

CHASING THE DRAGON

The Scourge of Opium

The opium trade was a lucrative business in colonial Singapore. **Gracie Lee** examines its deleterious effects on the economic and social life of the city.



"I turned from that sight and looked upon an elderly Celestial, lying on his back, and in a deep sleep, clutching his bamboo pipe between his thin, powerless fingers. The glow of the petroleum pit sprayed its faint light upon his ivory scalp. His half-open eyes, seized by the drug, shone moist in the shadows of his cadaverous face."¹

– Henrik De Leeuw
Cities of Sin, New York: Harrison Smith and Robert Hass, 1933.

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dutch-born author Henrik De Leeuw's observation of an opium smoker in Singapore as a "sallow-skinned and emaciated Oriental intoxicated and wasted on the opiate" is one of the more enduring and negative Western impressions of the Far East in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Economic Importance of Opium

The supply of opium to China and Southeast Asia came largely from India. This highly addictive narcotic, culled from the poppy plant, was one of British India's most valuable exports to China during the late 18th century and into the 19th century. It became the single-most important commodity that was used to offset the trade deficit arising from Britain's insatiable demand for Chinese tea.

So crucial was the trade in opium to European merchants that two wars over opium were waged against China – first by Britain (the First Opium War, 1839–42) leading to the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, and subsequently by Britain and France (the Second Opium War, 1856–60) – when the Qing government imposed a trade blockade on opium in an attempt to put an end to what it considered a social evil and the source for the large outflows of valuable silver bullion from the country.

Singapore was established as a trading post in 1819 by Stamford Raffles to guard British commercial interests along the major sea trade route between India and China. From 1814 to 1818, opium constituted about 30 to 50 percent of the total value of Bengal's exports to the East Indies and China. It therefore comes as little surprise to know that opium wielded a huge influence on the economic and social life of colonial Singapore. Early British traders ventured to this fledgling trading outpost in the hope of capitalising on the burgeoning and lucrative India-China opium trade.

The significance of the regional opium trade is reflected in an 1820 letter held in the National Library's rare collection. The letter, addressed to Robert Dundas, 2nd Viscount Melville, by Captain Archibald Hamilton says: "In this quarter we possess almost exclusively, the cultivation and manufacture of East India opium, in such universal demand amongst the natives of the Eastern islands, as to be the principal article at all times in bartering.... Singapore again appears of great consequence as an emporium for the support and encouragement of this important trade". Not only was opium highly sought after for consumption, it was also used as a form of currency in most transactions during the pioneering years of the settlement.

Despite the initial optimism held by the traders, the prospects of exploiting the India-China opium traffic failed to materialise due to the volatile nature of the opium trade. Carl Trocki, in his seminal book *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800–1910*, writes that fluctuating opium prices, trade restrictions from the two opium wars, competition from the new British colony of Hong Kong as well as the opening of free ports in the Dutch East Indies drove local agency houses to turn to the domestic market as a buffer against the vagaries of the regional trade.

Trocki estimated that about 20 percent of India's annual production of opium found its way into Singapore. Out of this, a portion was transhipped to China, but most were consumed locally or redistributed to other parts of Southeast Asia through the domestic trade. The Chinese immigrants in Singapore, who worked in the gambier and pepper plantations, at the ports or on the streets as rickshaw pullers, were the main consumers of opium, raking in huge profits for the opium traders.

Regulations on the sale of opium in Singapore had been instituted from the start. Founded on the principles of a free port, Singapore did not collect duty or port taxes. Hard-pressed to raise funds for the upkeep of

the settlement, William Farquhar, the island's first resident, introduced the revenue farm system in 1820 despite Raffles' objections. Under this scheme, government licences were auctioned off to private individuals or syndicates to give them monopoly concessions over the sale of *chandu* (opium in smokeable form).

Although wholesale opium was a freely traded commodity, the sale of opium in smaller quantities (anything less than one chest) was sanctioned through the opium revenue farm. The revenue farm system was not a new idea as it had been implemented much earlier in the British-controlled colonies of Bencoolen and Penang. The colonial government relied heavily on the franchising of these opium contracts to generate income. In fact, opium contributed about 40 to 60 percent of the government's annual revenue and it remained a key pillar of the fiscal system right into the 20th century.

Influential and wealthy Chinese businessmen such as Cheang Hong Lim, Tan Seng Poh and Tan Hiok Nee also reaped handsome profits from the opium monopoly. The colonial government too was understandably reluctant to turn off this tap of high economic returns although they did introduce various controls and restrictions from 1910 to curb the use of opium among the population. In the face

(Top) A Chinese man smoking opium, 1920. Opium-smoking was one of the three social ills – the other two being gambling and prostitution – that plagued the Chinese community in Chinatown in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. *Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(Below) A coloured zincograph print of a poppy flower and a seed capsule (*Papaver somniferum*) by M. A. Burnett, 1853. *Courtesy of Wellcome Library, London.*



of mounting international criticism on the opium trade, the colonial government proclaimed a total prohibition on opium-smoking in 1943 in accordance with the agreement signed at the 1925 Geneva International Opium Convention. After the Japanese Occupation, the returning British government closed the *chandu* factory and packing plant in Singapore, and issued a ban on the consumption and possession of opium in 1946.

Of Dragons and Vapours

“Chasing the dragon” (追龙) is a Cantonese street term, likely originating from Hong Kong, describing the act of heating opium or heroin and inhaling its vapours. The “chasing” occurs when the user follows the vapour trail in an attempt to inhale as much as possible of the psychoactive fumes.

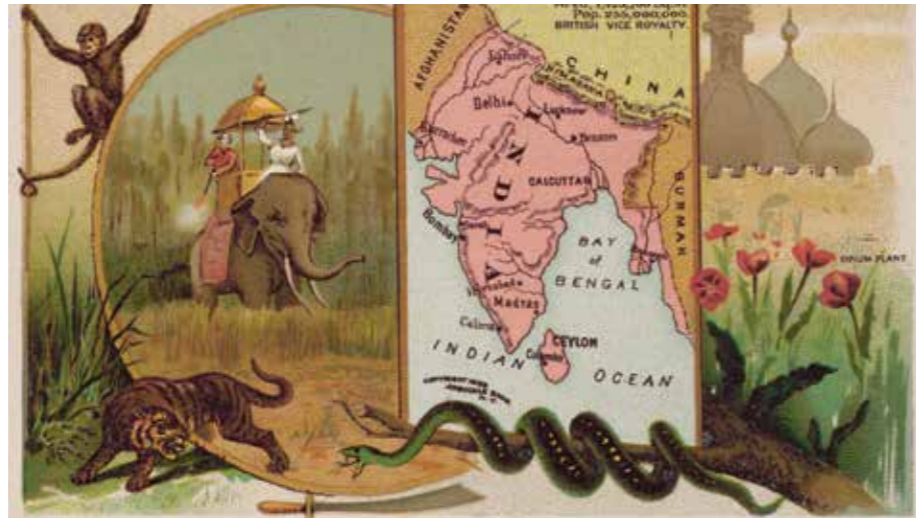
“Chasing the dragon” is also used metaphorically to refer to the “high” that one gets from drugs. The phrase has been used in popular culture, inspiring the song *Chasing the Dragon* (1975) by Led Zeppelin, a 1996 made-for-TV film bearing the same title, and the book *Chasing the Dragon: One Woman's Struggle Against the Darkness of Hong Kong's Drug Dens* (1980).

Opium Use in Asia

Up until the 16th century in the Middle East, India and China, opium was primarily a luxury item consumed orally for medicinal purposes, and to a lesser extent, used as a recreational euphoric or an aphrodisiac. It became popular as a recreational drug in the 19th century when opium-smoking became an accepted social practice.

Opium leaves a bitter taste when eaten raw. Smoked opium, however, is said to release a fragrant aroma that calms the nerves and relieves boredom. One of the earliest descriptions of opium-smoking is found in German physician Engelbert Kaempfer's record of his visit to Java in 1689. There, he saw the natives smoking a concoction of tobacco and opium mixed with water. He also attributed the introduction of the Javanese practice of opium-smoking to Formosa (present-day Taiwan) to the Dutch, and this subsequently led to its spread in mainland China.

Kaempfer's account is one of many that purport to explain the origin of opium-smoking in China. What is certain was that by 1729, opium-smoking had become



An advertising print for British India showing the cultivation of the opium poppy plant on the right, 1860–1925. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

so prevalent in Formosa and the Chinese coastal province of Fujian that an imperial edict was passed to ban it in China. The prohibition, however, did little to discourage the recreational use of opium as a psychoactive substance among the general Chinese population.

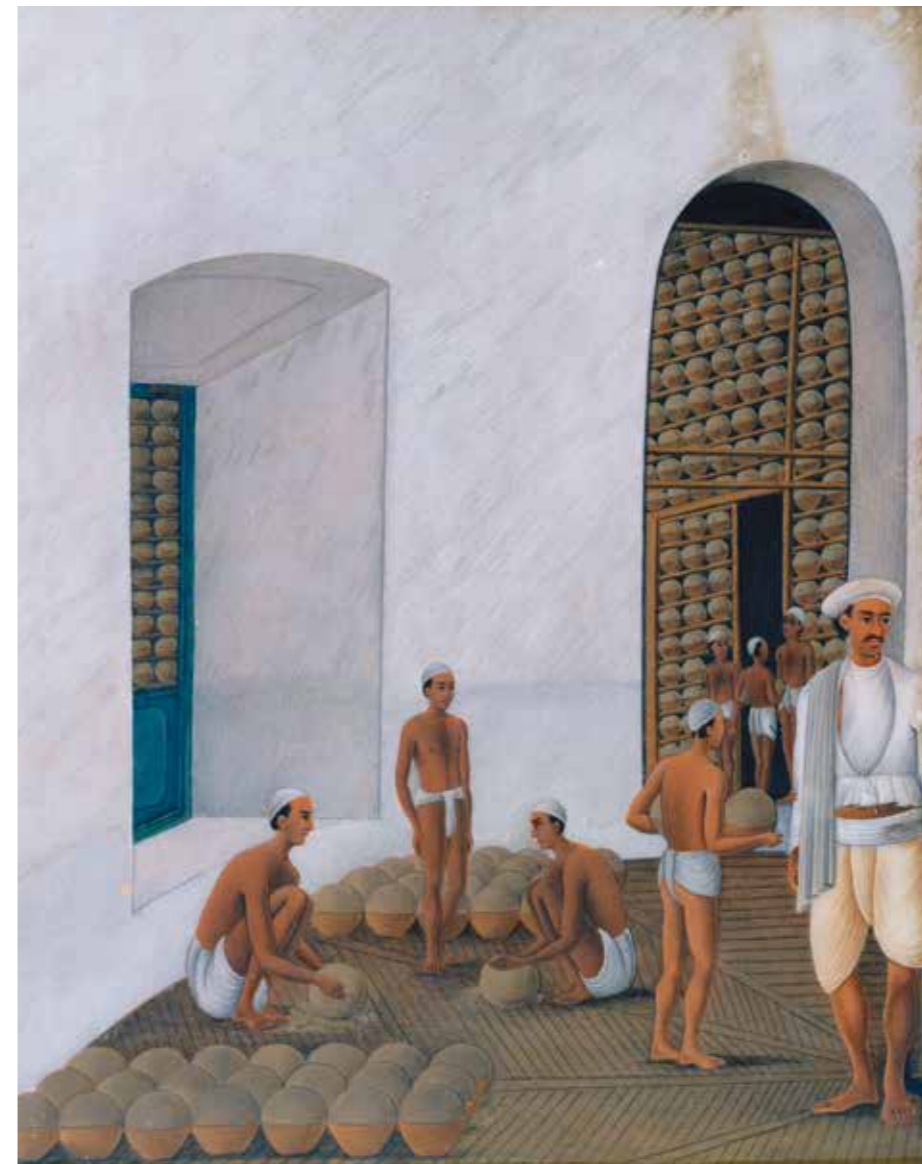
The proliferation of opium was also precipitated by major changes in the Asian maritime trade. Prior to the 16th century, opium was traded on a limited scale in China and Southeast Asia by Arab, Indian and Chinese merchants. The arrival of European maritime traders from the 16th century onwards, however, transformed the nature of the opium trade. The Europeans saw colonisation as a means to control and to further their interest in the commercial enterprises of the region. The Portuguese were among the first Europeans to supply Indian opium to China in the 16th century, but rose to prominence only in the 19th century when it wrestled and gained a share of the China opium market, using its colony Macau as a staging post to import opium into China.

In the 17th century, the Dutch took control from the Portuguese and came to dominate much of the Asian opium trade. Through its trading post in Bengal, the Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie; VOC) gained control of opium produced in Bengal's Hugli region, which enabled it to buy opium at cheap prices that it later sold for handsome profits to its colonial dependencies in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Malacca and the Indonesian Archipelago. The VOC also acquired monopoly rights to the import of opium into parts of the Indonesian Archipelago, commencing with the Mataram kingdom in Java in 1677. According to J. C. Baud, Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies (1834–36) and Minister of Colonial Affairs (1840–48), an average

of 56,000 kg of Indian opium were brought into Java annually between 1619 and 1799.

In the 18th century, the dominion of the Dutch was broken by the British East India Company (EIC), which grew the nascent Indian opium industry into a leading opium production centre to satisfy the opiate addictions of the vast Chinese market. In 1757, Britain seized control of Bengal during the Battle of Plassey,² and in 1773, declared a monopoly over all opium produced in the region. Under a system of indentured labour, the Indian *ryot* (small tenant farmer) obtained government permission to grow poppies, and received a cash advance to purchase seedlings and supplies for cultivation. In return, the farmer was obligated to sell the harvested opium to the government at a fixed price.

The raw opium was delivered to one of two factories belonging to the EIC in Patna and Ghazipur in India, where the Patna and Benares varieties of opium were manufactured respectively. The two products catered to different tastes although Patna opium was prized for its finer flavour, and was usually more expensive. In the mixing and examining halls of the factories, opium was cleaned, weighed, dried and moulded into balls. The balls were then covered with a protective shell made of poppy leaves and packed into specially fabricated partitioned chests made of mango wood. Inside each chest were 40 opium balls and a receipt indicating where the opium was packed and how much it weighed. Each chest also bore the EIC stamp that recognised the superior quality of the opium and the high standards adopted during the production process. The chests were then transported by boat to Calcutta and auctioned off before being loaded onto opium clippers (each typically carried about 1,000 chests) to be shipped to China and other regions.



Opium being moulded into balls and put into brass cups at the opium factory at Gulzarbagh in Patna, India. Painting by Shiva Lal, 1857. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

What is Opium?

Opium is a white milky sap extracted from the poppy plant (*Papaver somniferum*), and its derivative products include other powerful narcotics such as codeine, morphine and heroin. The cultivation and use of opium date back to antiquity. Opium poppy fossils have been discovered in Neolithic settlements in Western Europe, and one of the earliest written references to opium was found on a clay tablet in the region of Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) from the period 3,000 BC.

Opium is used in food, medicine, rituals and for recreational purposes across various cultures. Ancient civi-

lisations were already familiar with the therapeutic effects of opium as a painkiller and sedative, and the drug was used to treat a variety of ailments ranging from diarrhoea, dysentery, chills, malaria and asthma to coughs and rheumatic pains.

Today, poppy plants are grown in tropical, subtropical, and warm temperate countries all over the world. It is cultivated legally in countries such as Australia, Turkey and India for medicinal and pharmaceutical purposes. Large poppy cultivations can also be found in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Laos and Mexico and are mainly used for illicit trade.

Opium Use in Singapore

Once the chests of opium balls arrived at their destinations, they had to be further processed for retail and consumption. The method of opium preparation in Singapore has been well-documented in a paper by Robert Little, the first coroner of Singapore, entitled “On the Habitual Use of Opium in Singapore” published in *The Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* (popularly known as Logan's Journal after its editor James Richardson Logan) in 1848. His study presents the first in-depth survey of opium use in Singapore.

Preparation work would usually begin at three in the morning when the chests were opened and the opium balls divided among the workers. In the first stage of the refining process, the balls were broken in half and the soft crude opium scooped into earthen dishes. Thereafter, the protective shells were stripped away, and the poppy leaves boiled and strained through Chinese paper and cloth placed over woven baskets. Crude opium was then added to the dissolved opium water and cooked to the consistency of thick treacle.

Next, the mixture was dried over charcoal and then boiled again until it took on the appearance of black molasses. This laborious process removed impurities from the opium. After the preparation of opium was completed, the residue was not thrown away but sold as tye³ at much lower prices. The ashes from tye were also salvaged after smoking and sold to the poor as *samshing*⁴. Variations of this preparation method have been recorded in J. D. Vaughan's *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese in the Straits Settlements* (1879) and W. G. Stirling's *Opium Smoking Among the Chinese* (1900).

The Opium Ordinance determined and regulated the number of opium retail outlets in Singapore. At the time of Little's research, 45 retail outlets were permitted in town and six in the rural area. In reality, Little noted some 80 opium dens in his survey, many of which were operated illegally. Licensed shops were required to hang a red board outside their premises that bore the shop's licence number and were allowed to open only within the specified hours of six in the morning to around nine or ten in the evening. Opium dens were typically housed in two-storey brick houses or attap structures, and were generally located in urban areas with a high concentration of Chinese trades and population. These included Amoy Street, Carpenter Street, South Bridge Road, Boat Quay and red light districts such as Bugis Street and Malay Street.

Upon entering an opium den, patrons would purchase their opium from the



(Top) Chinese men inhaling opium on a raised bed, circa 1870s. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

(Bottom) The opium lamp heats and vapourises opium into fumes that are then inhaled. The opium pipe is made of ornate silver with a *yixing* pipe-bowl and ivory mouthpiece. All original artefacts courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



proprietor or clerk who kept accounts of sales. Government-sanctioned opium was sold in small triangular packets wrapped in bamboo leaves and white paper with the quantity and the words "Monopoly Opium" stamped in red. The packets also had perforations along the folds that hindered tampering. Of the various quantities available for sale, three *hoon* (17.5 grains) which was sufficient for about six smokes, was the most popular. The average consumption of a labourer was three *hoon* a day, although people engaged in hard labour or addicted smokers would use up to six *hoon*. Each three-*hoon* packet cost about 40 cents which was almost half of a day's wages.

Each opium den was spartanly furnished with benches or raised platforms arranged along the sides of the room. Smokers rested on their sides with their heads propped up on wooden blocks that acted as hard pillows. Two persons would share a tray of opium paraphernalia and take turns to smoke. With one hand, the smoker would manoeuvre the inch-thick pipe with the bowl-like knob over a flame, and with the other hand, dip a silver pin or prong into the opium, twirl the paste into the size of a pea before inserting it into the pinhole of the pipe for the opium to be cooked over the fire. The smoker would inhale the

vapour as the opium melted. A 19th-century traveller to Singapore described the scene in an opium den:

"There were about ten smokers lying with very little clothing on a platform raised two feet above the floor, and which occupied nearly all the space.... Some of the smokers appeared to be quite inebriated by the drug, particularly one man, who was sitting near the door on a stool, but who had done smoking. His arms and legs hung down as if they did not belong to him; and he leered on us with meaningless, but very good-natured smiles. The effect of excess in opium is more like idiocy, than ordinary intoxication. It steals away the brain like drink."

The more affluent smokers, however, partook of opium with the help of servants and in private rooms lavishly decorated with ornate blackwood furniture, mattresses and silk curtains. It was also not uncommon for the rich to collect and use elaborate opium accoutrements made of precious materials such as ivory and jade.

The Effect on Colonial Society

Opium-smoking was one of the social ills that plagued Singapore in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1856, there was an estimated 15,000 opium addicts in Singapore; by 1933, the number had risen to around 73,000 or between 120,000 and 150,000 (depending on which source is consulted). According to a study by the Singapore Anti-Opium Society in 1935, one in 10 adult Chinese in British

Malaya was an addict. Although opium was consumed by all strata of society – the rich and poor, men and women, Chinese and other races – its heavy use, and often abuse, was mostly associated with the poorer classes of Chinese migrant workers engaged in back-breaking occupations such as coolies, rickshaw pullers, agricultural workers, dock labourers, boatmen and lightermen.

Ironically, most of the Chinese migrant workers acquired the habit of smoking opium in Singapore. For the coolie on a meagre income and deprived of medical aid, opium was a panacea for various illnesses and their debilitating symptoms. However, many also turned to opium-smoking to relieve fatigue from arduous work or as a distraction from living in dark, overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, while some believed that opium was a stimulant that would enhance their mental capacity. And in yet other instances, the initiation into opium was borne out of curiosity – the search for pleasure or through influence from other smokers.

Despite the many accounts of opiate dependency and addiction, opinions on the physical and social effects of opium remained sharply divided right up to the 20th century. Although opium was addictive, its allure was mistakenly believed by some to be no stronger than that of nicotine or alcohol. For obvious reasons, the colonial government and those engaged in the opium trade were reluctant to turn their back on this lucrative source of revenue.

Anti-opium sentiments in Singapore first emerged around the 1890s among some vocal missionaries and influential members of the Chinese community. In 1898, medical doctor Lim Boon Keng, who was also a member of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, advocated the formation of an anti-opium society, but not much progress was made until 1906, when his brother-in-law S. C. Yin persuaded the Chinese Consul General in Singapore to open an opium refuge for the rehabilitation of opium addicts. The idea proved successful and the refuge, first located on Thomson Road, eventually moved into larger premises on Tank Road.

In 1907, the Singapore Anti-Opium Society was inaugurated, formalising the start of the anti-opium movement. However, activism was largely confined to the Straits Chinese community which included social reformers such as Chen Su Lan, a medical doctor who became the president of the society. Anti-opiumists were convinced of the social evils of opium-smoking, which robbed the working classes of their health, money and even families. Woeful stories were shared of addicts who pawned all they had, sold their children and even resorted to stealing to satisfy their cravings.

Against new medical evidence on the adverse effects of opium addiction and mounting criticisms from the public, the government commissioned two inquiries into opium use in Malaya in 1908 and 1924. Although the findings were inconclusive and the recommendations cautious, it led to the implementation of tighter regulations.

In 1909, the enactment of the Chandu Revenue Ordinance saw the cessation of the revenue farm system and full government control over the import, export, preparation and sale of opium. To this end, the Monopolies Department was formed in 1910 to take charge of the preparation and distribution of opium.

In 1928, the registration of smokers was introduced and was made compulsory a year later. In 1930, the government took further steps to eradicate the retail of illicit opium by investing in a new packing factory at Pasir Panjang that hermetically sealed opium (two *hoon* worth) into small metal tubes that were affixed with the date and place of issue. Opium users faced stiffer rules in 1933, as registered smokers were required to show a permit card bearing their photograph when buying opium. In addition, no more than four *chi* (or 40 *hoon*) of opium were allowed to be purchased in a day.

In 1934, the register was closed and no new applicants were accepted except for valid medical reasons. Opium-smoking was finally outlawed in Singapore on 10 November 1943 during the Japanese Occupation, ending a scourge that had enslaved its users for more than a century. ♦

Notes

- 1 De Leeuw, H. (1933). *Cities of Sin* (p. 220). New York: Harrison Smith and Robert Hass. Call no.: R 306.74095 DE
- 2 The Battle of Plassey took place on 23 June 1757 between Siraj-ud-Daulah, the last independent *nawab* of Bengal, and the forces of the British East India Company.
- 3 Tye is an inferior grade of opium used by the poor. It is made from the residue leftover from opium processing.
- 4 *Samshing* is prepared from the opium dross of used tye. It contains very little opium and is sold to the poor.

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