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Gendering and Sexualising Opium Consumption in Manchukuo, 1932–1945

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the sociocultural history of opium consumption and its popularisation through the beauty of female attendants in Manchukuo, which was a crucial part of the Japanese Empire and an important 'contact zone' of diverse cultures. It offers a glimpse into the opium–prostitution nexus by exploring the legal, commercial, social, and cultural dimensions of the gendered and sexualised practice of opium consumption, which reinforced a highly entangled triangulation of imperial consultants from Japan and Korea, Chinese opium shop-owners, and consumers of multiple nationalities. As such, the article highlights how this subculture developed at a time of increasingly pervasive surveillance of sex workers as well as deeply asymmetrical power relations between imperial subjects and the Chinese locals, and along class and gender lines. In examining how female attendants promoted opium within illegal establishments, I argue that the gendered and sexualised consumption of opium reshaped the culture and economy of the substance's use and that this culture, its regulation, and imperialism damaged Manchukuo society. By doing so, the article reveals the subculture of gendered and sexualised opium consumption in Manchukuo and the Japanese Empire more broadly.

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Introduction

This article discusses the consumption of opium and the increasing popularity of female attendants (opium sex workers), who were used to attract customers to opium establishments and brothels in China's Northeast, which was occupied by Japan and known as Manchukuo from 1932 to 1945. It illustrates the nexus between Chinese opium shops and the use of sex workers in these shops within a particular legal regime. I bring these places and symbiotic relations to life by analysing their legal, commercial, social, and cultural dimensions to show how opium use flourished despite – and because of – the imperial authorities' attempts to control the industry. The article thereby offers a glimpse of the opium–prostitution nexus in 1930s Manchukuo, which was a crucial part of the Japanese Empire and 'the jewel in Japan's imperial crown' (Young, 1998, 22).

Manchukuo, I show, was an important 'contact zone' (Pratt, 1991, 34) where diverse (sub)cultures interacted with each other in social spaces and contexts of deeply uneven

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power relations, such as imperialism, extraterritoriality, gender, and class. The concept of subculture here, however, does not connote inferiority but represents a relatively separate or new form of culture within the larger contact zone (Hebdige, 2002). Moreover, the term 'contact zone' is particularly useful for dissecting the entanglement of the asymmetric power relations between imperial administrators and opium shop consultants as well as the local owners of those shops, consumers, and a gendered and sexualised narration of opium consumption. Within these seminal spaces, the beauty of the female attendants (who were also called opium sex workers) was increasingly used as both a tool to attract patrons and a product used to help sell opium. As Henri Lefebvre (1991, 353) puts it, 'consumption satisfies needs and specific needs have specific objects'.

This article thus makes a distinctive contribution to understanding the subculture of highly gendered and sexualised opium consumption within the larger culture of the surrounding society, Manchukuo. In examining how female attendants, who were presented for the male gaze as objectified bait, promoted opium in illegal establishments, I argue that the gendered and sexualised consumption of opium reshaped the culture and economy of opium use, and demonstrate how this culture and its regulation, as well as imperialism, damaged society. Furthermore, I show that the commodification of women was driven not only by male sexual desire but by socio-political norms and economic motives that powerfully constructed such desire in Manchukuo society, where the boundaries of (sub)culture became less sharp and conflictual. These people were objectified here, however, not simply because of opium users' sexual commodification of female attendants, whose sexual partners were the opium users. This commodification of these attendants in both the opium business and the sexual realm, I argue, was the result of the shop-owners seeking to increase their opium turnover, and more often than not, this was influenced and determined by the larger issues in Manchukuo's socio-political context and asymmetric power relations.

Previous studies (e.g., Kingsberg, 2013) have analysed the Japanese Empire by focusing on relations between the governing authorities and the opium industry from an elitist perspective, but I instead focus on the neglected majority of ordinary people on the outside of the power elite. This article, which is written *from below*, tries to reconstruct the history of a major subculture of gendered and sexualised opium use from a female point of view. Some scholars, such as Mark Driscoll (2010) and Norman Smith (2012), deal with some aspects of opium and women in general but discuss them mainly in terms of mass cultural modernism or intoxicant modernity. For example, Smith (2012, 111–133) examines how the hostesses and female workers in different sectors, such as opium shops, restaurants, coffee houses, and bars, posed a danger to society by transgressing accepted public morals. I do not deny the importance of studies focusing on many forms of modernity, but rather suggest that the linkage of opium use and women began to reshape the culture of opium consumption through the opium sex industry, in which imperial subjects of Japan and Korea, and Chinese shop-owners and consumers, colluded to circumvent the law. Indeed, opium and other narcotics in Northeast China and East Asia more broadly have received little attention from historians, but this article uses a much wider range of multilingual materials, thereby presenting a detailed yet sophisticated examination of the (sub)culture of the gendered and sexualised opium industry.

The article has four sections. First, it provides an overview of an increasingly pervasive surveillance of sex workers and how the regulation of contagious venereal diseases

influenced the movement of sex workers from brothels to opium shops. Then, it discusses how imperial subjects of Japan and Korea used their extraterritorial rights to shield opium shops and sex workers from police raids and local laws. Third, the article focuses on how these asymmetrical power relations introduced a new subculture of transformative consumption of opium. It also explores how the popular discursive practices of gendered and sexualised use of opium further popularised this subculture of female attendants. Finally, the article looks at the subculture of opium consumption more broadly from an urban history perspective to accentuate the ramifications of societal deterioration by focusing on two major cities: Shinkyō (present-day Changchun) and Harbin, the former a newly constructed capital city and the latter the largest city in northern Manchukuo.

Infectious Disease Control and the Cross-Industry Movement of Sex Workers

The surveillance of sex workers and their activities by Manchukuo authorities became increasingly pervasive after the founding of the new state, as sex work developed simultaneously and rapidly in Manchukuo like 'the mushrooming of new towns and cities, like the Western expansion in the United States' (Duara, 2004, 144). The authorities, however, benefitted financially from the flourishing prostitution business by imposing a tax on brothels (Duara, 2004, 144). In the meantime, the control of sex workers' activities put the authorities to the test. From a regulatory perspective, revelations about the control over brothels and sex workers appeared in government documents showing how the authorities tried to keep tabs on the regulation of sex workers and venereal disease.

By 1934, the regulations governing the prostitution industry began to tighten up and the government enacted new measures to control the numbers of sex workers and issues related to hygiene. In a provincial ordinance (*shengling*) issued in July, Jilin Province checked on 29 county government offices with reference to the situation and the implementation of 'regular health check-ups' (*dingqi jiankang zhi jiancha*), the euphemistic term for 'venereal disease examinations' (*jianmei*) of sex workers (Jilinsheng gongshu zongwuting, 1934a, 1). About two months later, the provincial government issued another ordinance formally confirming that the police would be entrusted with the task of examining sex workers for venereal disease (Jilinsheng gongshu zongwuting, 1934b, 1–2). In the provincial *Bulletin*, the government required counties and police agencies to submit a monthly report on the examination results for venereal disease and the number of sex workers. In September of the same year, the government standardised the monthly report form for sex workers' venereal disease examinations to make it easier to collect information on examination results as well as to gather statistics on the number of sex workers (Jilinsheng gongshu zongwuting, 1934c, 1). The standardised form included crucial elements and entries such as the total number of sex workers, the number of sex workers who were examined, the type of venereal disease the sex workers were infected with (e.g., syphilis, gonorrhoea, or chancroid), and whether any other diseases were found (Lee, 2005, 52–54).

In the following month (October 1934), having laid the necessary foundations for full implementation of the venereal disease examinations, the provincial government again double-checked to ensure the monthly health check-ups were in order and required that all relevant counties report back without further delay (Jilinsheng gongshu zongwuting,

1934d, 2). The authorities relied on this new measure of venereal disease examination to surveil the sex work industry. Entrusted with the duty of conducting venereal disease examinations, the police conducted daily raids on brothels for one reason or another (Xinghua Zhoukan, 1933, 44). Stringent scrutiny from the police forced sex workers to leave their original workplaces and migrate to the opium shops to avoid arrest. This created one of the conditions for the booming female attendant business in opium establishments discussed in the following sections.

Imperial Subjects' Extraterritoriality and Opium Shops

The opium shops dramatically increased in number, largely due to the ambitions of profit-seeking opium shop-owners who wanted to operate more than the one shop that was officially allowed in their names. The profit-maximising ambition, however, only partly explains why so many opium shops sprang up, an obvious violation of the Opium Law Enforcement Regulations (Gao, 2022, 473). It does not give the full picture of how such a practice took place in real life, given that the unauthorised opium shops considerably outnumbered the official quota of 600 designated by the Opium Monopoly Bureau. They were not involved in the actual operation of the opium shops, but Japanese and Koreans, who were protected by extraterritorial rights, took up important positions and influenced how the shops were operated and policed (Gao, 2022, 473–474).

Employed as consultants (*guwen*), Japanese and Koreans who enjoyed the protection of extraterritorial rights could extend such rights to the opium shops under the guise of consultancy (Xinghua Zhoukan, 1933, 44). They were highly sought after by the local Chinese who owned the shops, and the hiring of consultants became a common practice in the opium industry. Each consultant could cover from as few as six or seven to as many as eight or nine shops (Xinghua Zhoukan, 1933, 44). As a reward, they were paid five or ten *yuan* per day (one US dollar was roughly equivalent to four *yuan* at the time) by each shop. Every day they could reap about 52.5 *yuan*, even if we only take a median number of the opium shops and the reward from them (seven shops multiplied by 7.5 *yuan* from each), which was a handsome profit from their nominal work as consultants. But why were the shop-owners willing to hire people who were so obviously 'reaping what they had not sown' (*bulao erhuo*) (Xinghua Zhoukan, 1933, 44)?

There were at least a few substantial benefits associated with hiring the expensive Japanese or Koreans as nominal consultants. First, the shop-owners could circumvent the aforementioned regulations, which forbade anyone from operating more than one shop. Authorities were aware of many opium shops operating without permission from the Opium Monopoly Bureau, but legally, the Manchukuo police could do nothing if there was a placard placed in front of a shop saying 'so-and-so place or so-and-so residence' (*moumou yu*) (Xinghua Zhoukan, 1933, 44). Another piece of evidence also supports the claim that the practice of using the extraterritorial rights of the Japanese or Koreans was prevalent. For example, in 1933, a returnee who had visited Manchukuo reported that there were more than 1,000 opium shops just in the districts of Daowai and Daoli in the city of Harbin, and all their entrances featured signs saying 'so-and-so Japanese Merchant Shop' (*rishang moumou hang*) or 'so-and-so Korean Residence' (*chaoxianren moumou yu*) (Ta Kung Pao, 1933). The smell of illegal opium from these establishments permeated the air of nearby streets.

Secondly, by having a Japanese or Korean consultant, an opium shop could legally evade the opium-smoking tax imposed by the authorities (Xinghua Zhoukan, 1933, 44). This dual structure of running opium shops significantly increased the number of illegal shops across Manchukuo. The structure not only boosted the opium industry, as the shop-owners desired, but also popularised opium smoking in the company of female attendants. Furthermore, the presence of consultants provides a sensible answer to why 'the difficulty, and resistance to, law enforcement' in relation to banning hostess work in opium shops arose (Smith, 2012, 125). Thirdly, and of central importance, Japanese and Korean subjects of Imperial Japan acted as consultants who protected female attendants from police searches and arrest.

The unauthorised opium shops under the extraterritorial protection of imperial subjects were usually located in areas mainly occupied by people from the lower social strata (Meng, 1934). These shops catered to people from the lower social classes who otherwise could not afford to consume expensive opium paste. Opium derivatives or refined narcotics, such as morphine and cocaine (colloquially known as *bai mian* among locals), were sold cheaply at these shops at prices ranging from two *fen* to one *jiao* (Meng, 1934).[1] The price for the pleasure of opium consumption at the shops was affordable, and to put things into perspective, two *fen* was only about 0.04 per cent and one *jiao* roughly 0.2 per cent of the average daily income for the consultants. The most popular opium-related products were opium paste, morphine, and cocaine (Ta Kung Pao, 1935).

In many ways, the unauthorised shops weakened the efficacy of the Opium Law, which had created a monopolised opium market and set a fixed price for opium. With the introduction of the Opium Law in January 1932, more and more consumers switched from opium paste to derivatives. This dual structure of consumption was determined by personal wealth: the propertied class consumed opium paste, whereas the middle class and the proletariat bought the derivatives or substitutes (Miyajima, 1935, 121–122). To put it more bluntly, the opium derivatives were mainly consumed by and associated with people from the lower social classes, which gradually became more common in the early 20th century in other parts of China too (Harrison, 2006/2007, 152; see Figure 1). Meng Fu (1934), who had first-hand experience in Manchukuo and witnessed what happened in these opium shops, stressed this social phenomenon in his writing. Cheng Ze (1937, 11) gave a vivid account of his journey through a 'so-and-so shop' where people from the lower social class gathered:

> A row of rooms, identical to the slum dwellings I saw in the capital, came into sight upon entering the Opium Den. But these rooms were much smaller and made from wood. While my friend ushered me further into the opium den, I exercised extra caution and could not help but think to myself 'Hey! Is this still the human world?' Damaged mats were spread across the floor with a few pieces of cotton on them. There are about 10 people staying in this room … it is said that other opium addicts are outside right now stealing coal and pilfering some money to get the money to be able to come back to satisfy their opium craving. Further down inside the opium den, a much narrower and much longer room comes into view. Nothing is on the floor, no mats, but grass; and there are at least three times as many people as there were in the previous room. This must be the third-class room! There are more people here, some sleeping and about half a dozen playing poker to kill time. I dare not interrupt them. Though it is smelly here, and from time to time I must cover my nose, feeling nauseous and unwell, I am tearless (Author's translation).[2]

Figure 1. Poor people inject morphine
Source: Author's collection

The passage above was taken from Cheng's first visit to an opium shop and he sarcastically likened the visit to a pilgrimage. He toured a cheap shop where he saw, although only halfway through the tour, at least 40 opium addicts gathered in one place. He felt sympathy toward those who were almost worn out by the consumption of opium and had to support themselves through pilferage. Cheng (1937, 11) was tearless at the sight of these already nonhuman-looking opium addicts in the shop, but while tottering on the brink of collapse and passing the countless so-and-so shops, tears apparently began to well up in his eyes.

In a remarkably similar fashion, citing an eyewitness's testimony from October 1936, Stuart J. Fuller, the United States' representative on the Opium Advisory Committee, had no hesitation to make scathing attacks on Japan's handling of the opium trade in Manchukuo:

> Adjacent to a rag-pickers' market about a reeking open sewer are some 50 or more hovels inhabited by the lowest type of sex workers who, in addition to their regular occupation, also openly dispense narcotics. The setting was loathsome to a degree. Demonstrating with peculiar force the relation of cause to effect, there lay on an ash heap just behind the narcotic brothels seven naked corpses which had evidently been stripped of their rags by fellow addicts (cited in League of Nations, 1937, 60–61).

This statement reflects a light-touch regulatory regime for opium, which rendered this new form of consumer culture possible. In the narcotic brothels or opium shops with female attendants (who were often called opium sex workers), those attendants, to a significant extent, told a larger story of gendered and sexualised opium consumption and its social ramifications, which became a major social and cultural phenomenon in the period of Japan-dominated Manchukuo.

Gendering Opium Consumption and Sexualising Female Attendants

The many unauthorised opium shops provided a cheap alternative to the government-monopolised opium market. In other words, the emergence of the

unauthorised shops was also partially driven by demand for affordable opium from the lower classes in Manchukuo society. The large number of these opium shops, which were protected by the extraterritoriality of imperial subjects, gradually developed into a hotbed for the emergence of female attendants or hostesses (*nüzhaodai*), also known as 'specially hired beauties' (*tepin minghua*) or 'female waitresses' (*nüshi*). They acted as attendants or sex workers and accompanied the patrons while they consumed opium (Smith, 2012, 111–133; Xing, 1937, 11).

There was a rapid emergence of female attendants in the opium shops after the enactment of the Opium Law in 1932 and the banning of hostesses in 1934 (Smith, 2012, 117). In February 1933, the *China Times* (1933) ran an article exposing opium shops that hired women or sex workers as female attendants and the fact that the military police would intervene in every kind of business except opium shops. The newspaper did not clarify why the police intentionally avoided raiding the unauthorised opium shops, but the likely reason was to protect the consultants, who were immune from raids and arrests. For example, the cities of Andong, Shenyang, Benxi, and Fuxun were infested with opium shops and were all hiring female attendants to sell opium products such as morphine and cocaine (Ta Kung Pao, 1935).

The opium shops thus became a haven for various illicit activities. In the beginning, the aim of the sex workers was to avoid the police raids on brothels, but gradually they used the shops as safe spaces to sell both opium and sex. Brothel-goers in their 20s and 30s would follow the female attendants into the opium shops, where they were enthralled by the pleasures of both opium-smoking and the sexual services the female attendants offered (Xinghua Zhoukan, 1933, 44; Yu, 1933). Some of these brothel-goers were not initially opium addicts, but their craving for sex turned them into opium users. From 1933 onward, the sight of young men streaming in and out of opium shops became commonplace in Manchukuo.

In the context of transformative gendered and sexualised opium consumption, this new form of recreation in the presence of female attendants gradually became widespread, so that by 1937 every opium shop, whether in a big city or a small county, had its own 'beautiful female attendants' (Xing, 1937, 11). The number of these attendants depended on the size of the opium shop's business, and the number ranged from as few as three to as many as 30 (Xing, 1937, 11). The primary purpose of employing female attendants was to lure more patrons into the shops to consume opium, and to do this, they used the strategy of the so-called 'beauty trap' (*mei ren ji*) (Xing, 1937, 11). At the same time, there emerged a unique means to attract and serve opium to patrons: *zhao lai pian*, a representation of female beauty that was highly gendered. This term literally meant an invitation card, but it was really an advertisement. In addition to serving as a form of advertising, the flyer had another function: as a menu from which the patrons could read the names of the female attendants with whom they could choose to spend time (see Figure 2).

Upon entering a shop, opium users would routinely be passed a flyer by a male *gong you*, or 'work buddy' (Ta Kung Pao, 1937). On the flyer, there was some basic information about the address of the opium shop and some concise advertisements related to the superb quality of the establishment, as well as the fine

Figure 2. *Zhao Lai Pian* that highlights the specially hired female attendants
Source: Reproduced from *Ta Kung Pao* (1937)

quality of its products, including a description of the quality of the female attendants. In these advertisements, female attendants took centre stage; after all, they were the selling point of the flyer. A total of 10 newly hired female attendants were lined up, waiting to be chosen by the opium users. Xiao Jinzi (literally 'goldling' or 'little gold') was one of the most sought-after female attendants at the Ju Xian Lou establishment; ironically, the name of this shop literally means 'a building for persons of virtue'. Jinzi was said to be extremely beautiful, to the extent that she developed a strong sense of agency, a sense of her own individual autonomy to deal exclusively with patrons of her own choice, and patrons were even willing to 'abandon the rule of their land' (*ganxin paoqi le guotu*) to stay and sleep with her (Ta Kung Pao, 1937). She entered the industry at the age of 15.

The conjoining of opium consumption with female attendants became commonplace, and it stood to reason particularly when viewed from the following play, which is composed by a mingling of prose and wretched doggerel:

Welcomed by the moon to the world of opium and demimonde,
Surrounded by the flowerlike temptresses in the establishment.
The mutual affinity revealed the sentiment of love tacitly,
Intoxicating the soul:
The smell, half opium and half powder (Ta Kung Pao, 1937; author's translation).[3]

This doggerel, which was often chanted in the opium shops, centred on the themes of opium (*yan*) and women (as embodied by these expressions: *hua, fen*, and *yue*), and made insinuations about sex (*chun*) in the company of women (*hua rao shen*). But it primarily highlighted three elements: opium, the demimonde (female attendants), and the sexual implications of the first two elements. In particular, the last line emphasised that the smells of opium smoke and the female attendants were common olfactory stimuli through which pleasure-seekers could recognise and find contentment (see Figure 3). Thus, the shops became a social space where the subcultures of gendered and sexualised opium use clashed and grappled with each other. In this social space, addicts were simultaneously served opium and women, and visiting a shop was tantamount to being 'on cloud nine' (Ta Kung Pao, 1937). It is not surprising that the presence of female attendants increased opium consumption; as one female attendant parting from her patron said in an affectedly soft voice: 'See you tomorrow! Please come early!' (Ta Kung Pao, 1937).[4]

The opium establishments as social spaces offered men somewhere to congregate, but these shops were not all the same. There were various ranks among the establishments, ranging from their architecture (yard-style establishments and two-storey buildings) all the way to the quality of their female attendants (Ding, 1937). The Ju Xian Lou opium establishment mentioned above appeared to be a top-ranking one, or at least it advertised itself as such on its flyer. Correspondingly, most of its patrons came from a privileged background, and were referred to as gentlemen, officials, and even soldiers (Ding, 1937). There was a tendency for such customers to visit the opium shops at different times depending on their social, political, and economic status. A relatively

Figure 3. A woman smoking opium in Liaoning Province
Source: Author's collection

clear distinction was drawn between mornings, afternoons, and evenings. In the mornings, most opium users were from various government offices and were said to occupy the shops from 8 to 10am (Judu Yuekan, 1936, 3). After they left for work, another group of opium users – gentlemen, the bosses of various businesses, and members of the 'leisure class' (*youxian jieji*) – apparently formed a steady stream into the establishments (Judu Yuekan, 1936, 3). These users usually consumed opium at a leisurely pace until around 5pm, after which a third group of addicts, who could only come at this time after finishing work, swarmed into the shops (Judu Yuekan, 1936, 4). Generally, the evenings were the prime time for business and were the busiest periods at the opium shops.

Among the morning opium users, even high-ranking military officials were found visiting these establishments. On 4 August 1993, Kim Kyŏng Hwan, the deputy commander of the Ninth Group Army from the Korean peninsula in support of the Rear Guard of Manchukuo, was caught frequenting an opium den called Da Bei Guan in the city of Fengtian (Chosun Choong-Ang Ilbo, 1933). Kim was subsequently arrested and prosecuted for disrupting military strategy in the outposts of Japan and Manchukuo. It is estimated that in the two years from 1935 to 1937, Japanese military officers and soldiers accounted for the largest numbers of opium users in Harbin (Yin, 1937, 32–33). The army's opium consumption even caught the attention of international representatives from places such as the United States, Egypt, and China proper. In June 1937, criticism from these countries led the representative to the Opium Advisory Committee, Yokoyama Masayuki (1892–1978), to defend Japan against 'the distortion of fact that [there] were opium addicts within the Japanese army' (Tokyo Asahi Shimbun, 1937, 2).

In addition to the close links between opium use and the female attendants, the shops also took a proactive approach to promoting and advertising opium consumption: arousing patrons' sexual desires. The shops used erotic art to achieve their purpose of selling opium. Within the opium shops, some works of art were on display, and erotic prints (*shunga*) became a key component of this art, retaining their own unique function. Smoking opium while gazing at *shunga* gradually became an accepted practice, and perhaps even developed into a kind of idealised cultural practice (Sano, 2005, 166).[5] *Shunga* thus was intended to evoke erotic arousal in patrons of the opium establishments and reshaped the larger culture of opium use.

In the same manner, verbal advertising also played a significant part in both increasing and diversifying the opium-smoking customer base. A 37-year-old Japanese man from the Manchuria Coal Mine (*manshū tankō*) was allegedly enticed by a Korean woman who claimed that smoking opium could be considered an aphrodisiac. The man recounts what he learned and what he went through:

> According to what the woman advertised, having sexual intercourse one hour after the consumption of opium or heroin would be akin to having a heavenly experience, or even better. Out of curiosity, I smoked the opium with the woman. Just as the woman had claimed, in my own personal experience, two hours after the consumption of heroin, the time of sexual intercourse was prolonged, and the feeling became intense. It was like I was in heaven. Rich in stimulus and experiencing the pleasant sensation, I felt like I was playing in Shangri-la (Sano, 2005, 168; author's translation).[6]

In this case, opium was promoted as a substance that could sexually excite and help heighten the pleasure of intercourse. Such promotion, moreover, apparently achieved its desired effect: men could not resist the temptation and consumed opium in conjunction with having sex with the women. In the end, they transformed from non-opium smokers into addicts (Sano, 2005, 168). In this way, the owners of opium dens successfully enticed customers into consuming opium and patronising the women who worked there. Travellers to Manchukuo, too, succumbed to the lure of female attendants who sold opium and sex. In March 1936, the *Dong-A Ilbo* (1936) ran an article that detailed how an ordinary 41-year-old Korean male, Sŏng Kyŏng O, had visited Manchukuo, where he unintentionally developed the habit of smoking opium on the street. Young women would lure passers-by into the shops to consume opium. Sŏng, and countless others, became regular patrons of opium shops through these female attendants.

Opium Shops and Addicts in a Wider Context

From an urban history point of view, it is illuminating to map out how opium shops and addicts functioned in newly constructed cities and the new state. In early 1936, Chŏn Mu-Kil (1936a), the Korean correspondent for the *Dong-A Ilbo*, wrote in his travel diary:

> The new and still-under-construction city has developed many times better than its predecessor, Changchun. The spacious and high-rise buildings stand close together along the new roads jam-packed with streetlamps. The population is very active. All these developments easily catch the eye. The waste is being dumped, and the vegetable paddies and the wilderness are being replaced by big buildings which are very imposing even seen from the outside (Author's translation).[7]

The new capital Shinkyō appeared to be a city with modern infrastructure: people were awed by its splendour. However, people were equally stupefied by the corpses of opium addicts that were hurled onto the streets. Those exposed to opium froze to death on cold nights (Chŏn, 1936b). Such scenes on the streets provided a sharp contrast to the awe-inspiring buildings. The statement by Stuart J. Fuller, quoted earlier, presented to the Opium Advisory Committee also powerfully corroborated the argument here.

In the same month (January 1936), in another part of Manchukuo, the night life in dancehalls stood in clear contrast to the nightlife of opium addicts. In the cosmopolitan city of Harbin, men and women indulged in the international atmosphere of dancehalls, engaging in lewd conversation and activities. Compared to the warm dancehalls, it was minus 30 degrees outside, and the following morning, there would be many corpses of opium addicts lying in the streets (Chŏn, 1936b). The coexistence of such contradictions was perhaps inevitable in the process of imperial expansion and the building of the Empire. In the words of Chŏn Mu-Kil (1936a; author's translation), it was 'on humanitarian grounds a piteous sight to see so many opium addicts who had died from harsh cold in a single night'.[8] Chŏn's account further confirmed what Meng Fu (1934) had witnessed a few years earlier. Due to their chronic consumption of opium, the addicts were as thin as strips of wood, and they begged in the streets. Those who fell sick on the streets and died were ubiquitous in the cities. An investigative report published in *North-China Daily News* (1946) provided a horrific account, describing the sight of seven opium addicts' corpses that had been stripped naked after death and discarded on an ash-heap

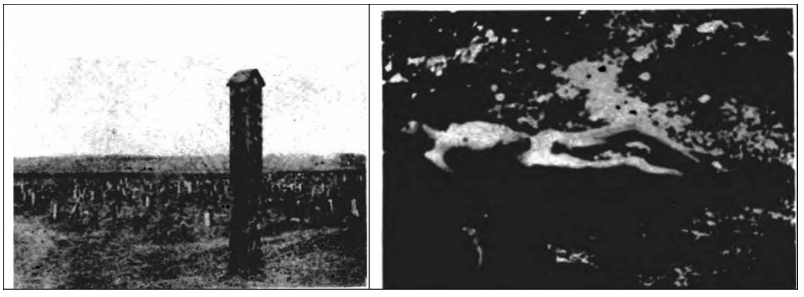

Figure 4. A pit in Harbin containing 10,000 corpses (left), and a corpse lying in Changchun Street (right)
Source: Reproduced from Chianbubunshitsu (1941, xix, xxi)

behind the opium establishment they had frequented (see Figure 4). The report said this was a sight that could be seen daily. The average annual death toll in major cities in Manchukuo was around 6,000 (Yin, 1937, 32–33). This death toll was, at best, a conservative estimate given that habitual opium-smokers accounted for one third of the total population of Manchukuo (North-China Daily News, 1946).

There was a strong consensus in the Japanese Empire that Harbin, one of the largest cities in Manchukuo, had a unique, exotic, and international character (Hayashibara, 1934, 74). Its population was just as diverse as the city itself. Of its 400,000 people, there were 300,000 local Chinese, 27,000 Russians, 34,000 stateless Russians, 8,200 Koreans, 7,000 Japanese, and 3,500 others (Hayashibara, 1934, 74). The city was so vibrant and cosmopolitan that after touring it, Murata Shō (1935, 62), a correspondent for *The Chosen and Manchu*, the longest-running printed newspaper that served both the Korean peninsula and Manchukuo, wrote: 'Harbin was neck and neck with Shanghai as the grand international amusement park in the Far East'. On the status of Harbin, Chŏn Mu-Kil of *Dong-A Ilbo* agreed with Murata. The city thus earned the name 'the northern Shanghai' – and also, more famously, 'the Paris of the East', even among the Chinese themselves (Ta Kung Pao, 1937). In this giant amusement park, another form of pleasure-seeking formed an important, organic part of the entertainment scene: Daikan'en ('the Garden of Grand Vision') or 'the Harbin slums' (Meyer, 2014).[9]

Against the backdrop of the flourishing development of Harbin, the dark side of society was also evolving, as could be seen in the biggest pleasure quarter in northern Manchukuo, Daikan'en, the state's 'den of monsters' (*makutsu*) (Sano, 2005, 197). This quarter was almost inconceivable to the outside world, but it provides a good snapshot of ordinary life in Manchukuo, especially its dark underbelly, and the lives of the lower social strata, who frequently experienced opium addition, prostitution, extreme poverty, and social alienation.

Daikan'en appeared from the outside to be no different from other ordinary shops or business establishments. But once one entered through the main gate into the quarter, a dark world of stenches, vulgarity, and terror appeared (Chianbubunshitsu, 1941, 3). It was a huge two-storey complex that contained hundreds of small shops of various types

and inns of different purposes. In addition to small eateries, barber shops, pharmacies, and so on, the complex contained at least six pleasure quarters, more than 40 unlicensed opium sellers, and an official dispensary (the No. 34 Harbin Opium Dispensary). Prostitution also took place at inns within the complex, and illicit sales of opium were conducted in other parts of the complex. Daikan'en formed its own pleasure-driven ecosystem: inhabitants could have all their needs met without leaving the complex.

Women in Daikan'en were like the female attendants at the opium establishments outside the complex. Some were as young as 13 years old, even younger than the most sought-after 15-year-old female attendant at Ju Xian Lou mentioned above. As young girls, they endured the same brutality as other sex workers and were sometimes forced to sleep with customers even during their menstrual periods (Chianbubunshitsu, 1941, 3).

Meanwhile, some of the sex workers at Daikan'en were as old as 60. They were different from higher-class women for whom sex work was a profession (see Smith, 2012, 111–133). The women at Daikan'en were sometimes photographed waiting for more customers to patronise them. The only dreams and solace for people in Daikan'en were opium, morphine, and women (Chianbubunshitsu, 1941, 68). Once one entered the complex, it would often become a magnetic force that tied its occupants together.

These sex workers' lives were probably no better than those of Daikan'en's other inhabitants, who often ended up becoming opium addicts. Women in Daikan'en, to relieve the pain and bodily exhaustion caused by venereal diseases such as syphilis or gonorrhoea, would rub opium into their sore genitals, while the poor used it to deaden their pain and suffering from the ruination of their lives. Customers infected with venereal diseases turned to opium for help and subsequently became addicted to it (Chianbubunshitsu, 1941, 75). Many women, as well as their clients, fell into the trap of a vicious circle of opium consumption and venereal disease pain relief. In Figure 5, the breasts of a woman who was engaged in sex work are exposed, her health suffering under the strain of overwork from selling her body. According to an unpublished report describing the living and working conditions in Daikan'en: 'These women were manipulated into grotesque sexual games. Their breasts disappeared due to excessive sex. Their skin sagged and atrophied due to overwork, malnutrition, and disease; also, due to lack of sunlight and fresh air … ' (Chianbubunshitsu, 1941, 83–84; author's translation).[10]

The end of the Daikan'en inhabitants' lives is not hard to imagine. They often died of chronic opium consumption and were stripped of their possessions and clothes. Their bodies were tossed into the streets naked. Such scenes were common in big cities such as Shinkyō and Harbin. Similarly, their destinies were the same as those of ordinary opium addicts outside of Daikan'en. These accounts indicate that what happened outside the complex was identical to what was happening inside Daikan'en. The visual record presented above provides a telling snapshot of everyday life in Daikan'en in the late 1930s and early 1940s, illustrating the mutually reinforcing relationship between sex and opium.

Daikan'en was a microcosm of the city of Harbin and of the new state of Manchukuo itself, where asymmetric power relations existed. Okabe Osamu, the consultant to the Mongol United Autonomous Government (another puppet regime under the control of the Japanese authorities), wrote in a memorial collection in tribute to Kagawa Tetsuzō (1888–1968), a metropole official who had worked for Japan's Ministry of Finance for about 30 years, 'Harbin would be incomprehensible without an understanding of

Figure 5. A sex worker (left) accompanied by another person
Source: Reproduced from Chianbubunshitsu (1941, xv)

Fujiadian. Manchukuo would be incomprehensible without an understanding of Harbin. The full administration of Manchukuo would not be possible without an understanding of Manchukuo itself' (cited in Chianbubunshitsu, 1941, vi; author's translation).[11]

This memorial tribute underscored the importance of understanding the neighbourhood of Fujiadian, in which Daikan'en was situated. With a population of around 250,000, Fujiadian had long been known as a Chinese or Manchukuoan town. Since the early part of the century, it had developed significantly due to its proximity to the bustling district of Futou, the Wharf District, an area that was likened to downtown Tokyo. By linking the governance of Manchukuo with a proper understanding of Fujiadian and Daikan'en, Okabe exposed the Achilles heel of the authorities. Fujiadian was the scourge of Manchukuo that seemed to mock the pretensions of the new state. The short memorial message highlighted the need for a better understanding of the real lives of people on the ground in the administration of Manchukuo.

Conclusion

By 1938, the dire situation of opium consumption in Manchukuo prompted a series of newspaper reports such as that in the *Cairns Post* (1938) from as far away as Australia. *The Voice* (1938) linked the use of opium with prostitution: 'the use of drugs falls into a category of vice similar to that of prostitution'. This was also later confirmed in the Tokyo War Crime Trials after Japan's defeat in 1945. The places where opium was consumed with the help of female attendants, who also helped to attract clientele, were described as 'narcotics brothels' in evidence presented to the war crimes trial (North-China Daily News, 1946).

The goal of this article was to explore a subculture of gendered and sexualised opium use. This was evident in the interplay between opium consumption and sex work,

especially through the commodification of women in advertisements and other media forms. The article also showed how this convergence evolved in the sordid, unseen world of big cities. By examining the triangulation of imperial consultants, owners, and consumers, this article has revealed how the operation of many illegal opium shops was possible and how these shops transformed opium use by employing female attendants. Based on these findings, the article concludes that the strikingly uneven power relations – such as gender, class, imperialism, and extraterritorial rights – produced a new subculture characterised by the highly gendered and sexualised consumption of opium in the social spaces of opium establishments that were protected by the extraterritoriality of the imperial subjects of Japan and Korea. This subculture contributed to the deterioration of the surrounding society in not only an important contact zone but also 'the centrepiece' of the Japanese Empire (Young, 1998, 22).

It is therefore appropriate to end our discussion on another aspect of the opium business: its consumption. Like the diverse actors involved in the illicit production of opium, the equally diverse array of its consumers played a major role in weakening the government's control over opium circulation and profits. In turn, opium sellers, such as the shop-owners, skilfully exploited the system of opium regulations through the imperial subjects and gendered opium use. This increased the social impact of opium use. As a result, the convergence of opium consumption and the sexual commodification of female attendants in relation to the selling of opium became a common yet significant sociocultural phenomenon in the shops and thus boosted both legal and illegal sales of opium.

Notes

1 The *fen* was the smallest currency unit and was merely one-hundredth of a *yuan*; a *jiao* was one-tenth of a *yuan*. To put this in perspective, the so-called consultants received median salaries of 52.5 *yuan* per day.

2 '進去裡門便看得見有一行屋子, 活像在首都所見的蓬戶, 不過更為矮小, 而且屋子是木製的, 保役領我向屋子里走, 我真是存着十二分的戒心『喂！這是人間麼？』我不自禁的這麼想, 地下東一塊西一塊破的席子, 席子上零零落落的有幾張棉片, 大概這個屋子裏住着十個左右的人 … … 據說其餘的癮客現正在街上打食-偷炭, 扒點財務, 其他方法, 弄到幾個角子, 再來過癮, 上宿。再後走到還有更窄更長的一間本棚, 地下只有亂草, 席也沒有了, 人數也三倍於前面的屋, 這大概所謂三等臥室罷, 這裏的人也多些, 有的在睡着, 有的四五個人在看紙牌消遣, 我完全沒敢驚動他們, 味道雖大, 我也不忍的掩着鼻子, 我恐嘔, 我難過, 但我無淚可流。'

3 '煙花寨裡月迎人, 風月樓頭花遶身。一點靈犀漏洩春, 醉人魂: 一半兒煙香一半兒粉。'

4 The modal particle *he* (Ch. 呵) is usually used to convey a soft and effeminate feeling. In this scenario, the word reveals the particularly poignantly sweet and affected manner of a woman speaking.

5 As a popular nonfiction book from 2005, it offers a fascinating, unparalleled account of some unknown stories about the opium industry in Manchukuo.

6 'その女の云ふことには、阿片又はヘロインを吸て、一時間位の後に性的交渉があれば、全く想像以外の天国遊ぶ感になると盛に宣伝するので、遂好奇心にかられて之を用ゐる気になり、女と共に吸たのであります。この女の云ふ様に、ヘロイン吸飲後二時間位で交渉のあたときが、非常に時間を長く要し私自身の経験では、感覚も鈍でなく、天国遊ぶ如く感じたのであります。刺激に富み、非常に快感を味ひ、全く桃園郷遊ぶと云ふのは、この事かと自覚したのでありました。'

7 '신흥하는 도시|동시에 건설중의 도시는 전신인 장춘시대보다 배나되게 자랏으며 광면적의 고층건물이 즐비하고 도로의 정비 새로운 가로등의 행렬, 인구 동태의 민활 등이 쉬웁게 눈에 띠운다. … 쓰러기나 내버리고 채전으로 쓰든 황야를 덮고 삼립마천하는 대건물들은 실로 그 외양부터가 굉장히 위압적으로 보인다.'
8 '일야지간에 아편쟁이의 동사한 시체를 노상에서 점점히 본다하니 인도의 대안으로 보아 민연한 일이다.'
9 Meyer offers a riveting account of Daikan'en, but her heavy reliance on a field report as a primary source to sustain a book-length project impairs her interpretation and analysis of this larger and very complex story.
10 '女共はグロテスクな支那の性的遊戯に玩弄せられ、過淫のため乳房は消え失せ、皮膚はなく萎び、過労と栄養不足と病毒と、更に日光と空気との不足のため(中略)'.
11 '傅家甸がわからないと哈爾濱がわからない。哈爾濱がわからないと満洲がわからない。満洲がわからないと、満洲の行政が完全にゆかぬ。'

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