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ABSTRACT

In the 1930s, Cantonese society paid less attention to the women who smoked opium, than to the *yanhua* 煙花 («flowers of smoke»), the young and pretty waitresses, of modest social pedigree, who prepared pipes for patrons in opium houses. The anxiety about the *yanhua* had to do with fears of social disorder. Because of their beauty and the effects of the drug, these girls were accused of being the cause of inappropriate downward and upward mobility (respectively, that of the male customers ruined by their immoderate consumption and that of the *yanhua* who succeeded in seducing and marrying rich patrons).

Drugs and Social Transgression: Women and Opium in Canton in the 1930s

Xavier Paulès (EHESS)



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DRUGS AND SOCIAL TRANSGRESSION: WOMEN AND OPIUM IN CANTON IN THE 1930s*

XAVIER PAULÈS

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ABSTRACT

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KEYWORDS

opium, opium houses, Canton, waitresses

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AUTHOR'S RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Books:

- PAULES, Xavier, *La Chine des guerres de l'opium à nos jours* [China since the opium wars], Paris, La Documentation française, coll. La Documentation photographique, 2013, 64 pages.
- PAULES, Xavier, *L'Opium, une passion chinoise, 1750-1950* [Opium, a Chinese passion], Paris, Payot, 2011, 318 pages.
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- PAULES, Xavier, “細審新聞記事：《越華報》與廣州日常生活（1927-1938）” [News items under scrutiny: *Yuehuabao* and the Canton daily life, 1927-1938] », in Lian Lingling 連玲玲 (ed.) 萬象小報：近代中國城市的文化、社會與政治 [All-seeing tabloid newspapers: modern Chinese urban culture, society and politics], Taipei : Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, 2013, p. 335-365.

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- “The Gambling game of *fantan* in South China during the early twentieth century”, *International Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 7, n° 2 (July 2010), p. 179-200.

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Classic Chinese historians such as Sima Qian have shown special interest in the theme of the beautiful woman who, through her influence over the sovereign, provokes an avalanche of political disasters¹. However, this is simply one of the manifestations of the general principle that the passion which women can arouse may cause men to stray from the straight and narrow path of proper behaviour. These formidable sexual predators, examples of which abound in literature, also demonstrate the ability to exploit their sexuality to wield the power of alienation².

In a similar way, but more recently, opium smoking (which began to spread significantly throughout China only in the 18th century) has been marked out as a potentially destabilizing agent for society. According to its detractors, the pleasures of the drug divert men from their most basic obligations. Thus, in a country where filial piety counts as one of the most fundamental values and where the family constitutes the keystone of social order, the opium smoker, blinded by his dependence on the drug, is accused of neglecting his parents and next of kin, going so far as to sell his wife and children in order to support his habit³.

Thus, there is an interesting convergence between women (or rather, their beauty, which can solicit uncontrollable desire) and opium, both of which are capable of casting their spell over men and thus threatening the social order that is based on male domination. But how do these two potential threats interact? The 19th century literary texts dealing with opium that have been examined by Keith Mac Mahon, distinguish three possible scenarios⁴. First, one threat can cancel out the other: the power of opium over its users is so great that the company of women and the pleasures of sex (as well as other pleasures, such as good food), lose all their attraction. In a second scenario, women who consume opium

become “phallicised” and are therefore likely to abandon their legitimate roles of devoted mothers and wives, and may even be unable to have children as a result of excessive opium consumption. Finally, the third scenario depicts the exploitation of opium by a woman (often a prostitute) as a tool for seduction.

Like the study that we have just referred to, the sparse research that has been carried out on the relation between women and opium in China has only examined the examples of prostitutes and women of the 19th century elite, and this research is based almost exclusively on literary sources⁵. This article proposes to take another look at the matter and to widen the perspective to include to the whole of society. To do this it would seem judicious to abandon the 19th century, which provides very few examples of opium consumption within the working classes, and to look instead at the 20th century, but without attempting to cover the entire country, for there is, indeed, a clear dividing line between the poppy growing inland provinces (such as Sichuan, Guizhou or Yunnan), lands of plenty where opium, cheap and abundant, is widely consumed, and provinces such as Guangdong, where the opium poppy is little cultivated and where the drug arrives after a long journey entailing considerable extra costs, thus curbing its consumption⁶. What is more, even within the same province, the context of large cities is very different to that of remote rural areas⁷. For all these reasons, and in order to benefit from sufficiently abundant and reliable source material, it seems judicious to limit this study to one of the country’s major urban centres.

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The choice of Canton seems appropriate for two reasons: first of all, such a project will help to better understand a metropolis that has been little studied, especially in comparison with Shanghai. Secondly, in the 1930s, a newspaper published in Canton called the *Yuehuabao* 越華報 (the *Yuehua News*) devoted an unusual amount of space to the subject of opium consumption in its editorials, letters to the editor and news items. The news items were not much different from what we see today in the West: short articles about minor events that break the monotony of daily life. Those about opium, which was legal at the time, typically related stories of theft, swindling and brawls in the opium dens, or else described the arrests of smokers of smuggled opium. In addition to the *Yuehuabao*, we also have at our disposal the articles that were published in Cantonese general interest reviews and in the anti-opium periodicals (*Judu yuekan* 拒毒月刊, *Jinyan banyuekan* 禁煙半月刊), as well as interviews.

5 Mac Mahon 2002; Zheng 2005.

6 *China weekly review*, 23 September 1933, p. 148; Royal Commission on opium 1894.

7 Dr. Hobson’s report to Sir J. Bowring, November 6, 1855: *British Parliamentary Papers*, 1971.

1 Sima Qian 1967. We find the theme of the ravishing and destructive woman in high political spheres as early as the 8th century B.C. (*Shijing*, The Classic of Poetry: Book III, Song X, Book IV, Songs VIII and IX).

2 We might mention Pan Jinlian, a key character in the great novel, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. The myth of the fox women (*hulijing*), formidable creatures whose charms could prove devastating for the men who succumbed to them, also reflects the use of female sexuality for alienating purposes: Pu Songling 1996.

3 *Chinese repository*, June 1838, p. 107-109; Royal Commission on opium 1894; *Tuhua ribao* (Illustrated Daily), n° 346, 355, 358, 363, 365, 380, 396 (1910).

4 Mac Mahon 2002.

1. WOMEN OPIUM SMOKERS: REPRESENTATION AND REALITY

The literary works dating from the end of the Qing Dynasty (1850-1911), indicate that women who smoked opium were condemned punished more severely than their male counterparts, for the reasons we mentioned earlier. If we look outside the literary field and examine those publications that were hostile to opium, we find, again, the idea that female opium consumption represented an extreme stage in the devastating effects of the drug, even if this is never a central theme in the articles⁸. These sources express a concern, within the milieu from which they emerge — that is to say the male members of the elite classes — about opium consumption by the women belonging to their social stratum.

A look at the Cantonese newspapers and periodicals of the 1930s leaves one with a somewhat different impression. The numerous news items about female smokers readily express indignation over the poor conduct of the women concerned, but the anti-opium diatribes that are frequently presented to the readers devote little space to the problem of opium consumption by women. Indeed, this subject is virtually ignored in the many propaganda publications produced by the Guomindang in Canton in 1936-37⁹. In fact, these texts always designate the smoker without indicating the gender, using terms such as *xishi de ren* (smokers), or *xiyan de ren* (opium smokers), but the fact is that the reference is implicitly to men, as readers will quickly understand when they come across a reference to the sale of a wife to provide funds for purchasing opium. A text from this same period, which presents all the different means that should be mobilised to quickly eradicate the opium problem, encourages children to implore their fathers (and wives their husbands) to stop smoking¹⁰. When a typical opium smoker's personal trajectory is described, it is always a man, usually young and well-off, who is taken as an example. The wife only makes an appearance to illustrate the family's difficulties (see illustration 1). Women, therefore, are almost exclusively represented as collateral victims of the opium habit.

8 *Tuhua ribao* 圖畫日報, n°374 (1910), p. 5; *Shishi huabao* 時事畫報 (The Illustrated News), September 1907, p. 10b.

9 At this time an intensive propaganda campaign was organised by the Kuomintang to eradicate opium within a period of six years. The *ad hoc* organisation produced a large number of flyers, speeches and written articles in Canton, which are assembled in an impressive compilation: Guangzhoushi jinyan weiyuanhui 1937.

10 Guomindang guangdongsheng dangbu, *Jinyandu zhuankan* 禁煙賭專刊 (Special edition for the suppression of opium and gambling), p. 37.



1. *Opium, a world problem*, March 1928, p. 34. Propaganda poster of the National Anti-opium Association (*Zhonghua guomin juduhui*)

Although the contrast between the abundance of news items about female opium smokers and the absence of themes concerning the ravages of opium consumption amongst women in the propaganda of the time may at first seem contradictory, both phenomena are the result of the same specific reprobation of opium consumption by women. Illegal consumption of opium on the part of a woman was considered to be worthy of mention precisely because it was sensational. For that matter, women arrested for offences involving opium almost always manifested their shame before a hostile crowd, as they were taken to police headquarters, by covering their faces: this behaviour was rarely observed when men were arrested for the same reasons¹¹.

The virtually universal stigmatisation of women opium smokers also accounts for the low level of female opium consumption and explains why, as a result, anti-opium propaganda was aimed at men rather than women. The situation for women was comparable to that of children, for whom the propaganda texts were clearly not intended either¹². It would have been a waste of effort to mobilise the limited means of propaganda available to address these two categories of the population, when the battle was already won. By ignoring women (and children), the propaganda campaigns were simply

11 *Yuehuabao* (hereafter *YHB*) 10/5/1930, 18/10/1930, 5/6/1931, 11/5/1931, 6/3/1932.

12 In the case of children, opium consumption was extremely rare because of the firmly entrenched belief that anyone who started to smoke before reaching full growth would die prematurely.

being pragmatic by attacking, instead, the largest battalion of opium smokers: adult males.

A systematic study of smokers in Canton in the 1930s has allowed us to conclude that about one Cantonese smoker out of ten was a woman. If we accept that the percentage of smokers in the entire population was probably around 3% to 4%, we can judge to what extent female opium consumption was a marginal phenomenon¹³. During our interviews, witnesses from the period confirmed - indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that they confirmed unanimously - that women did not smoke. Not one of them knew of a women opium smoker in their circle of acquaintances¹⁴.

The very negative way in which women smokers were perceived does not, alone, explain why so few women smoked. There are two other explanations that should be mentioned. First, economic factors discouraged opium consumption amongst working-class women. Specific sociological studies have shown that the expense involved in procuring opium, or even less costly derivatives, for regular consumption was far from negligible for the budget of a family of modest means. Let us look, for example, at a study carried out amongst the Tankas¹⁵ in the Shanan area, a study that is particularly useful, as it provides numerical data both for the consumption of opium and for the level of income¹⁶. Even if we take the example of a fairly moderate consumer who spends 0.2 yuan a day on his habit, this amount still represents no less than 13 % of the average income for a family of modest means. Thus, if in some coolie families the head of the family relied on opium to help him carry out the exhausting work that provided the main financial resources for the home¹⁷, the wife would have seriously threatened the family's survival if she, too, had let herself slip into the opium habit. This internalised economic constraint may also have reinforced the idea within the working classes that it was unsuitable for a woman to smoke¹⁸.

13 Paulès 2005a.

14 Interviews with seven witnesses were carried out on October 5, 2005, July 7, 10 and 11, 2006, and on July 15, 2008. However, considering the stigma attached to the image of the female opium smoker, we cannot exclude the possibility of self censorship.

15 The Tankas were, at the time, a group of social outcasts of uncertain origin who had settled permanently on boats moored on the Pearl River.

16 Lingnan shehui yanjiusuo 1934.

17 Opium was often consumed by workers whose jobs were especially hard, such as rickshaw runners, because it helped to fight off the feeling of fatigue: Murayama 1941; *Judu yuekan* (Monthly for the suppression of drugs), n°90 (June 1935), p. 7; *YHB* 5/5/1933.

18 This mechanism of internalising an objective constraint, "necessity transformed into virtue", obviously refers back to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1979).

The second reason is a result of a change of attitude towards opium amongst the elite classes. In fact, a large number of testimonies bear witness to the fact that, at the end of the Imperial period, women smokers were mainly women from wealthy families (or prostitutes)¹⁹. However, in Canton, between the end of the 19th century and the 1930s, there was a shift in the opium smoking population. Quantitatively, the percentage of smokers in the population as a whole dropped considerably, from 10% to about 4%. At the same time, from a qualitative point of view, the most privileged social categories, which were more receptive to the arguments linking China's decline to the influence of opium, began to give up the drug²⁰. The result was the pauperisation of the opium-smoking population. In the 1930s, coolies and workers were largely over-represented amongst smokers. The fact that the categories of the population that began to abandon the drug were precisely those that had, up to then, included the largest proportion of female users meant that female consumption was, as a consequence, all the more reduced.

A final clue indicates that, in the collective view, the female opium smoker had ceased to be perceived as a credible threat under the Republic. Indeed, we can see that, as far as the relationship between opium and women was concerned, the public's attention was largely focused on the *yanhua* 煙花 (literally, "smoke flowers"), rather than on women smokers.

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2. THE QUESTION OF BANNING THE *YANHUA*

Preparation of the opium pipe requires both time and skill. What is more, the process must be repeated for as many pipes as needed, with the average consumer smoking up to a dozen a day²¹. The *yanhua*'s job is precisely to spare the smoking-house clients this drudgery by providing them with pre-prepared pipes, while at the same time keeping them company and providing conversation. They might also offer the clients cigarettes or sweets.

No doubt because these pretty young women interested its readers (mainly men), various kinds of articles in the *Yuehuabao*, our main source of information, are about the *yanhua*. Some of the articles relate a visit to an opium den where the author's attention was drawn to a particular *yanhua* working there. He then gleans information from an

19 Royal Commission on opium 1894.

20 Paulès 2005b.

21 Paulès 2005b.

acquaintance or a neighbour who, in general, willingly tells the story of the young woman. Articles such as these probably have a tendency to romanticise, which is why news items about thefts or brawls in the opium dens that mention, in passing, a *yanhua* who happened to be involved in one way or the other, are valuable testimonies, even if brief: they probably provide more objective information about the *yanhuas'* daily lives²². Articles of a third type are indictments against the *yanhua*. The question of their prohibition was, indeed, a recurring theme in Canton in the 1930s. It was part and parcel of the larger problem of the *nü zhaodai*, a term that designated the employees in charge of services in the opium dens, restaurants and tea houses²³.

Several times over, in 1930-31, the authorities proclaimed a ban on the *yanhua*²⁴. Nevertheless, they kept reappearing in the opium dens, even if they had to try to get round the ban by pretending to be fruit vendors²⁵. During the first two months of 1932, the question of banning the *yanhua*, who were targeted in a full-blown media campaign in the *Yuehuabao*,²⁶ attracted a great amount of interest. A number of accusatorial articles appeared. They emphasised the absolute necessity of banning these women once and for all from the opium dens²⁷. Here is the conclusion of an article written in January, 1932 which is typical of this approach to the question:

All in all, the *yanhua* are jeopardising morality and are the cause of many problems. This is particularly true for hot-blooded youths and students who, abandoning their studies, hang about the opium dens and lust after the *yanhua*. Many become drug addicts in this way. This is most regrettable and it is to be hoped that there will be a veritable, strict ban [on the *yanhua*], which will prevent them from re-emerging in any shape or form. This would be an inestimable benefit for our youth!²⁸

As in the preceding case, the attacks are based primarily on two arguments: first, the *yanhua*, on the whole, behave indecently and, secondly, they tend to distract men from productive enterprise and draw

them into drug abuse. The concern is all the more serious because the *yanhua's* “victims” are young. We will return later to the accusations of “indecentry”. As for the number of opium smokers who developed the habit because of the *yanhua*, it is impossible to make this calculation. As the *yanhua* represented a commercial attraction provided by the owner to increase patronage of his smoking house²⁹, their impact could not have been negligible, especially as each of the 300 Cantonese smoking houses had one or more *yanhua*³⁰.

Whatever the case, the media campaign against the *yanhua* achieved its goal, for in March, 1932 a radical measure was enforced: a total ban on all women in the opium dens, be they clients or employees³¹. At the same time, this measure dealt a rather severe blow to business in these establishments³², and over the following years, the ban continued to be enforced³³. Nevertheless, signs of an easing of the ban were detectable around the years 1934-35, but it would appear that there was not a massive and visible return of the *yanhua*. The newspaper and magazine reports seem contradictory: during the same period they report that women were caught and arrested in the opium dens³⁴, and on the other hand they describe the overt presence of both clients and *yanhua* in certain chic establishments³⁵. This rather confused situation would continue until the end of the autocrat Chen Jitang's 陳濟棠³⁶ regime in the summer of 1936. In the months following his downfall, the Guomindang authorities, back to Guangdong, would unambiguously re-establish the strict ban on the *yanhua*³⁷.

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22 See for example *YHB* 15/2/1931, 12/1/1932, 9/3/35, 17/11/1936. Sometimes, too, these human interest pieces provided an opportunity to briefly outline the life story of the *yanhua* in question: *YHB* 29/2/1934, 24/11/1934, 28/7/1935.

23 Chin 2007.

24 *YHB* 24/3/1930, 30/5/1930, 18/11/1931, 21/11/1931; *Guangzhoushi shizheng gongbao* 廣州市市政公報 (The official newspaper of the government of the municipality of Canton), November 1930.

25 *Yugong sanrikan* 羽公三日刊 (The newspaper of Yugong), n°31, n°60 (ca 1930); *YHB* 11/12/1931, 10/1/1932, 4/2/1932.

26 It must, however, be noted that the newspaper *Guangzhou minguo ribao* 廣州民國日報 (The Canton Republican Daily), closely linked to the government, does not record debates of this nature and that, inexplicably, it does not even mention the steps taken to ban women from the opium houses.

27 *YHB* 7/1/1932, 10/1/1932, 12/1/1932, 15/1/1932, 2/2/1932, 4/2/1932, 11/2/1932.

28 *YHB* 15/1/1932.

29 *Yugong sanrikan*, n°53 (ca 1930); *Huazi ribao* 華字日報 (the Huazi Journal) 24/8/1929; *YHB* 5/12/1931, 10/1/1932.

30 *YHB* 11/12/1931. Concerning the estimate of 300 opium houses for the city of Canton, see Paulès, 2005b. The only reference in the source material to the number of *yanhua* in the city is imprecise: “several hundreds”: *YHB* 22/6/1932.

31 *YHB* 22/3/1932.

32 *Huazi ribao* 4/6/1932; *YHB* 22/3/1932, 22/6/1932, 9/6/1934.

33 Along with the ban there was also the sacking of some police commissioners guilty of excessive permissiveness in this matter, which clearly encouraged their remaining colleagues to zealously enforce the ban: *YHB* 22/3/1932.

34 *YHB* 17/1/1934, 9/3/1934, 22/11/1934, 24/11/1935.

35 Two articles from *Judu yuekan*, n°79 (circa 1934), p. 31, and n°90 (June 1935), p. 5-7 mention the presence of several women both as clients and as *yanhua* in the luxury opium houses in Canton.

36 Chen Jitang (1890-1954) was a military leader in the Kuomintang who managed to seize control over the province of Guangdong from 1931. He administered control independently until the central government in Nanking succeeded in ousting him in 1936.

37 Article n°30 of 18 November 1936, regulation concerning the reorganisation of the section of civil inspectors of the Committee for the opium ban in the city of Canton, *Guangzhoushi jinyan weiyuanhui gongzuo jiyao*, p. 67.

3. THE *YANHUA*: PROSTITUTES OR DEALERS IN “FACE”?

Even though the purpose of the *yanhua* was to prepare opium pipes for the clients and to keep them company, many articles in the media allude to their indecent behaviour. Some of these articles assimilate the *yanhua* with clandestine prostitutes, an association that is reinforced by the expression “smoke flower”³⁸. It must also be said that the consumption of opium, because it had long been used in brothels to calm desire and prolong sexual relations and had subtly become a part of social relations in these establishments, was traditionally associated in the collective mind with prostitution³⁹. Several accounts of the lives of *yanhua* mention that they engaged in prostitution before or after they worked as *yanhua*⁴⁰ and certain phenomena would indicate that there was a hazy line between the two⁴¹. Thus, after the March 1932 ban, a number of the young women who, as a result, found themselves jobless, would join the ranks of the clandestine prostitutes⁴².

A 1924 short story by the Cantonese writer Zhang Ziping 張資平 places sex at the centre of the relationship between a *yanhua* called Aju and one of her regular clients (Chen Zhongzhang, a shady low-level civil servant), thus encouraging the reader to see this relationship, effectively, as one between a prostitute and her client⁴³. Aju hopes to seduce Chen so completely that he will marry her, but in the meantime does not fail to extort as much money from him as possible: not only does she accept tips from him, but she has no scruples about taking a heavy commission on the meals and drinks he orders for both of them. Chen, for his part, has no intention of making her his wife and simply tries to sleep with her for as small a fee as possible. Zhang Ziping highlights the ease with which games of seduction can be played by two people who are reclining face to face to smoke.

However, for a handful of articles from the 1930s that unambiguously refer to sexual relations between a *yanhua* and a client⁴⁴, how many more accusatory articles are there that hide behind such vague terms as « *canggounawu* » (to serve as a screen to dissimulate

vice)⁴⁵? Of course, we cannot exclude the possibility of self censorship on the part of the journalists, for the sake of propriety, but when faced with descriptions making more or less clear allusions to amorous relationships or promiscuous sexual behaviour on the part of the *yanhua*, the historian must refrain from systematically interpreting this as disguised prostitution⁴⁶.

We must also place the accusations of “indecent” within the context of Canton in the early 1930s, a period when, under the influence of Chen Jitang, traditional values were encouraged, after these values had been largely undermined between 1910 and 1920 by the authorities of the time, who were almost always resolutely progressive. One of the most famous aspects of this turnaround was the renewed emphasis on the Classics in primary schools⁴⁷, as well as the measures adopted in favour of a clear separation of men and women in public places. As Wang Di demonstrated in his study of street life in Chengdu, even though sexual segregation (including in the home) was undeniably an essential part of an ideal social order derived from Confucian ideals, the theoretic imperatives dissolved of their own accord when faced with the necessities of daily life in families of modest means⁴⁸. The situation in Canton was without a doubt the same and within the working classes, men and women rubbed shoulders every day. We need not go so far as to caricaturise the initiatives taken by Chen Jitang, which at the time were pure delight for the contributors to the satirical review *Lunyu* 論語 (Sayings)⁴⁹, but it is true that, for example, men and women were banned from bathing together in open air swimming pools⁵⁰, and the police kept a sharp eye on women’s clothes to make sure they conformed to the rules of decency as defined by a strict dress code⁵¹. In such a non-permissive climate, the question of the *yanhua* seems to have been especially sensitive.

We must also define the notion of prostitution, for, indeed, the Chinese and Western meanings only partially overlap: studies on this question show quite clearly that sexual relations as such were not — at least for the elite of what, for lack of another term, we call prostitutes — at the centre of the relationship

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38 *YHB* 11/12/1931, 27/7/1934.

39 Henriot 1997; Luo 1994.

40 *YHB* 5/8/1931, 26/10/1931, 20/12/1931, 2/2/1932, 9/2/1932, 5/3/1934.

41 Angelina Chin 2007 makes the same observation about the waitresses in the Cantonese tea houses.

42 *YHB* 11/6/1932, 22/6/1932, 17/11/1932.

43 Zhang Ziping 1994.

44 *YHB* 7/9/1933, 27/7/1934.

45 *YHB* 30/5/1930, 12/1/1932, 4/2/1932, 17/11/1932.

46 Zhu 1995 purely and simply assimilates the Cantonese *yanhua* and prostitutes.

47 Yang & Zhong, 1996 ; *Revue nationale chinoise*, May 1934, p. 398.

48 Wang Di 2003.

49 *Lunyu* n°46 (August 1934), p. 1016; n°47 (August 1934), p. 1055 and 1069-71.

50 Lee 1936.

51 *Revue nationale chinoise*, October 1935, p. 242.

with the client. It would be absurd to deny that some *yanhua* sold sex, but this does not mean that this was the *raison d'être* of the majority of them and that we can deduce that their undeniable success derived solely from their activity as prostitutes. It would appear that, on the contrary, the vast majority of *yanhua* did not sell their bodies⁵², and, when they did, not to just anyone. Certain *yanhua* chose clients with whom they arranged meetings in nearby hotels, but did not hesitate to rebuff old fogies, even if they were rich and generous⁵³. We should also note that some smoking-house managers used their own wives as *yanhua* in their opium dens⁵⁴, although this is not a decisive argument, as at the time poor women worked as prostitutes with the consent of their husbands⁵⁵.

In order to understand the success of the *yanhua* without reducing it simply to clandestine prostitution, it may be more enlightening to reformulate the question and ask why a client would wish to pay for the services of a *yanhua*. It is obvious, first of all, that the client who entered an opium parlour and was served by a young, seductive *yanhua* who, reclining opposite him, carried out the fastidious preparation of the opium pipes, gained as much in terms of comfort as he would spend on tips. Pleasure is, thus, the most obvious explanation, but an article in the January 15, 1932 issue of the *Yuehuabao* sheds light on another essential aspect of the *yanhua's* function, which was to affirm the status of the client by serving him. A *yanhua* called Youbao was taking care of one of her regular wealthy clients, Liu, in a private room in a chic opium parlour when Chen, another of her regular clients, came in with a friend who was visiting the opium parlour for the first time. Usually Youbao would hurry out to welcome Chen, offer him a pipe, dust off his couch and prepare his opium pills. This time, Chen was disagreeably surprised not to be greeted by Youbao. Worse, he had to wait around with his friend on the ground floor because the other *yanhua* did not dare to serve a man who was known to be the private preserve of their colleague. Indignant at being thus ignored when other clients were being looked after by other *yanhua*, Chen became annoyed. He had hoped to show his friend that he was treated like an important client, so he shouted for Youbao but Liu would not allow her to leave to take care of his rival. It all ended in a fist fight between the two men.

This anecdote provides a good illustration of how the presence of the *yanhua* was, above all, a visible sign

52 A witness of the period who was familiar with the Cantonese opium houses is affirmative on this point: interview with Mr. Mai Zhaoshen, 15/7/2008.

53 *YHB* 7/1/1932.

54 *Huazi ribao* 24/8/1929; *YHB* 16/11/1931, 3/12/1931, 20/12/1931, 2/8/1934.

55 *Huaguobao* 華國報 (The Nation) 29/5/1915; Henriot 1997.

of the client's rank. When Chen arrived, he was expecting "face"⁵⁶, and he required it all the more because he was accompanied. In fact, both of the men involved felt that they had paid dearly enough to expect to be treated as clients with more privileges than all the others. Their face off (the expression is well adapted to the situation) would necessarily lead to a confrontation. The possible amorous sentiments involved were no more than extra factors beside the acts carried out to save face and the strategies employed to maintain prestige. Neither flights of passion nor sexual desire should mask the fact that one of the *yanhua's* *raisons d'être*, and perhaps even the main one, was to sell "face".

Keeping this in mind, we should have another look at the *yanhua's* attributions, compared with the other employees of the smoking houses: indeed, is it not interesting to note that the *yanhua* were the specialists of all that was accessory? The services they provided, i.e., preparing the pipes (which the clients could do themselves), looking after the clients, as well as selling sweets and cigarettes, were all extras that were added on to the main service. The pomp and care with which they were carried out reflected the rank of he who was able to buy the service⁵⁷.

On the other hand, in the opium houses the general handymen (*qintong* 琴僮) were in charge of distributing and collecting the pipes, cleaning the furnaces, attributing the couches, collecting the money, distributing the tea, and all the tasks involved in providing the required minimum service. As a result, when a client asked for a *yanhua*, he was requesting a service that exceeded the strict minimum requirement, and he thus raised his status above that of the ordinary client.

It is interesting to compare the situation of the *yanhua* with that of the hostesses in the dance halls in Shanghai (young women hired out to dance with the clients): fingers were also pointed at these hostesses, as their job required them to be in close physical contact with men. From there, it was an easy step to designating the dance halls as none other than venues for disguised prostitution. However, Andrew Field's thesis demonstrates convincingly that during the 1930s, very few hostesses engaged in prostitution, for they were perfectly capable of earning a living by simply dancing. This does not exclude the possibility that a hostess might at times choose to go with a man of her choice, as she was free to lead her sex life as

56 In China, "face" (面 *mian*) designates prestige, the "surface" which, at every level of society, each individual has at his disposal in relation to a wide group around him. The expression "to lose face" comes from the Chinese language.

57 *YHB* 18/11/1931, 11/12/1931.

she pleased. The hostesses who had sex regularly with clients were often prostitutes who had taken jobs at the dance halls in order to attract the clients who had abandoned the brothels on account of their restrictive rules⁵⁸.

Like the dancers, most of the *yanhua* in the average smoking house (and *a fortiori* in luxury houses) could make a decent living without having to resort to prostitution⁵⁹. Some famous *yanhua*, — who in this capacity were both the trophy and the arbitrator in the veritable jousting matches for prestige that took place amongst the wealthy Cantonese to procure their services — might even receive presents of huge sums of money in a short period of time. All the same, even if they were not prostitutes, these women did recline next to men in circumstances of real promiscuity. This is the true reason for the scandal, just as in the case of the dancing hostesses in the arms of their clients. On the dance floor or in the opium den, it was this trivialised proximity of two bodies of the opposite sex that was the crux of the problem.



2. *Shidai manhua* 时代漫画 (Shanghai), n°1 (1934)

4. THE LIFE TRAJECTORIES OF THE *YANHUA*: THE TEMPTATION OF FREEDOM AND SOCIAL ASCENSION

Articles charting the lives of *yanhua* appeared frequently enough that we can attempt to define the characteristics of two typical life stories. The *yanhua* who were in employment were generally young, between 15 and 22, and in most cases single. The social origin of the young women engaged in this work is often mentioned in the articles about them. Thus, some of the articles attribute the deliberate choice of becoming a *yanhua*, on the part of young women from well-to-do families, to a certain “erroneous interpretation” of the concept of freedom (*wujie ziyou*), which motivates them to demand, in particular, a love life free of family

control⁶⁰. However, although the misconduct (as they saw it) of these few girls from good families was the delight of the columnists, the fact was that the *yanhua* generally came from modest backgrounds⁶¹, and many articles mention girls who were pushed by financial necessity into the profession of *yanhua*⁶².

Nevertheless, it does not seem pertinent to radically oppose, on the one hand, the *yanhua* from wealthy families who chose the profession in order to defy the social norms that weighed upon them with, on the other hand, the poor girls who were pushed into it by necessity. In fact, the life trajectories of *yanhua* of modest origins often reveal the same rupture with certain values that were commonly embraced by their communities of origin, and in particular a traditional conception of women. Associated with elegant apparel and reasonably good wages⁶³, the profession of *yanhua* probably also had the added attraction of not being physically trying, despite the rather long working hours. When these articles describe the predilections, judged to be libidinous, of some of these young women of modest backgrounds, would it not be more credible to put forward the argument that they aspired to financial independence, a freer and more comfortable life than that of the model wife of a worker and, most of all, the possibility of social ascension through marriage to a well-to-do client⁶⁴?

Indeed, even if it is true that the profession of *yanhua* was not a prestigious one, it could, nevertheless, allow young women, especially those who worked in the better smoking houses, to become the concubine of one of the wealthy regulars of the house, in the same way as prostitutes in high class brothels⁶⁵. The newspaper’s readers probably had an appetite for this sort of rags-to-riches story, which explains the large number of articles devoted to the subject. The story of the young He Zhen is typical. He Zhen worked as a prostitute in Chencun, a town south of Canton. She married a merchant, but very quickly his business declined as a result of his opium habit. The couple found themselves reduced to extreme poverty, in the face of which the husband remained totally apathetic. His wife then convinced him to let her work as a *yanhua* in an opium den, where her elegance and natural attractions quickly made her famous. For a while, she supported her husband, but then, once her prestige opened up the possibility, she became the concubine of a wealthy young man who bought her freedom from her husband for a huge sum. In this

60 *YHB* 11/2/1932, 5/3/1934.

61 *YHB* 10/1/1932, 31/12/1931, 9/2/1932, 6/1/1934. According to Mme X, the *yanhua* who worked in the opium house where she was also employed were all from poor families: interview with Mme X, 11/7/2006.

62 *YHB* 10/1/1932, 1/5/1932, 9/2/1932.

63 Several articles highlight this fact: *YHB* 26/6/1931, 26/10/1931, 15/1/1932.

64 *YHB* 26/10/1931, 20/12/1931.

65 Hu 1936.

58 Field 2000; Henriot 1997.

59 Paulès 2005b.

way, the young woman, when confronted with an obstacle to her plan for social ascension, consciously used the profession of *yanhua* to exploit her beauty and find a place for herself within a wealthy family⁶⁶.

From the point of view of the facilities that their respective professions offered for self-serving campaigns of seduction, the *yanhua*, were placed halfway between the prostitutes and the hostesses in the teahouses or restaurants. The latter, even if they had a reputation for flirting with the clients, worked within a space where there was no possibility of intimacy⁶⁷. They did not have the opportunities that were provided by the long *tête-à-tête* with the clients that took place while the opium pipes were being prepared, and which could occur in the intimate surroundings of a private room in the high class smoking houses. At the other end of the spectrum, the prostitutes, whose profession was entirely organised around the act of seduction, were more likely than the *yanhua* to end up marrying one of their clients.

Even though the arguments that are put forward in the source documents we consulted refer mostly to their “indecent” and the trap they presented for luring men towards drugs, we can also distinguish another, not very explicit, series of concerns related to the idea of transgression. In addition to the opportunity that it offered young women of modest origins to escape, through marriage, into a wealthy family, the profession of *yanhua*, like some other professions of the same period, opened up the possibility of financial independence for certain women.

We might think that the subject of female consumption of opium would have been a prime preoccupation for the Cantonese in the 1930s. Such was not the case: unlike what some source material from the end of the Qing era seems to indicate, women opium smokers, a minute number, were no longer a concern. The concerns of society during this period were focused on the women who exploited the drug: the *yanhua*, the young employees who prepared the pipes for the clients in the opium dens. Beyond their assimilation with prostitutes, there formed a cluster of fears linked, in fact, to the problem of maintaining order and, most of all, the established hierarchy. Indeed, in the final analysis, the seductive combination of drugs and the physical attractions of these women was seen to favour unseemly social mobility, whether downward (the ruin of an opium smoker as the result of his excessive spending) or upward (the marriage of a *yanhua* with a wealthy client).

The *yanhua*, after their brief eclipse at the beginning of the 1930s, remained an integral part of the life of Cantonese opium dens up to the time when opium was eradicated by the Chinese Communist Party at the beginning of the 1950s⁶⁸.

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66 YHB 5/8/1931.

67 Chin 2007.

68 *Minzoku Taiwan* (Taiwanese folklore), vol. 3, n°8 (August 1943), p. 34-38; Interview with Mr. Mai Zhaoshen, 15/7/2008.

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