theories and methodologies

In the Opium Den

ANTHONY W. LEE

AMONG OTHER THINGS, PHOTOGRAPHS ARE DEPOSITS OF SOCIAL RELATIONS. TO PUT IT ANOTHER WAY, THEY ARE SOCIAL RELATIONS TEMPORarily hardened into images—figured, captured, frozen. The most obvious of those relations, that between the photographer and the sitter, has been a regular subject of inquiry for art history. Acknowledging but leaving that kind of interest aside for the moment, we may explore other sorts of relations in and around a photograph and pursue a line of inquiry more in keeping with visual culture. Here's a quick example.

One summer evening near the turn of the nineteenth century, the painter Xavier Martínez, a Mexican by birth but living in the United States, decided to visit one of the few remaining opium dens in San Francisco's Chinatown. Martínez was well acquainted with the Chinese quarter, his studio a stone's throw away and his favorite café just on the other side of it. But on this occasion, heading not for the streets but for the underground dens, Martínez opted for company and invited a photographer, Isaiah West Taber. Taber was an especially apt companion, the sort of person who liked to boast of insider knowledge of the city's mysterious spaces.

While the existence of opium dens was common knowledge—newspapers wrote about them, city ordinances targeted them, medical investigators tried to have them shut down, tourists and flâneurs sought them out as leisure distractions, illustrators brought forth a slew of images of them—they were not so easily entered as in previous decades. After the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 and the enormous influx of suddenly unemployed Chinese rail workers, white labor unions, wanting to rid themselves of competition, pointed a condemning finger at the opium dens. Their flurry of efforts resulted in local ordinances in 1875, 1878, and 1881 prohibiting the drug. Most dens closed; others went underground—literally—moving from back rooms to basements, where access could be more controlled and the dead-giveaway sweet smell of burnt opium could be contained.

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The new criminality surrounding the dens may have been one reason Martínez needed a companion. Taber claimed to know the safest stores, having photographed them for his large archive. But the photographer was also enlisted for another purpose. As if trying to avoid notice, or perhaps to embellish the risqué nature of his visit, Martínez donned a masquerade, outfitting himself with the loose-fitting pants of a nineteenth-century Chinese laborer, complete with white socks and oversized jacket, and pulling back his long, bushy hair into a queue. Though he surely fooled no one (his English was Spanish-accented, peppered with Mexican slang, and his Cantonese nonexistent), I like to think Martínez's ridiculous appearance caused a store owner, no doubt chuckling, to invite the painter and photographer below. The two men were even permitted to set up a big glass-plate camera.

And then it happened. Martínez stretched himself out on a bunk like a denizen of the place, and Taber commemorated this act in an extraordinary photograph (reproduced on this page).

It's hard to tell from the picture whether Martínez was in the midst of serious smoking, already in the fog of the drug, or simply hamming it up for the camera, but given the circumstances, I think the last. In the most common pictures from the day, usually taken just before police raids, the Chinese were almost always captured in the act of smoking, in rapture, or simply comatose. Taken together, such photographs narrated the processes and effects of the underground habit, the better to medicalize, criminalize, and police it. The photographers



Photograph by Isaiah West Taber, c. 1901. His caption reads, "Opium Den underground, by Flash-light. Smoker caught lighting the pipe. The keeper in the door had extinguished the light."

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usually emphasized the cramped, low-ceilinged environs and the clutter and dishevelment to help characterize the dens' clandestine nature. They typically worked in the dim light of only a lamp or two and so required a powder flash. Its sudden blare was everywhere apparent in the pictures and, combined with the quality of abruptness and intrusion, gave the whole scene something of a criminal air.

But in Taber's photograph of Martínez we see instead a generous bedroom space, complete with a picturesque print of the bay and shoreline on the back wall, a clock to keep proper time, and a Chinese companion neither in rapture nor comatose but holding up to the camera the long, darkened bamboo pipe of choice, as if it were a prized specimen. The man stands fully erect, as if to accentuate both his sobriety and the ceiling's generous height. The light is robust, the depth of field plotted, the plunging space and passageway to the adjoining room carefully elaborated—all these evidence of the deliberate disposition of the tripod and equally thoughtful management of the lens and powder flash. An open bed is nestled closest to the camera, its sheets and blanket crisply made and pillows and quilts stacked neatly overhead ready for use, like an invitation to the viewer to cozy up. Instead of smoking, Martínez prepares the pipe, packing the opium pill into the bowl, as if he were a practiced smoker arranging the opium for a companion about to join him.

Early writers on opium usually argued for its myriad functions, including its medicinal qualities—a relief to pain; a comfort for fever, diarrhea, cholera, malaria; a sedative after childbirth. Beginning in the late 1880s, however, opium was more often understood as offering neither palliative nor relief but instead only a dubious euphoria. The dens were filthy and smelly, as they had always seemed, but increasingly the filth and smell obtained a moral aspect, as if the pleasures underground were sure signs of degeneracy and debauchery.

This new understanding of the dens cut at least two ways. While opium was interpreted as uniquely Chinese in origin and therefore confirmed the lowliness of an alien race, smoking for a non-Chinese brought about the opposite—not a representation or confirmation of one's identity but an effacement of it. "When a [white] man or woman falls under the bondage of opium, self-respect is lost," the flâneur George Fitch wrote in 1887. "I have seen a man, who was very fastidious before he acquired the opium habit, lying side by side with a dirty coolie, each taking alternate puffs at the same pipe, while on the next bunk was stretched, in the deep sleep that opium brings, a wretched outcast of the street, who once claimed to be a woman" (356). Addicted, men and women lose their status, becoming like the dirty, reviled coolie, mere street flesh.

By the time of Martínez's visit, opium dens came to harbor an impossibly large anxiety among non-Chinese about the borders of difference, the spaces in which yellowness and its opposites were seemingly dissolved, the means by which the social, psychological, and bodily integrity of white men and women became undone. "Women, as well as men, are the slaves of the habit," reported the *Medical and Surgical Reporter* in 1887. "Dr. Anderson has witnessed the sickening sight of young white girls from sixteen to twenty years of age lying half-undressed on the floor or couches, smoking with their 'lovers'" (Anderson 784). The slide from addiction to profligacy to miscegenation was easy to make. "Instead of a normal sexual tone," explained the physician H. H. Kane, "the appetite is exalted to a veritable condition of satyriasis in the male and nymphomania in the female" (43).

The reasons opium smoking became the cause of so great a social anxiety are several. First, by the early 1880s United States suppliers of opium to China had witnessed their exports slow to a trickle and halt. By then the Chinese were growing their own opium in such large quantities that British and United

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States opium chests, once extraordinarily profitable, were no longer needed. Simply put, there was no imperial reason to justify and explain away domestic opium addiction. Second, the existence of the dens signaled the tenacious existence of a Chinese community, supposedly being eradicated with the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. Instead of dissolving the community, the act seemed only to entrench it, and the underground den, dug deep into the earth, was its physical embodiment. Third, Chinatown's supposed filth, most feared in its unsanitary and infectious underground, became increasingly the abject example for an American bourgeoisie bent on health and cleanliness. And, fourth, the fact that the illicit gatherings in the underground were still large had to be attributed to something other than the drug's appeal. The dens seemed to suggest not only a cultlike sensibility built around addiction but also something oddly cultivating and built around a culture.

Journalists, reformers, and illustrators obsessively noted this last point, as if an alien conviviality was being nurtured in the underground gatherings. The drug's social effects were not limited to the Chinese but, beyond all bounds of comprehension, attracted non-Chinese as well. "It may sound strange," a baffled police officer reported, "but I have had men who could easily buy their own outfit and the purest opium tell me that when the longing comes on them they cannot satisfy it except in a low Chinese den; that the idea of smoking good opium in a clean pipe and in their rooms don't seem to fill the bill" (Kane 12).

To the non-Chinese, opium seemed to represent not only the teeming Chinese brought to American shores but also the "oriental" qualities both loathed and desired in that arrival: the habitual surrender of reason and clarity, the happy acceptance of physical and psychological escape without fear or guilt, the impassive, even pleasurable, way of confronting urban change and social disruption with a waking indolence. To make matters worse, opium seemed utterly foreign and backward because it outcompeted money and Western goods in the primitive insatiability of its consumers. Or, in a variant of that argument, it was the most extreme commodity and turned capitalism on its head because the desire for it overwhelmed everything else. And when smoked, it seemed to flatten, if not rearrange, the social hierarchies carefully achieved by the industrializing West. It even positioned its users on their bunks in fetal positions, as if its adherents, no matter their walk in life, returned to an infantile state of being, longing, and knowing. To the West's clarity and logic, it offered the irrational and libidinal. To the West's demand for progress, it offered a collective withdrawal to a dream space seemingly outside time. No amount of prodding could push the smoker out of his or her dream; no amount of legal hectoring seemed to deter him or her from pursuing it. In the depths of the drug, the opium smoker, Chinese and non-Chinese, was happily unperturbed.

To the Chinese, the dens could represent the surrender of reason, true, or the escape from boredom, or the pleasures of lethargy and indolence. But they were also tinged with melancholy about the accommodation of the Chinese to the West. Opium, after all, was understood in China as a Western drug. Its common name in nineteenth-century Chinese translates into "western sea smoke," a reference to the importing of the drug through Pacific ports. It was foisted on the Chinese when the British and Americans had no other commodity to exchange for herbs and silk and zealously pushed a product the Chinese came to need. When the Chinese refused, opium came with battleships. The brief and deeply humiliating Opium Wars resulted in the drug's being forced onto China in such mass quantities that addiction became rampant in a generation. The effects on the population were devastating. "The disaster spread everywhere as the poison flowed into

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the hinterlands," the poet Zhang Changjia wrote in the late nineteenth century. "It was like a flood, conflagration, and rampaging armies all at once, making no discrimination between rich and poor, high or low. . . . Heroes drown themselves in the depths of a mere length of pipe" (McMahon 193).

In this alternative history, opium smoking was not a deep Chinese racial characteristic but was instead a result of cultural contact, even foreign imperialism. It represented the destruction of Qing China in the face of Western powers, and its insidious history among the people was an allegory of the nation's ruin. The condition of the addict was marked by helplessness, not divine enjoyment. Westerners, not the Chinese, were seen as the beneficiaries of addiction. Their pockets were filled with Chinese gold and money, their storehouses packed with Chinese goods, while the Chinese had in return merely small opium pills that soon went up in smoke. The Chinese confronted in the Western drug not an empowered sense of self but collective loss and devastation.

Where the non-Chinese saw the den as backward and primitive, the Chinese could just as easily see it as modern and all too Western. Where the non-Chinese saw its underground station as evidence of its criminality, the Chinese could see the venue as proper for an imposed habit—subterranean, tucked in the bowels of the earth, pushed into darkness where just above, at street level in the bright light of day, the colonialists held sway. The den was like an import of a colonial situation across the Pacific, and in this sense it confirmed that Chinatown, like China, was at the service of the West. Where the non-Chinese interpreted the drug as the most primitive of commodities, as the one that disrupted all others in its utter desirability, the Chinese could just as easily interpret it as the most modern of commodities, as the one that disrupted all ancient forms of fantasy and desire. And where the non-Chinese interpreted the den as a place where sexuality ran to satyriasis and nymphomania, the Chinese could all too easily interpret it as a place of monumental impotence.

What has this photograph offered us thus far? At minimum, that a Mexican artist posing as a Chinese addict in the underground of an American port city presents a good opportunity to think about visual culture's transnational dimensions; and for the purposes of this brief set of essays on visual cultures, that photographs, the lifeblood of modernity, are helpful in imagining the madness of modern cultural encounters, in this case tinged with the competing meanings of self and other, of power and loss, and of difference and desire. Of course, more work needs to be done to flesh out the complexity and thickness of social relations in and around the photograph: Mexico's relation to the United States and China, competing histories of immigration and migration, the status of ethnic identity, and the value of masquerade in a port city. And, most important, we need to see how the photograph captures or hardens them. Only then might we begin to see the picture's full deposit.

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