

Intoxicating Manchuria

Alcohol, Opium, and Culture in China's Northeast

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Introduction

This sacrifice is truly terrifying
You've turned your blood into mud
The price is far too high.
If it were your lover
You'd have to let it go.
It goes without saying that your enemy
Is also my enemy.

"JIE YAN GE" (GET OFF OPIUM SONG)

In 1942 Li Xianglan (b. 1920), the most famous entertainer from the Japanese colonial state of Manchukuo (1932-45), sang the "Jie yan ge" to decry the "truly terrifying" price of using opium, which she described as a seducer that destroyed those who fell under its sway.¹ Li sang of a fateful relationship with the drug, her words echoing the sentiments of a restive population, health professionals, and officials who sought to wean users off intoxicants such as opium and alcohol despite the state's dependence on the revenues they raised and the resistance of supporters who profited from their sale. In the first half of the twentieth century, the Northeast of China was certainly famous for its "opium problem" (*yapian wenti*), which attracted considerable international attention. Alcohol, however, was also a constant but seemingly less controversial influence on health and culture in the region. Whereas opium has been central to understandings of the region's modern history and Japanese imperialism, alcohol has not been a particular focus of scholarly attention despite the region's development of what is now in China popularly called a "unique alcohol culture" (*dute de jiu wenhua*).² Both alcohol and opium have been used for centuries in the pursuit of health and leisure, while also being linked with personal and social decline. Despite the stress on opium, the impact of alcohol on the region has been even more pronounced, and it continues to this day, as attested to by the recent firing of China's most decorated Winter Olympics athlete, the Northeasterner Wang Meng, whose drunken fighting

is argued to have “violated the team’s disciplines and jeopardized the sport’s image,” resulting in her expulsion from her team and banning from international competitions.³ This study examines the ways that recreational intoxicant consumption was understood and characterized in the first half of the twentieth century, especially by the 1940s prohibitionist platform in Manchukuo, which dominated official policy and Chinese popular culture during the Japanese Empire’s Holy War (*sheng zhan*) (1941-45) against Anglo-American imperialism.⁴

Li Xianglan’s “Jie yan ge” occupies an important space at the intersection of mid-twentieth-century Chinese national weakness, foreign imperialism, and the battle against the recreational consumption of intoxicants: it is the theme song of the 1942 Japanese-sponsored, Chinese-language movie *Wanshi liufang* (*Eternity*), which dramatizes the Anglo-Chinese Opium War of 1839-42. *Wanshi liufang* was produced in Japanese-occupied Shanghai a century after the end of the Opium War and during the Japanese Empire’s Holy War against England and the United States. Although the film was intended to incite anti-opium, anti-Western sentiment among Chinese audiences, it also issues a negative reflection on its producers. Although the Japanese publicly vowed to liberate China from the double yoke of Western degradation and drug addiction, they inflicted brutal colonial regimes that belied the ideological underpinnings of Holy War and imposed what Mark Driscoll has termed “anticolonial colonialism.”⁵ Japanese efforts to placate critics through the promotion of domestic Chinese popular culture, such as *Wanshi liufang*, ironically accentuated for audiences the “far too high” costs of the subjugation that Li so famously sang about.

Li Xianglan is an enduring symbol of the Chinese culture produced within Japanese-occupied Manchuria.⁶ Li was born to Japanese parents in Fushun, Manchuria, and was raised in the region and in Beijing.⁷ Reflecting her parents’ admiration of Chinese culture, Li attended Chinese schools, adopted a Chinese name, and pursued a Chinese-language career. In her late teens and early twenties, Li starred in films produced for Chinese audiences by the Japanese-sponsored Manchuria Motion Picture Producing and Distributing Company (Chinese: Zhushi huishe Manzhou yinghua xiehui; Japanese: Manshū eiga kyōkai). Audiences were led to believe that Li was a pro-Japanese Chinese national.⁸ Li also established a formidable career as a singer, popularizing several of the most beloved Chinese songs of the twentieth century.⁹ Her rendition of the “Jie yan ge” was lauded not only in Japanese-occupied territories but also in Republican- and Communist-held areas, including the revolutionary stronghold of Yan’an; its anti-opiate message had a strong appeal in war-torn China. So, too, did Chinese-language literature that

condemned alcohol addiction. Local writers in Manchukuo, such as Mei Niang and Xiao Jun, gained considerable fame for works that criticized intoxicant consumption at a time of such national peril. But in the post-occupation period, all those who produced popular culture – no matter how critical – under Japanese dominion were tainted by a presumed “traitorous” collaboration with the imperialist power. Following Japan’s defeat in 1945, for example, the Republican regime condemned Li to death. Li escaped execution by producing a genealogy that proved her Japanese identity, and she then fled to the United States and Japan.¹⁰ Others who stayed, including Mei Niang and Xiao Jun, were persecuted by the Maoist regime for decades. Those who worked in the controversial fields of drugs control or rehabilitation also faced persecution and, in some cases, death. Their legacies, like the state of Manchukuo itself, were wiped from the face of China but have left long shadows in the national psyche.

The prominent roles of intoxicants in Manchukuo raise important questions regarding Japanese imperialism, narratives of addiction, and Chinese popular culture. *Intoxicating Manchuria* analyzes alcohol and opium narratives in the region’s most popular Chinese-language media during the first half of the twentieth century with three questions foremost:

- 1 How were intoxicants, and addiction, popularly understood and characterized?
- 2 In what ways were intoxicant industries impacted by Japanese occupation and war?
- 3 Were serious efforts made to reduce intoxicant consumption?

The answers to these questions shed new light on received interpretations of the region’s history and Japanese imperialism. This study does not deny that Japanese committed atrocities in China’s Northeast, including a voluminous drug trade.¹¹ It does, however, argue that to gain a more comprehensive appreciation of the region’s recent history, historians need to more fully restore to public memory its complicated (*fuzha*) nature, which necessitates a closer examination of the historic roles of intoxicants.

Intoxicating Manchuria demonstrates that throughout the first half of the twentieth century, opium may have been a major trade commodity in the Northeast, but it was also widely denounced. In the early 1940s, alcohol was also repudiated but not until after it had been heralded for decades as a marker of modernity. Expanding hostilities across the mainland, and the launch of Holy War, transformed narratives regarding the consumption of alcohol, and it was increasingly condemned as a gateway drug for opium, heroin, and

morphine. From then, huge intoxicant industries existed alongside harsh criticism of recreational intoxicant consumption. This study argues that efforts to control and condemn intoxicants in the region were even more extensive, diverse, and nuanced than has previously been appreciated – and they demonstrate just one example of the significant socio-cultural roles that intoxicants have played in the history of the Northeast and in China more generally.

In China and Taiwan there is a growing literature on alcohol history, including most notably Guo Panxi, *Zhongguo yin jiu xisu* (*Chinese Drinking Alcohol Customs*); Li Zhengping, *Zhongguo jiu wenhua* (*Chinese Wine Culture*); Xuan Bingshan, *Minjian yinshi xisu* (*Popular Food and Drink Customs*); and Gong Li, *Yin jiu shihua* (*History of Alcohol Drinking*).¹² These works reflect growing interest in the role of China's "alcohol culture" (*jiu wenhua*) and the desire to legitimize claims to the expertise of domestic consumers and producers and appeal to foreign markets. To date, there has been no English-language counterpart to this boom in Chinese publishing on alcohol. Rather, discussion of alcohol in China has been limited to works on food or has occurred as part of international studies; especially relevant titles include K.C. Chang, *Food in Chinese Culture*; John E. Helzer and Glorisa J. Canino, eds., *Alcoholism in North America, Europe, and Asia*; and David T. Courtwright, *Forces of Habit*.¹³ The only exception has been David Armstrong's *Alcohol and Altered States in Ancestor Veneration Rituals of Zhou Dynasty China and Iron Age Palestine*.¹⁴ This volume seeks to begin to address the historical lacunae with a focus on alcohol in the Chinese region most famed for alcohol consumption. The volume centres on the Manchukuo context of the 1930s and 1940s and especially complements Zhang Huinuan's *Beifang shaoshu minzu de jiu wenhua* (*Northern National Minority Alcohol Culture*), which focuses on national minorities in China's north in the imperial and contemporary periods.¹⁵

There is an even larger volume of scholarship on opium in Chinese and Japanese history. Jonathan Spence's seminal essay on opium consumption has demonstrated that it "radically affected all levels of Chinese society" and not just in terms of physical harm.¹⁶ Relevant, more recent works that continue to question opium's roles in society include Kathryn Meyer, *Webs of Smoke*; Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, eds., *Opium Regimes*; Frank Dikötter, Lars Laamann, and Zhou Xun, *Narcotic Culture*; Yamada Goichi, *Manshukoku No Ahensenbai* (*Opium Monopoly in Manchuria*); and Zheng Yangwen, *The Social Life of Opium*.¹⁷ These works underline the importance of contextualizing opium and its varied socio-economic roles. The work of Zhou Yongming, *Anti-Drug Crusades in Twentieth Century China*, and Alan

Baumler, *The Chinese and Opium under the Republic*, is especially relevant to this project.¹⁸ Both detail anti-opium campaigns in China but dismiss out of hand the efforts made in Japan's mainland regimes, and both reflect the continued ambiguity of post-Qing Dynasty Chinese nationalists' rendering of the Northeast as an integral part of the Chinese nation. *Intoxicating Manchuria* argues that a clearer understanding of the local prohibitionist movement is essential to understanding the region's history and relations with China and Japan.

There have been extensive studies of Japanese imperialism, especially in terms of opium. The most relevant are John M. Jennings, *The Opium Empire*; Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire*; Lü Yonghua, *Wei Man shiqi de dongbei yandu (Opium Poison in the Northeast during the Bogus Manchukuo Era)*; Yamamuro Shin'ichi (trans. Joshua Fogel), *Manchuria under Japanese Dominion*; and most recently, Mark Driscoll, *Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque*.¹⁹ *Intoxicating Manchuria* adds to this scholarship through a focus on Manchukuo's anti-opium movement as well as on the aggressive promotion of alcohol and on the later efforts to restrict alcohol consumption in Manchukuo. Major, recent projects on Manchuria in the 1920s and 1930s include Ronald Suleski, *Civil Government in Warlord China*; James Carter, *Creating a Chinese Harbin*; Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity*; Liu Jinghui, *Minzu, xingbie yu jieceng (Nation, Gender, and Social Stratum)*; Mariko Asano Tamanoi, ed., *Crossed Histories*; the Sino-Japanese collected volume *Wei Manzhouguo de zhenxiang (The Real Truth of the Puppet Manchukuo)*; and Blaine Chiasson, *Administering the Colonizer*.²⁰ These works stress the need for increasingly complex readings of the multi-ethnic region's history to enhance understandings of local history and have made this volume possible.

Intoxicating Manchuria comprises eight chapters. Chapter 1, "Alcohol and Opium in China," describes the historical treatment of alcohol and opium in China to the mid-twentieth century. It outlines the longstanding roles that they have had in cultural practices and state policies, from mythmaking to tax regimes. In Chapter 2, "Manchurian Context," attention is directed to China's Northeast and major business and state developments in the region's intoxicant industries, from the end of the imperial period through the 1940s, to argue their significance to local life and governance. The chapter focuses on the business of intoxicant production, providing the general context for the discussion of intoxicants in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3, "Evaluating Alcohol," interrogates dominant alcohol narratives as revealed in the region's leading newspapers and journals in the 1930s and 1940s, such as *Datong bao (Great Unity Herald)*, *Jiankang Manzhou (Healthy*

Manchuria), *Qilin (Unicorn)*, *Shengjing shibao (Shengjing Times)*, and *Xin Manzhou (New Manchuria)*. Throughout the 1930s the narratives were generally positive, stressing alcohol's roles in health regimes, cultural production, and entertaining. These narratives bolstered the regime's modernity claims while reflecting lengthy traditions of alcohol use in the Manchu, Mongol, and growing Han Chinese, Japanese, and Russian communities. In the 1940s, however, health concerns and socio-economic instability resulting from occupation, war, and poverty inspired increasingly aggressive denunciation of alcohol as the type of poisonous foe that Li Xianglan so famously decried.

Chapter 4, "Selling Alcohol, Selling Modernity," traces advertising practices from the promotion of alcohol consumption as a marker of modernity to calls for strict control or prohibition. The products examined include Chi yu pai putaojiu (Red Jade Brand Grape Wine), Gui pai haomeng putaojiu/Suppon Holmon (Soft-Shell Turtle Brand Grass Grape Wine), Yangming jiu (Life Support Wine), and Asahi beer. For those who consumed too much, the health supplement Ruosu (Basic Element) was promoted as the most modern antidote to intoxication. The advertisements feature illustrations and text that aimed to teach consumers about the products and how to consume them in the most modern ways, shedding light on changing business and consumer practices and on changing state policies.

Chapter 5, "Writing Intoxicant Consumption," analyzes Chinese-language fictional work of the 1930s and 1940s that describes the consumption of alcohol and opium. The chapter maps the writers' efforts to raise mass consciousness of the dangers of intoxicants as they established their literary careers. Work of high-profile local writers, including Bai Lang, Li Qiao, Li Zhengzhong, Mei Niang, Wang Qiuying, Xiao Jun, and Zhu Ti, is examined.

Chapter 6, "The Hostess Scare," interrogates the intense debate that erupted in the 1930s over women working in opium retail outlets and in service industries more generally. Discussion centred on the "accepted talents" of women and how they should be deployed in the workforce. Starkly divisive contemporary *Shengjing shibao* reportage provides insight into perceptions of hostesses and the industry as a whole. It also helped to shape fictional accounts of service-industry workers, such as Mei Niang's 1940 "Zhui" (The Chase) and Wei Cheng's 1942 "Kuilan de du shi" (The Festering, Poisoned Tongue). Locating hostess work within debates over early-twentieth-century "new women" reveals the conflicted nature of women's roles in the service and intoxicant industries, an issue that still resonates today.

Chapter 7, "Reasoning Addiction, Taking the Cures," describes contemporary efforts to define "addiction" and to delineate methods by which it might be overcome – by individuals in their homes or in institutional settings. Media

promotion of anti-addiction products and descriptions of hospitals, clinics, and Healthy Life Institutes (Kangsheng yuan) and their staffs highlight the seriousness with which many viewed achieving the end of addiction. Received interpretations of the period reject or minimize the attempt to treat and eradicate addiction, yet the most popular media of the day were consistently, aggressively engaged with the issue.

Chapter 8, “The Opium Monopoly’s ‘Interesting Discussion,’” examines the 1942 Manchukuo Opium Monopoly (Yapian zhuanmai gongshu) publication *Qu tan conglin, di’yi ji* (*Interesting Discussion Thicket: Volume Number 1*), a 126-page book that was distributed free of charge. The richly illustrated volume contains fourteen chapters that reveal the monopoly’s stance on alcohol and opium and on how addiction should best be treated. This volume, once widely available, is now extremely rare and has not previously been the subject of scholarly inquiry. This examination of *Qu tan conglin* brings together the main strands of inquiry in *Intoxicating Manchuria* to demonstrate the historical significance of Manchuria’s intoxicant industries and their undeniable impact on local culture.

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