

Living on Borrowed Time

Opium in Canton, 1906–1936

Xavier Paulès

TRANSLATED BY
Noel Castelino

CHINA RESEARCH MONOGRAPH 74

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Cover image: A young man posing with opium paraphernalia, postcard, late-nineteenth century (Hong Kong, Daibatsu). Collection Mme. Régine Thiriez.

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To Chunyi

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Romanization

The Chinese terms, names, and words used in this book have been transcribed according to the *pinyin* system, barring the following that follow older styles, either in line with usage or to preserve their original transcription in the sources:

Canton (*pinyin*: Guangzhou)

Honam: in *pinyin*, Henan (literally, South of the River). This term designates the huge island to the south of the Pearl River and by extension refers to that part of the Canton urban area that is attached to it (see maps 4 and 5). The name Henan happens to be an exact homonym of Henan Province, and it is to avoid confusion between the two that I have used the term Honam derived from the Cantonese pronunciation.

Hopei: in *pinyin*, Hebei (North of the River). Contrary to Honam, Hopei designates the part of Canton city situated to the north of the Pearl River. In the *pinyin* transcription, it is an exact homonym of Hebei Province, and it is to avoid confusion between the two that I have used the term Hopei derived, like Honam, from the Cantonese pronunciation.

Hong Kong (*pinyin* Xianggang)

Peking (*pinyin* Beijing)

Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhongshan)

Tankas: in *pinyin*, *danjia*. This term designates the river-dwellers of the Pearl River. The origin of this community is unknown.

Jiang Jieshi: I have used the increasingly prevalent *pinyin* transcription (as opposed to Chiang Kai-shek and other variants). A similar rule has been followed for Nanking (Nanjing), Swatow (Shantou), and Pakhoi (Beihai).

Sun Yat-sen's son, who was the mayor of Canton on several occasions in the 1920s, is called Sun Ke (and not Sun Fo, as is sometimes the case).

Currency and Weights

There is total confusion in the sources as to monies and currency. The widely prevalent reference to dollars (\$) gives no clue as to whether the currency in question is the central government currency, the provincial government's currency, or even the Hong Kong dollar, which was quite commonly used in Canton. Occasionally, the ambiguity is lifted by additional information, but such cases are few and far between. The term *yuan* 圓, used elsewhere in the sources, simply indicates that the currency being referred to is not the Hong Kong dollar.

This is why the currency unit used herein is always the one given by the source without any attempt to harmonize the different sources.

Whatever the unit of account (dollar or yuan), the *jiao* (or *hao*) represents one-tenth of the unit and the *fen* represents one hundredth.

As for weights, the situation is not much clearer, because the weight corresponding to the *liang* would vary, albeit moderately, from region to region. The following were the metric system equivalents of the units used by the Maritime Customs.

A *liang* 兩 (often called a *tael* or *ounce* in Western sources) was equivalent to 37.7 grams.

A *qian* 錢 (sometimes called a *mace*) was about one-tenth of a *liang*, or 3.78 grams.

A *dan* 擔 (sometimes called a *picul*) was the weight of one chest of opium, i.e., 60.5 kilograms.

A *jin* 斤 (pound) was equal to 16 *liang*, or about 600 grams.

Abbreviations

Aix	Archives d'Outre Mer: Archives for Overseas Departments and Territories (they are kept in Aix en Provence)
CO	Colonial Office
CWR	<i>China Weekly Review</i>
FO	Foreign Office
GJJ	<i>Guangdong jinyan jikan</i> (Quarterly for the suppression of opium in Guangdong)
GJWGJ	<i>Guangzhoushi jinyan weiyuanhui gongzuo jiyao</i> (Summary of the activities of the Canton City Opium Suppression Office)
GJYN	<i>Guangzhoushi jieyan yiyuan nianbao</i> (Annual report on the Canton detoxification clinic)
GGI	Gouvernement général de l'Indochine (Government-General of Indochina)
GMR	<i>Guangzhou minguo ribao</i> (Canton republican daily)
MAE	Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (Ministry of Foreign Affairs: this term by extension designates the holdings of archives kept at the Quai d'Orsay in Paris)
Nantes	Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs kept at Nantes
NAOA	National Anti-Opium Association (Zhonghua guomin juduhui)
SCMP	<i>South China Morning Post</i>
SDN/LON	Société des Nations/League of Nations (by extension, this term designates the holdings kept in Geneva)
XGR	<i>Xianggang gongshang ribao</i> (Hong Kong industry and commerce daily)
YHB	<i>Yuehuabao</i>

Introduction

The poppy plant, from which opium is extracted, has been known in China from early times. Even though the question of its provenance may be moot, most historians believe that the poppy was introduced by Arab merchants during the Tang dynasty (618–907). *Papaver somniferum* entered the Chinese pharmacopeia as early as the tenth century. In the centuries that followed, poppy pods and seeds became an ingredient in numerous remedies. The poppy, with its beautiful flower, was also appreciated as an ornamental plant.¹

“Opium” (*yapian*) is the name of the substance obtained after the sap tapped through incision of the pods has been put through a few simple processes. The term appeared at the beginning of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), again in the context of medicinal use.² Consumption for pleasure dates from the seventeenth century, when *madak*—opium mixed with tobacco—came to be used by Chinese communities in what is today Indonesia. It was at the same time that *madak* gradually entered China, probably via Taiwan, but very little is known about its spread, which came about at the beginning of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912).³

The practices of opium consumption made familiar in the West by an abundance of illustrations and texts, that is, the consumption of pure opium without added tobacco, using the characteristic long-stemmed pipe

¹ Yangwen Zheng, “The Social Life of Opium in China, 1483–1999,” *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no. 1 (2003): 4–8; Su Zhiliang, *Zhongguo dupin shi* [History of narcotics in China] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1997), 32–35; Frank Dikötter, Lars Laamann, and Zhou Xun, *Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 75–78.

² Su Zhiliang, *Zhongguo dupin shi*, 36–37.

³ On this question, the available sources are as scanty as they are imprecise: Jonathan Spence, “Opium,” in *Chinese Roundabout: Essays in History and Culture* (New York: Norton, 1992), 231–232; Dikötter, *Narcotic Culture*, 16–21 and 36–37; Wang Hongbin, *Jindu shijian* [History of the prohibition of drugs] (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1997), 15–27.

and lamp, appeared only in the following century.⁴ At this time, the drug was restricted to the empire's political and economic elites.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, opium was being imported from India by British merchants, and its spread was no longer a trivial matter. The local authorities turned a blind eye to the illegal traffic organized in southern China's great port of Canton, then the only port open to foreigners. In 1839, alarmed by massive exports of silver used to pay for opium purchases, the emperor decided on a policy of firmness against the traffickers. The famous Qing official Lin Zexu, sent to Canton to put an end to the opium traffic, confiscated all the stocks of the British merchants in Canton. The spectacular destruction of these stocks in June 1839 became the *casus belli* for the first "Opium War" (1839–1842) between China and Great Britain. British military superiority proved to be overwhelming and, in a succession of unequal treaties signed at the end of the war, China was forced to open a number of ports to foreign trade. It was there that Indian opium, among other commodities, was unloaded during the following decades.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, China began to cultivate its own poppy crops on an extensive scale. Some twenty years after the first Opium War, Chinese opium, which was less costly but of a constantly improving quality, began to seriously compete with British imports. In the 1890s, the quantities of opium produced in the empire gradually and definitively overtook those imported from India. The robustness of the supply and the fall in price meant that the use of opium as a narcotic began to spread to every level of society.

The scale of opium consumption led the imperial authorities in 1906, after half a century of inaction, to adopt a policy of gradual elimination of both cultivation and consumption of the drug: this was the Ten-Year Plan. This domestic initiative was underpinned by diplomatic successes: the empire reached agreements with the British in 1907 and 1911 that stipulated annual decreases in the imports of Indian opium. The plan proved to be an indisputable success, much to the surprise of Western observers who had been highly skeptical at the time of its launch.

The 1911 Revolution, which ushered in the Republican era (1912–1949), thus erupted at a time when the successful eradication of opium was within reach. However, the rapid collapse of central authority in the mid-1910s and the emergence in its place of the notorious "warlords" (*junfa*) prevented this goal from being attained. Both production and consumption now saw a major revival. While the need to resume the policy of opium elimination continued to be a constant theme, the *junfa* depended far too much

⁴ Dikötter, Laamann, and Xun, *Narcotic Culture*, 37–38; Wang Hongbin, *Jindu shijian*, 17–23.

The Material and Structural History

Opium could be described as a complex substance containing about twenty alkaloids, chiefly morphine, along with sugars, acids, and resins in variable proportions,¹ but this would be like saying that wine is fermented grape juice. These factual statements do not quite tell us why well-to-do Parisians in the nineteenth century were partial to “Bordeaux” and “Burgundy” or why wealthy Cantonese in the 1930s would pay three times more for opium from India than for its Chinese equivalent. To the connoisseur, opium from Guizhou was inferior to the Manghai and Huaye varieties from Yunnan yet preferable to opium produced in eastern Guangdong.² It was all opium, but the quality, virtues, and reputation varied from region to region.

Historical works on opium are concerned mainly with its political and economic implications and tend to relegate the modes of production and consumption to a few lines or pages. This approach will not do in a study seeking to focus on the consumption side of the question. Grasping all the complexity of the product and its mode of consumption is indispensable if we are to understand the smoker’s behavior, the strategies of distinction (in Pierre Bourdieu’s meaning of the term), and the rationale behind the fraudulent activity that pervaded this sector. These are all questions closely linked to issues of quality, reputation, and price. This chapter will attempt to uncover the complex reality behind the fog that surrounds the word “opium.”

The geographical circuits of the procurement of raw opium saw major upheavals in the period under study, and this greatly affected the price of the drug. This fact is as important as it is difficult to study. And yet, it is almost completely absent in previous works on the subject. Also, a catalog

¹ Frank Dikötter, Lars Laamann, and Zhou Xun, *Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 8, 84–85.

² XGR, 14 June 1935.

TWO

Opium Eradication as a Feasible Goal, 1906–1923

Apart from Lin Zexu's short-lived attempt to stop opium consumption in 1839, the late-Qing attitude toward the narcotic was one of laxity that ended only in 1906 with the inception of an ambitious and realistic policy of eradication, conducted with resolve throughout China until the fall of the empire. The national government that emerged from the 1911 Revolution vowed immediately to pursue the same goals. In Guangdong, the new authorities were particularly zealous. The warlord Long Jiguang, who became master of the province in the summer of 1913, followed essentially the same course, and it was two years before he was able to legalize the narcotic. Following in his footsteps, the leaders of the Old Guangxi Clique allowed opium sales, but without making an official policy of it. However, by 1920, the federalist Chen Jiongming had resumed a policy of resolute hostility to opium in which he remained inflexible until his downfall at the beginning of 1923.

The policies put through in the years 1906–1922 were much varied on the surface but show an underlying unity. That opium could be eliminated continued to be a feasible goal. Even when the authorities turned a blind eye to opium traffic and even when they organized the traffic themselves, they did not dare set up an official opium monopoly—with the exception of Long Jiguang. This first part of the study into official approaches to the opium question shows real continuity despite the change in regime that came about in 1912.

The High Tide of the Fight against Opium, 1906–1913

The year 1906 was a milestone in the history of the opium trade. The launching of the Ten-Year Plan initiated a period of intense nationwide struggle—with spectacular results.

THREE

An Indispensable Source of Revenue, 1923–1936

A few months after Chen Jiongming's defeat, itself so symptomatic of the times, Canton's opium circuits came under sustained official control. It therefore no longer makes any sense to look at opium management by government in terms of a dilemma between prohibition and legalization. The one common thread running through opium policy from 1923 to 1936 was the search to maximize income by improving the organization and control of the opium circuits. That said, the administration of opium went through two distinct periods. The first, from 1923 to 1931, was one of great instability in terms of both administrative structures and the officials who headed them. No fewer than twelve different heads of staff followed one another, each serving in office for little more than six months on average. By contrast, from 1931 onward and up to 1936, the opium system saw only a few minor adjustments. A period of remarkable stability ensued.

The chronic instability of the first phase stemmed essentially from two causes. First, the 1923–1931 period saw frequent shifts in power relations at high levels. Every faction that came to dominance in Canton strove to place its own men in key positions of the opium administration and ensure total control over this vital resource. Whenever power was being shared among different cliques, control over opium became a key factor in the definition of a mutually acceptable balance of forces. The second cause of instability was the perpetual attempt to maximize revenues through an optimum mix of direct administration of opium sales and outsourcing. Once these two issues were resolved, around 1931, the administration of opium achieved a state of stability under a permanent organization headed by Huo Zhiting.¹

¹ Huo Zhiting (see the biography section herein), a key figure of the times, was a Cantonese businessman involved in gambling and opium from the Long Jiguang period onward. In the 1920s, he was the driving personality behind several trading companies (Xingyun, Nansheng, Liangyue) that carried opium from Yunnan to Guangdong. Under Chen Jitang, he pushed to become the organizer of the opium circuits for the entire province. There is a

FOUR

The Geography of Consumption

Nowhere are the contradictions of opium policy more sharply defined than in the relationship between opium and the urban space. The authorities constantly sought a compromise among their own interests, the smokers' needs, and the demands of anti-opium activists. An immediate ban on the opium houses was the topmost demand in the many anti-opium petitions made to Chen Jitang in 1935. In Canton as elsewhere, the conspicuous presence of opium consumption in the urban space became the subject of heated discussion whenever opium consumption was itself tolerated. The pages of the *Judu yuekan* and other sources hostile to opium show that opponents of the drug were extremely sensitive to the very profound impact of opium consumption on the city of Canton through the presence of its numerous opium houses. In their eyes, the illegitimacy of the practice was quite incompatible with its visible, even ostentatious position in the urban space.

What then were these places in which opium was smoked? The smokers had to be sheltered from the elements and needed a minimum amount of space to be able to recline and make use of the full panoply of instruments needed for the complex ritual of preparing an opium pipe.¹ All these reasons made it very inconvenient to smoke outdoors, and so opium consumption took place almost exclusively behind closed doors.

Any mention of the locales of opium consumption immediately brings to mind the "smoking den" or "opium house," that establishment devoted specifically and solely to this drug. However, not all places of opium consumption were opium houses. The practice of home consumption cannot be ignored, even though little is known about it from the available sources. Besides, there was a fairly wide range of public places such as brothels,

¹ MAE, Série Asie 1918-29, Sous-série affaires communes, file no. 55, report by Doctor Jarland, "L'opium au Yunnan, ses conséquences sociales" [Opium in Yunnan and its social consequences], 25 October 1924.

Life in the Opium Houses

Chinese cities in the second half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of numerous places of sociability—public parks, teahouses, opium houses, gambling rooms, and theaters. Their importance increased as they attracted large sections of the population that hitherto, at least in the case of the common folk, would have restricted their outings to religious festivals, occasions when temples became spaces of collective recreation.¹ In the first half of the twentieth century, new forms of leisure—cinemas and dancing halls—were added to those already on offer. With the increasing importance of leisure, by the end of the Qing period, the cities, Shanghai in particular, came to be seen as “havens of leisure.”²

Current work by specialists on these spaces of sociability at the end of the empire and under the Republic is influenced by anthropology, cultural history, and micro-history, and focuses extensively on the effects of representation and interaction in these spaces. Such an approach makes for in-depth descriptions of life as it was lived in these places. In the case of the theaters and teahouses, for example, Joshua Goldstein has analyzed the underpinnings of the strategies of prestige and hierarchical structuring that were elaborated in these places, strategies linked especially to the position of the spectator in relation to the stage.³ However, this approach has never served in any study on the opium houses as spaces of sociability.

Historians dealing with opium houses have been limited to two approaches. Some historians offer rapidly constructed typologies in which

¹ Des Forges, “Opium/Leisure/Shanghai,” 169.

² Catherine Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850–1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 11–16 and 338–339.

³ Joshua Goldstein, “From Teahouse to Playhouse: Theaters as Social Texts in Early Twentieth-Century China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 63, no. 3 (August 2003): 753–780. Another, more classic study is Wang Di, “Ershi shijichu de chaguan yu Zhongguo chengshi shehui shenghuo” [Teahouses and social life in Chinese cities at the beginning of the twentieth century], *Lishi yanjiu* [Historical research] 5 (2001): 41–53.

Opium in the Collective Mind during the Republican Period: The Imperfect Victory of Propaganda

Reconstructing the ways in which opium was represented among the population is an illusory goal. The best that the historian can hope for is to observe the divergent perceptions and beliefs attached to these social phenomena at different levels of society. Virgil Ho, studying attitudes under the Republic, has highlighted the huge difference in the judgments on prostitutes made by reformist circles including officials on the one hand and the general population on the other.¹ The approach is highly relevant and can help us make similar distinctions between the attitudes toward opium among the elite and in the general population. However, an approach based on social groups, which are difficult to define in any case, obscures a major difficulty, to wit, that individuals are often capable of entertaining dissonant representations, ideas, and even value judgments on one and the same subject.

Rather than study the perceptions and attitudes of predefined social groups toward opium smokers in Canton under the Republic, it might be more useful to start from two “poles of opinion”: the pro-opium pole and the anti-opium pole. There did exist two relatively coherent and opposed systems that must be characterized before any attempt is made to measure their respective influence on the population.

The notion of two opposite poles is obviously no more than a convenient working hypothesis. It should especially not encourage the idea that there existed any sort of balanced debate on the subject: the adversaries of opium formed an organized camp. They occupied the high ground and even had specialized journals that disseminated an aggressive variety of propaganda. They account for the lion's share of the extant sources. The pro-opium camp poses greater problems because the sources that have come down to us are far from prolific.

¹ Virgil Ho, “To Laugh at a Penniless Man Rather than a Prostitute,” *European Journal of East Asian studies* 1, no. 1 (2001): 103–112.

An X-ray of the Opium Smoker

Some liberties must be taken with the appointed time frame of this book since the sources used for our study of the population of opium smokers go beyond its terminal date of July 1936. They include documents produced by the Canton City Opium Suppression Office (Guangzhoushi jinyan weiyuanhui) set up by the Guomindang authorities on 28 September 1936, shortly after their return to Guangdong Province. This committee, responsible for applying the Six-Year Plan in Guangdong—it was already being applied in the rest of the country—required all smokers to register with the authorities. In March 1937, it opened up a detoxification clinic, the Guangzhoushi jieyan yiyuan, which published a report in June 1937 containing statistics on a thousand patients treated since its inception. Another report used in this chapter comes from a comparable clinic, the Guangdong jinyan liuyisuo, which was opened under Japanese occupation by the collaborationist government in January 1941.¹

The only sources available in numbers sufficient to give a picture of the smokers in their different aspects are from the 1930s. For the preceding decades, the information is far too scanty to chart any precise diachronic development, but it nevertheless allows some light to be shed on certain particularly important changes that came about between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1930s.

The Silhouette of an Object

What Was an Opium Smoker?

The term “opium smoker” appears to be self-evident but conceals a problem—that of its rigorous definition—which is clearly full of implications

¹ The name of the institute could mistakenly give the impression that it received patients from the entire province and not just from Canton. However, the data on patients, examined case by case, shows that they were all Cantonese.

Conclusion

Although the Ten-Year Plan of 1906 led to a sharp reduction in opium consumption, the fall of the empire ushered in a period of revival for the narcotic, as the disappearance of central authority now impeded the application of a nationwide policy of prohibition. The ensuing “regionalization” of opium policies only meant that opium became a legalized and lucrative source of treasure for the warlords who emerged from the mid-1910s onward.

The new political context in which opium made its return was marked by two additional and novel characteristics. First, since late-Qing diplomacy had reduced opium imports from India to very low levels, it was now the producing provinces in the interior that supplied low-priced opium to the great consumption centers in the coastal cities. Second, the appearance of modern, convenient-to-use drugs (such as morphine and heroin) opened up new possibilities for many consumers.

This revival of opium that began in the mid-1910s could not have been studied at the pan-China level. Not only was the time not ripe for such an endeavor, but it would not have been matched by the currently available sources. That is why this work has taken the form of an urban monograph.

Seeking as it does to deal with the opium question in all its facets, this study is based on the idea that the supply side (embodied in the opium policies of various administrations) and the demand side (consumption) must complement and shed light on each other.

I shall therefore return to my findings in these two areas and then determine the extent to which my conclusions on opium in Canton can be applied to the national situation.

The Supply Side

Other studies have demonstrated the importance of opium in the process of China's political fragmentation and then in the Guomindang's

Biographies

Chen Jiongming (1878–1933)

Chen Jiongming was born into a family of Hakka landowners in eastern Guangdong and became a member of the provincial assembly in October 1909. A significant figure in the anti-Manchu uprising in Guangdong at the end of 1911, he also played a frontline role in the revolutionary government that emerged in November of that year. The fall of the revolutionary government in the summer of 1913 forced him into exile. After returning to China, he controlled the southern part of Fujian Province between 1918 and 1920. In November 1920, his armies expelled the Old Guangxi Clique from Canton and Guangdong Province, where he was then sharing power with Sun Yat-sen. The two men had differing goals: Chen was above all concerned with the development of the province, while Sun Yat-sen's absolute priority was to reunify China. In the inevitable break that came about in June 1922, Sun was forced to flee Canton. Some months later came Chen's turn to be chased out, by a coalition of troops loyal to Sun Yat-sen. He withdrew with his armies into eastern Guangdong. In October 1925, Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) put an end to the threat that he still represented to the Guomindang. Chen played no significant political role in the remaining years of his life.

Chen Jitang (1890–1954)

Chen Jitang was born into a Hakka family in southwestern Guangdong and became an early member of the Tongmenghui (United League, founded in October 1905), which he joined in 1907. From an initially subordinate role, he rose through the ranks of the Guomindang's Canton troops during the first half of the 1920s. During the Northern Expedition (*Beifa*), he became one of the top-ranking officers of the troops stationed in Guangdong. The disgrace into which his superior Li Jishen fell in 1929 propelled Chen into the role of chief commander of the Guomindang's military forces in

Sources and Bibliography

Sources

Note on the Sources

The historian wishing to do full justice to the consumption side of his story and sketch a complete picture of the smokers in their daily lives is hamstrung by the absence of what should have been his El Dorado—the judicial and police archives. Yet one resource remains—the press. Canton, like every other great Chinese metropolis of this period, had a wide range of dailies and periodicals, of which it was the *Yuehuabao* that appeared to be the best candidate for systematic and intensive use. Founded in August 1927, the *Yuehuabao* soon became one of Canton's main daily newspapers, with a circulation of fourteen thousand in 1929.¹ As a popular, lightweight, scandal-oriented daily with a penchant for fairly trivial anecdotes, it was thoroughly despised by the progressive elites. However, it had the inestimable advantage of reflecting the daily life of the smokers in its most ordinary aspects. A systematic count of all its articles on opium consumption between 1927 and 1936 yielded an abundant trove of more than 350 items that can be divided into three categories: news briefs, in-depth articles, and readers' accounts.

The news briefs, by far the most numerous, are not fundamentally different from their counterparts in other parts of the world²—they are generally fairly brief accounts of minor events that broke the monotony

¹ Liang Qunqiu, *Guangzhou baoye*, 114–116; Guangzhoushi zhengfu tongjigu, *Guangzhoushi zhengfu tongji nianjian*, 340. The currently preserved collections of this newspaper are very spotty for the 1927–1930 period. However, remarkably complete series are available for the 1930–1936 period.

² For a masterly account of the differences between news briefs in the *Shenbao* and those published in Western newspapers of the same period (an observation generally valid for the *Yuehuabao* also), see Barbara Mittler, *A Newspaper for China? Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai's News Media, 1872–1912* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 84–102.

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—Alain Roux, *Revue historique*, vol. 663 [orig. French].

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—Frédéric Obringer, *Etudes Chinoises*, vol. 30 [orig. French].

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