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Unacceptable but Indispensable: Opium Law and Regulations in Guangdong, 1912–1936

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Abstract

During most of the period from 1912 to 1936, Guangdong Province was independent from the central government. The local authorities there were facing a dilemma regarding opium, as others were elsewhere in China. On the one hand, opium was considered the symbol of China's weakness, and its suppression was a top priority; on the other hand, opium taxes represented an indispensable source of fiscal income. Some Guangdong power holders were truly committed to a suppression agenda, especially from 1913 to 1924. During this period, with the exception of a brief interlude from 1915 to 1916, opium laws were prohibition laws. Even if these laws were not always enforced with full vigor, the drug remained illegal in Guangdong. After 1924, opium was legalized, and the authorities openly ruled an opium monopoly. They came out with increasingly comprehensive regulations, which proved successful in increasing opium revenues. Yet, as this article makes clear, there was nothing like direct government control: traditional tax-farming arrangements with local opium merchants (though under stricter supervision) remained the backbone of the monopoly. The article also pays attention to the influence of the Six-Year Plan (1935–1940) launched by the Nanking government. As a credible set of suppression laws, it appealed to the Guangdong progressive elites who were hostile to opium. They urged the local autocrat Chen Jitang to take similar action. Chen made attempts to launch his own plans for suppressing opium, but they were unconvincing and nothing concrete came out of them. This article suggests that, in order to obtain a better understanding of how easily Chen Jitang was driven out of power in the summer of 1936, it is necessary to take into account the significant contribution of the Six-Year Plan in undermining his legitimacy.

Keywords: Opium, Republican China, Guangdong, Six-Year Plan, Nanjing, Chen Jitang

Introduction

The Xinzheng period (1901–1911) and the Republican period (1912–1949) were both characterized by ambitious attempts to reform the Chinese legal system. Scholarly research on this topic is distinguished by a strong focus on the reform efforts of the central governments (Qing, Beiyang, and Guomindang) (Bernhardt and Huang 1994; Huang 2001; Bourgon 2004; Xu 2008; Tran 2009). Despite the long period of marked political fragmentation (1916–1928), and despite the fact that political reunification following the

Beifa (Northern Expedition) remained incomplete, laws enacted in the parts of China enjoying autonomy from the central government are still understudied.

The existing scholarship on opium laws during the Republic is fairly consistent with this general trend.¹ A steady stream of writing on the topic of “opium politics” over the past two decades (Zhu, Jiang, and Zhang 1995; Wang Hongbin 1997; Slack 2001; Wang Jinxiang 2005; Baumler 2007) has illuminated the actions of the central government during this time. It is thus acknowledged that anti-opium action was an important part of the Xinzheng. Drawing on the elite consensus that it was necessary to eradicate opium,² the Qing dynasty took action by launching the Ten-Year Plan in 1906. The plan was presented in the edict of September 20, which was followed by the publication of more matter-of-fact instructions on November 1 (Ma 1998, 399–401). The plan and subsequent instructions called for a gradual eradication of poppy planting over a period of ten years. In addition, smokers were subjected to a census; they received smoking licenses and had to gradually give up smoking. Opium houses were to close within six months, after which opium was to be purchased in carefully monitored shops for home consumption only. To set an example, officials were required to quit smoking within a six-month period. At the same time, the Qing signed two agreements with Great Britain in 1907 and 1911 that stated principally that India should diminish its exports of opium to China each year in proportion with the annual decrease in production of opium in China (Yu 1934, 259–261).

Despite encountering enormous difficulties, the Ten-Year Plan yielded impressive results, which were acknowledged even by the English.³ The new central government maintained a commitment to opium suppression during the first years of the Republic, but after the collapse of the central power in 1916, China witnessed a revival of opium production and consumption. The Guomindang decided to take steps against opium in the mid-1930s, and its achievements regarding opium suppression (as a result of the 1935–1940 Six-Year Plan) have recently been reevaluated (Wang Hongbin 1997, 417–450; Zhu, Jiang, and Zhang 1995, 356–407; Baumler 2007, 228–230; Slack 2001, 104–154). Yet the opium politics of local power holders are still relegated to cursory references. Even if scholarship relating to opium acknowledges some exceptions,⁴ local power holders are in general tagged as “warlords” and described as bullies eager to seize any occasion to derive profit from opium (Yu 1934, 198; Wang Hongbin 1997, 369–376). No serious attention has been paid to the opium legislation these local officials promulgated; instead, this legislation has generally been considered cynically, as a smokescreen or, worse, a means of extortion (an often-told

story is that of the “lazy taxes” that were imposed on farmers if they did not grow poppies) (Baumler 2007, 90–92; Wang Jinxiang 2005, 106–107).

Taking Guangdong as an example, this article’s main contention is that local opium laws deserve the same serious attention as those enacted by the central government. The period from 1912 to 1936 was chosen because, during most of these years, Guangdong Province was independent from the central government. This study reveals, first, that genuine and coherent attempts at eradicating opium did not only emanate from the central government. Laws concerned with maximizing opium profit were not necessarily associated with warlord-type regimes; some Guangdong power holders (warlords among them) were truly committed to a suppression agenda, even as they enjoyed de facto independence. When one considers this twenty-four-year period, the general reluctance toward legalizing opium is striking and encompasses both warlords and non-warlords. In every case, opium legalization was decided out of pragmatism, because its resources were badly needed in a highly competitive political environment.

The year 1924 stands as a watershed. From 1913 to 1924 (except during a brief interlude from 1915 to 1916), opium laws were prohibition laws. Even if they were not always enforced with full vigor, the drug remained illegal. But from 1924 on, legalization was taken for granted, and the authorities became concerned with finding appropriate ways to manage opium distribution while minimizing the political cost of legalization.

Prohibition in Question (1912–1923)

Under the aegis of Hu Hanmin, Guangdong became a stronghold of the revolutionaries as early as November 1911. The revolutionaries, like the central government of the time, were committed to eradicating opium. Regulations prohibiting opium starting on January 1, 1913, were promulgated, making 1912 a transitional year.⁵ In August 1912, the opium administration was put under the management of the Guangdong Police Department and its notoriously energetic head, Chen Jinghua.⁶ Anti-opium regulations were strictly enforced up to the end of the revolutionaries’ rule over Guangdong⁷ in August 1913, when Yuan Shikai’s protégé Long Jiguang succeeded in expelling the Guomindang. Long declared his commitment to an anti-opium policy and, for one and a half years, he stuck to this position.⁸ Yet there are reasons to believe that in 1914 he started to derive some profit from opium by establishing traffic with his native province, Yunnan (where poppy culture was gradually resuming) with his brother, Long Yuguang, acting as an intermediary.⁹ Still, Long

Jiguang refrained from “crossing the Rubicon” of legalization until 1915, when he was given what he probably regarded as too good an opportunity to refuse.

Long Jiguang as Forerunner: The 1915 Monopoly

Articles 3 and 4 of the 1911 Anglo-Chinese agreements stated that every Chinese province freed of domestic opium and duly inspected by a team of British officials would be closed to imports of Indian opium. Many provinces were affected by these terms in the early years of the Republic, and soon only three provinces remained open to Indian opium: Guangdong, Jiangxi, and Jiangsu. But even there, local regulations made the consumption of opium impossible. At the same time, in Shanghai and Hong Kong, big stocks of Indian opium were still piled up. According to the 1911 agreements, these inventories could be legally sold on Chinese territory.¹⁰ A solution had to be found. In April 1915, Yuan Shikai appointed Cai Naihuang as special commissioner for the suppression of opium in Guangdong, Jiangxi, and Jiangsu (Wang Hongbin 1997, 361). An agreement between Cai Naihuang and the merchants who held the Hong Kong stocks was signed in October 1915: HK\$3,500 would go to the central government coffers along with HK\$600 to Long Jiguang’s pocket for each of the twelve hundred opium chests purchased by an ad hoc organization, the Yaogao jiancha zongsuo (Medical Paste Inspection Bureau), which was granted the right to sell opium in Guangdong.¹¹ It soon turned out, however, that the Yaogao jiancha zongsuo (which was under Long’s control) was unwilling to buy the twelve hundred chests as it was supposed to. Instead, it turned to relatively cheap Yunnan opium, thereby deriving much higher profit margins.

No matter the kind of opium it was selling, a monopoly was put into place. Astutely, Long had used the agreement as an excuse to launch a monopoly allegedly to solve the pending problem of the Hong Kong stocks of Indian opium. Moreover, the agreement was signed by an envoy of the central government. The next year, in a characteristic show of cynicism, Long declared independence from the central government on April 6, 1916 and assassinated Cai Naihuang on April 24, charging him with establishing the monopoly.¹²

It is worth mentioning that many features of the Long Jiguang monopoly emulated the Ten-Year Plan. This is true of its allegedly temporary nature, as it was meant to last only eighteen months, the time deemed necessary for selling out the stock of Indian opium. Also, smoking houses were forbidden, and permits (available only to old, ill, or inveterate smokers) were required to be granted the right to smoke. But this monopoly was unique as well—its

most notorious innovation being the use of euphemisms. For example, instead of “opium,” the Yaogao jiancha zongsuo used the eponym “medicine paste” (*yaogao* 藥膏), as the opium contained a substance that would allegedly ease withdrawal. Long Jiguang opened a path for future Guangdong monopolies, which would generally claim to be temporary and require permits. The word “opium” (*yapian* 鴉片) rarely appeared explicitly. For example, prepared opium would instead be called “detoxification medicine” (*jieyan yaopin* 戒煙藥品)¹³ or “detoxification paste” (*jieyan yaogao* 戒煙藥膏),¹⁴ and raw opium would be labeled “raw material for detoxification medicine” (*jieyan yaoliao* 戒煙藥料) (figure 1).¹⁵

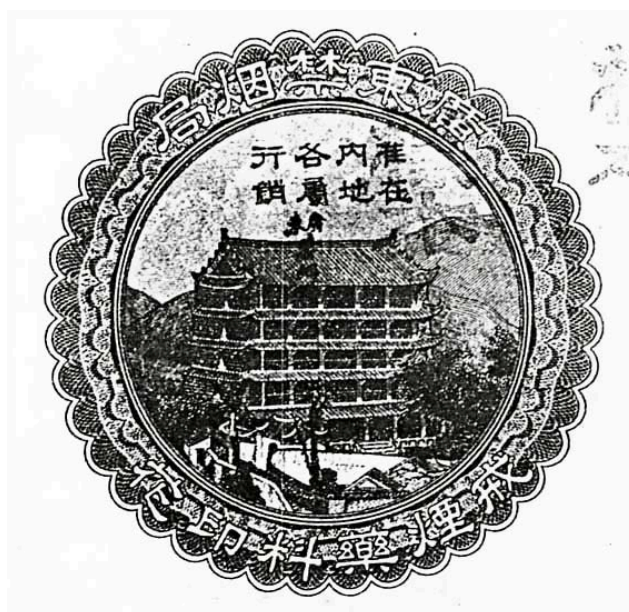


Figure 1. Early 1930s certification stamp for raw opium (*jieyanyao yinhua*) under the Guangdong jinyanju (Guangdong Opium Suppression Bureau). *Source*: GA, series 95/1, file 639 (Kowloon maritime customs).

Prohibition Becomes a Dead Issue (1916–1923)

In July 1916, the old Guangxi clique (Lu Rongting, Chen Bingkun, and Mo Rongxin) expelled Long Jiguang. The clique tried to use Sun Yat-sen as a way to enhance his legitimacy, but Sun realized he was deprived of any real power and left for Shanghai in the spring of 1918. The Yaogao jiancha zongsuo was disbanded under the old Guangxi clique, which reverted back to its pre-1915 position: no legal status was granted to opium, but the clique profited through its involvement with an underground trade (Hosoi 1919, 49). Under these circumstances, the consumption of opium remained limited, as it had been in 1913 and 1914. The old Guangxi clique (which dared to lift the ban on *fantan*, a gambling game of particularly infamous reputation, and farmed out its revenues), considered that the taboo

remained too great in the case of opium (*Judu zhoukan* 1(2): 2 [October 23, 1920]; Wei 1963, 66).

Chen Jiongmíng, one of the former leaders of the 1911 revolution in Guangdong,¹⁶ succeeded in gathering troops in South Fujian and recovered control of Guangdong in November 1920. Somehow, reluctantly, he accepted Sun Yat-sen's patronage. As soon as he regained control over Guangdong, Chen Jiongmíng demonstrated his commitment to fighting opium. In an early 1921 proclamation, he emphasized that Long Jiguang and the old Guangxi clique had unleashed the scourge of opium, and he declared a strict prohibition against planting, transporting, selling, or smoking the substance (*Guangdong qunbao*, January 11, 1921). He would stick to this position for the rest of his time as a power holder in Guangdong.¹⁷

In June 1922, Sun Yat-sen's prioritization of national reunification by way of a military expedition led to a clash with the federalist-oriented Chen, whose major concern was Guangdong's development and prosperity. Chen led a surprise attack on Sun's headquarters; Sun narrowly escaped death and fled to Shanghai.¹⁸ Six months later, a motley band of mercenary troops regained control of Canton in the name of Sun, and Chen Jiongmíng's forces took refuge in the eastern part of Guangdong. Many of Sun's troops were from other provinces and hence were earmarked as "guest troops" (*kejun* 客军). Some were powerful enough to be a threat to the Guomindang, in particular the twenty-three thousand Yunnanese troops under the leadership of Yang Ximin (Chereparov 1982, 25).

The Creation of the Opium Suppression Superintendent's Office (Jinyan dubanshu)

Sun Yat-sen's Late 1923 Dilemma

Despite a commitment against opium that was beyond doubt (Wang Jinxiang 2005, 118–127), Sun Yat-sen was driven to the conclusion that a policy of prohibition in Guangdong was inappropriate. To understand this seeming contradiction, multiple factors have to be taken into account.

The general context for Sun's decision was one of a revival of opium production and consumption in the rest of the country. With the legalization of opium in 1915 by Long Jiguang, Guangdong had been remarkably precocious. However, by late 1923 it remained one of the last provinces to effectively enforce prohibition. Anti-opium idealism therefore led to a critical weakening, because almost every other power in China profited from opium.¹⁹ Moreover, the political environment was markedly competitive at both the national level and

in Guangdong Province. During 1923, Sun Yat-sen's mercenary allies proved to be inveterate smugglers of opium as a way to derive profit and pay their troops. The troops from Yunnan—because of the strong connections they had with their native province, where opium production was rampant—were especially notorious in this regard (*China Weekly Review*, March 10, 1923; August 25, 1923). For Sun, it was the worst possible situation: not only was prohibition an empty word, but opium was profiting his enemies as well as his troublesome allies (potential rivals themselves) instead of himself.²⁰ The time had come for realpolitik.

In the instruction Sun gave to the newly nominated *jinyan duban* (opium suppression superintendent), Yang Xiyan, on December 17, 1923, Sun stated that prohibition was useless because smuggling was so widespread, and he connected the issue of legalization to the process of state building, claiming that “prohibition through taxation” (*yujinyuzheng* 寓禁于征) would have the advantage of providing money for the Beifa.²¹

The reason that Sun Yat-sen did not simply follow the path of some of his predecessors (like the old Guangxi clique), and profit from opium revenues without making it legal, is that opium legalization was embedded in a strategy of state building. In the short run, the creation of the role of opium suppression superintendent was aimed at depriving the guest troops of their power. In the long run, it was part of an effort to rationalize and centralize tax collection.

Yet there was nationwide consensus during the whole of the Republican era about the need to eradicate opium. Nobody dared suggest that opium might be acceptable to any extent.²² Opium had been made even more infamous since the warlord era: the connection between the rule of warlords and the legalization of opium for profit was often pointed out (*Minguo ribao*, December 28, 1922; January 29, 1923).²³ As a consequence, legalizing the drug was not only against Sun's personal convictions but also had a genuine cost in terms of political legitimacy, especially since the Guomindang was claiming to be a progressive and revolutionary force. In that regard, it is important to pay attention to the way opium laws were written and made public.

The case of the opium prohibition rules (*jinyan tiaoli* 禁煙條例) promulgated by Sun Yat-sen on January 16, 1924, is especially interesting: the document reads more or less like the outline of a prohibition policy. Article 2 states that “all the arrangements regarding opium suppression” (*yiqie jinyan shiyi* 一切禁煙事宜 i.e., opium management) are to be supervised by the *jinyan duban*. Then, the great majority of its twenty-two articles are devoted to stating

the punishments for opium smokers (Article 13), for people opening opium houses (Article 14), boiling and planting opium (Articles 11–12), and so on. One has to read between the lines that opium (*yapian* 鴉片) in this context actually means *smuggled* opium. Only one article (Article 7) is actually devoted to legal opium, euphemistically called “detoxification medicine” (*jiēyān yāopin* 戒煙藥品) (Ma 1998, 763). To gain insight into the real management of the *jinyan dubanshu*, it is necessary to refer to the various regulations issued by the successive *duban* during the following months.²⁴ (However, their main concern was not so much the inner organization of the monopoly as contraband.)²⁵

As a consequence, the legal apparatus during this period was based on a dichotomy. On the one hand, a law was published by the highest authority stating the overall principles of the opium policy (quite deceiving, as it was in the eyes of a layman taking the shape of a policy of suppression). On the other hand, a flow of regulations dealing with the day-to-day management of opium was published whenever it was deemed necessary by the opium administration itself. These regulations, being of a more technical and matter-of-fact nature, provide insight into the way the opium system was *actually* managed.²⁶ The authorities were, however, reluctant to publicize these kinds of regulations, and the press only sporadically published them, making them harder to screen out.

A New Deal (June 1925)

However confusing its formulation, the 1924 legalization was a watershed, as opium would remain legal until 1936. A proclamation of immediate prohibition was published on June 20, 1925, in the outbreak of enthusiasm following the victory of the Guomindang over the rebellion of its most troublesome partners (Yang Ximin and his ally Liu Zhenhuan, the chief of the Guangxi forces), but it turned out to be a flash in the pan (*Guangzhou minguo ribao*, June 22, 1925; June 23, 1925). Nonetheless, the victory over Yang and Liu opened a new area. It made the party tighten its grip over Guangdong (and the situation would improve further by the end of the year, as the eastern part of Guangdong, which had remained under the domination of Chen Jiongmīng, was taken).

In the context of such an improved political situation, new *jinyan tiaoli* were promulgated on August 1, 1925 (Ma 1998, 802–804). These rules were innovative in several aspects. First, the regulations featured a long preamble (under the heading *liyǒu* 理 [justification]), in which the evils of opium are exposed at length (it is a social plague; it is the cause of China’s present state of weakness; and so on). It also stated that Yang Ximin and

Liu Zhenhuan should be held responsible for the de facto situation of unrestrained consumption.²⁷ This interpretation offered great possibilities: the situation regarding opium was acknowledged as bad, but this was supposed to be the result of preceding evildoers.

Because of the number of people addicted to opium, the next logical step was to put into force a policy of gradual suppression by issuing permits (in the same manner as the Ten-Year Plan) over a period of four years. Molding the regulations into the shape of a plan organized within a yearly time frame was not only a way to postpone effective suppression or to mimic the Ten-Year Plan. In Republican politics, planning meant modernity, science, and progress and was considered no less than a political panacea.²⁸ The distinctive appeal of planned regulations dated back to the Xinzheng period,²⁹ with the Nine-Year Plan for the formation of a parliament launched in 1908 (Rhoads 2000, 129). Later, the Soviet experience of economic planning further reinforced the interest of the Chinese intellectual and political elite in this approach.³⁰

With the goal of securing a better grip over opium revenues, the *jinyan duban* was put under the Ministry of Finance, an innovation that lasted. Over the years, the name of the opium administration (which changed many times) sometimes reflected the affiliation with the Ministry of Finance: for example, from September 1928 to July 1929, the administration was named Guangdong caizhengting jinyanke 廣東財政廳禁煙科 (Opium Prohibition Service of the Guangdong Ministry of Finances). From July 1929 to December 1929, it was named in a more cryptic way that nonetheless expressed an affiliation to the Ministry of Finance: the *Caizhengting diwuke* 財政廳第五科 (Fifth Service of the Ministry of Finance) (*Huazi ribao*, June 6, 1928; Chen Dayou 1963, 68; *Yuehuabao*, July 12, 1929).

As under the Ten-Year Plan, smoking permits became an important part of the system (attached to the *jinyan tiaoli*, a whole set of regulations—*jinyan lingpai zhangcheng* 禁煙領牌章程—was devoted to this question). Smoking permits were meant to be a more humane way to help opium smokers quit by letting them regularly decrease their daily dose. Every addicted smoker (*you yapianyinzhe* 有鴉片癮者) had to state his daily consumption, along with other information (such as name, age, and address). The permit fee was modest and in proportion to daily consumption (10 *yuan* a year if the person smoked more than 6 *qian* a day, 5 *yuan* if the person smoked from 3 to 6 *qian*, and 1 *yuan* if the person smoked less than 3 *qian* a day). In the following years, new regulations were issued. These regulations betray a concern for better control over the consumption of opium at home (where regulation was

more stringent than in the opium houses, where no permit was required). In the 1930s permit holders were compelled to purchase a certain amount of opium per month in order to minimize the possibility of their consuming smuggled opium at home. The permits were used to make money by heavily taxing wealthy smokers (in 1929, the most expensive permit, *tebiezheng*, enabled its bearer to smoke any kind of opium anywhere, with the guarantee of being undisturbed by opium administration inspectors, but it cost an exorbitant 100 *yuan* per month). Finally, a temporary (daily) permit could be purchased to gain the right to smoke in places like brothels, hostels, and restaurants: this option was aimed at controlling consumption in these locations, as well as collecting extra revenue.³¹

Toward a More Sophisticated System (1926–1936)

Song Ziwen's Action and Its Legacy

The legalization of opium had the advantage of enabling the authorities to organize the management of opium in a more bureaucratic (i.e., rational) way. The first regulations that appeared in the wake of the 1924 opium legislation were quite rudimentary. Over the years, more and more comprehensive regulations were issued to ensure the smooth running of the opium monopoly. It is not possible to deal with them at length in this article, but it is necessary to underline the role of the Harvard-trained businessman and politician Song Ziwen (then in his early thirties) in this regard. Song Ziwen skillfully reorganized the concrete aspects of the Guangdong opium monopoly. The “Regulations regarding the special permit granted by the Ministry of Finance for the transportation and sale of raw and prepared opium” (財政部特許各商運銷戒煙藥料請領牌照章程) and the “Provisional regulations of the Ministry of finance regarding the permits for transportation of raw and prepared opium” (財政部核發戒煙藥膏藥料運照暫行規則), declared on October 28, 1926, are examples of comprehensiveness and precision (Ma 1998, 829–832). These regulations testify to Song Ziwen’s larger commitment to rationalizing and centralizing the collection of all fiscal resources. Most of the time, Song Ziwen did not suppress the tax collection method of farming (Remick 2004, 57, 78–88), which was then widely preferred, but he improved the method for selecting farmers and pressed for competition in the auctioning process (Yang 2001, 27–35). In the case of opium, Song came up with a combination of farming and administrative control. Farmers (and their subfarmers) took care of the complete distribution network. There was no farming *en bloc*: each farmer was granted a task, such as transporting

opium from a producing region or conducting the wholesale trade of opium in a given area, and they operated under the tight control of official agencies.

Song successfully addressed one of the major challenges the opium administration had to face when legalization became effective: smuggling. He certainly benefited from the fall of Liu and Yang, enthusiastic smugglers whose military strength placed them beyond the reach of the opium administration. Yet opium was not a bulky item, and Guangdong had many connections by water with the producing provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou. Smuggling opium was still relatively easy and tempting, because it could generate huge profits. Smuggled opium could efficiently challenge legal opium, because it was much cheaper and easy to mix with legal opium.

In the long run, the main tactic used to curb smuggling was the quota system. One can go so far as to say that it became the backbone of the opium administration system. As previously noted, smokers had to hold a permit to smoke at home and had to purchase a minimum amount of opium each month. But the system extended to opium brokers, who were compelled to sell a certain quota of legal opium per month corresponding to the size of the potential market to which they were granted the right to sell. If they did not reach the quota, they were fined.

Smuggling was also a concern when it came to poppy cultivation. Like his predecessors, Song prohibited planting in Guangdong and tried to never use local opium for supplying the monopoly, because the climate was unfit for growing poppies: Guangdong could yield only very poor-quality opium. But since the sole districts suitable for growing poppies were located near Chaozhou in a region where the hold of provincial authorities was precarious, it was safer to rely exclusively on opium from Yunnan and Guizhou along the Xijiang.³² Song installed a series of checkpoints on the river to guarantee better control (Slack 2001, 77–79).

As a whole, Song was successful in curbing smuggling. His actions are clearly important: after 1928 the Guomindang drew on its experience as a Guangdong-based power and put into place the same kind of organization at the national level.³³

The Great Increase in Opium Revenues

Song Ziwén's reorganization also led to a sharp increase in opium revenues. It is a complicated task to evaluate the revenues derived from opium during the period from 1923 to 1936 in terms of both value and percentage. The origins of the estimates provided by some

witnesses were never made explicit, but they all agree that Song Ziwen succeeded in increasing opium revenues.³⁴ Of the few official sources available, one provides figures that corroborate these testimonies (table 1):

Table 1. Guangdong Province Opium Revenues from 1926 to 1932 (unit: *yuan* 元 (國幣)).

1926	5,252,978
1927	6,720,000
1928	7,416,000
1929	7,409,664
1930	7,764,013
1931	8,011,738
1932	8,662,025

Source: Guangdongsheng caizheng jishi, 1912–33 [A survey of the finances of Guangdong province, Canton] (1934), as quoted in *Guomindang Guangdongsheng dangbu Jinyandu zhuankan* (1936, 35–36).

As a percentage of Guangdong's overall revenues, the *South China Morning Post* estimates that opium contributed 24 percent (HK\$7.6 million out of HK\$32 million) for the year 1929, which seems reliable.³⁵ Opium revenues probably reached their peak during the Chen Jitang era, a period when it was widely believed that Chen could derive HK\$1 million per month from opium. Estimates as to their proportion of the province's revenue varied from 18 percent to 38 percent.³⁶

The Opium System under Chen Jitang

After the completion of the Beifa, Guangdong remained under the control of Nanjing for three years, until 1931. The opium laws introduced during this period were more or less the same as those enacted in Nanjing. In 1931, an anti-Jiang movement unfolded in Guangdong after Jiang Jiechi (Chiang Kai-shek) put Hu Hanmin under house arrest in late February. Chen Jitang (then the commander of the Guangdong army) seized this opportunity to assert his leadership over Guangdong (see figure 2).³⁷ The province would again enjoy a great deal of autonomy during the five years of Chen's warlord-style regime. As a whole, the opium system kept the same features inherited from the Song Ziwen period during these years,³⁸ with two notable changes.

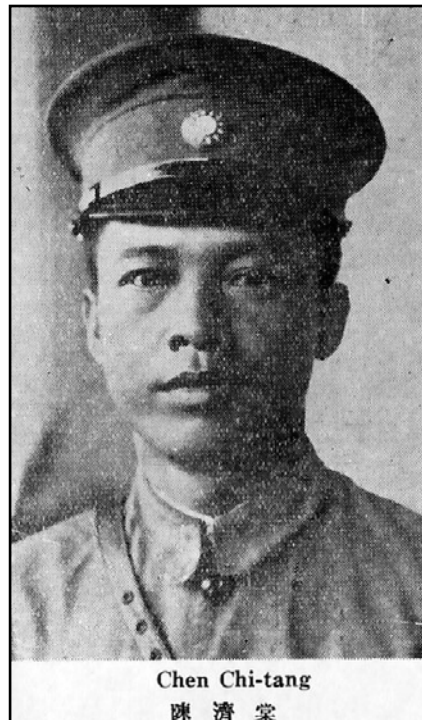


Figure 2. Chen Jitang in the late 1920s or early 1930s (no later than 1931). *Source: Who's Who in China* (1931, 46).

The first change took place in the early 1930s: opium houses became a crucial element in controlling the system. All of the published laws either explicitly forbid or failed to mention opium houses, because they were an especially sensitive issue (*Jinyan tiaoli*, August 1, 1925, article 7). They represented the most visible manifestation of the drug; as such, they were a particular concern for anti-opium activists and public opinion. Reading the laws, one has no sense that opium houses existed all over the place during the period (there were about 350 in Canton during the mid-1930s).³⁹ If opium houses had remained relatively free of administrative interference during the first years of the monopoly, a new effort was made to ensure stricter control over them in the early 1930s. They were, for example, denied the right they had so far enjoyed to boil opium on their premises, in order to avoid the “cutting” of official opium with smuggled opium or other substances, a practice that was once universal and an “open secret” (*gongkai de mimi* 公開的秘密) (*Minguo ribao*, July 27, 1931). Instead, the opium houses were now required to sell the official brand in sealed boxes containing the exact quantity the customer wanted to smoke (*Xianggang gongshang ribao*, June 19, 1935), to abide by quotas, and to sell a certain amount of opium per day (*Yuehuabao*, June 7, 1930; June 10, 1930; July 3, 1933; August 20, 1933). Moreover, new

taxes were levied on them, including a monthly license fee and fees proportional to the number of opium sets available for consumers' use (*Yuehuabao*, February 7, 1930).

I have pointed out the potentially deceptive nature of the laws and, by contrast, underlined the revealing nature of more matter-of-fact regulations. Yet the potential usefulness of these regulations for deciphering the reality of the situation should not be painted too optimistically. A poster kept in the Guangdong Archives displaying a set of regulations pertaining to inspections is a good case in point. This poster was probably intended to be displayed in opium houses; yet even in this set of regulations, absolutely no explicit reference is made to opium houses; instead, it allegedly dealt with “private dwellings” (*minjufangshi* 民居房室).⁴⁰ One point was especially crucial: if authorities had reason to suspect an opium house of illegal activities (like the selling of adulterated or smuggled opium) and wanted to investigate, agents from the Guangdong Opium Suppression Office, formed on December 1, 1929, had to be accompanied by members of the official police forces. Several news items published in the Canton press testify to the fact that the rulers of opium houses were perfectly aware of their rights in that matter and rebuffed agents who would not abide by this regulation (*Yuehuabao*, October 1, 1933; June 27, 1934). The reason for this measure was simple: the Guangdong jinyanju wanted to avoid extortions—in particular, false accusations and blackmailing that could very well result from its own unscrupulous agents (most of whom enjoyed the reputation of being shady characters) (Chen 1963, 126; *Huazi ribao*, June 12, 1928). But the authorities were too embarrassed to straightforwardly state that they were actually concerned with the *protection* of the infamous opium houses.

The second innovation to take place under the rule of Chen Jitang was that the Guangdong jinyanju, instead of being placed under the authority of the Ministry of Finances, was now under the firm grip of Huo Zhiting, a questionable character who had an impressive command over gambling and opium operations in Guangdong (*Renjianshi* 38:19, October 20, 1935; Wei 1964, 111) (see figure 3). But once again, he did not control the complete distribution network and still used subfarming.⁴¹ Huo maintained a low profile, never appearing as head of the Guangdong jinyanju.⁴²



Figure 3. One of the rare existing pictures of Huo Zhiting (on the right). The other men are important managerial staff of the *Guangdong jinyanju* (from left to right: Chen Wenfu, Chen Yukun, Wen Zhongsheng). Source: *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, March 17, 1936.

The Influence of the Six-Year Plan on Guangdong

Jiang Jieshi used the Six-Year Plan to financially weaken local warlords who challenged his power. For example, by redirecting the opium routes connecting some of the main provinces of poppy production (Yunnan, Guizhou) to the Lower Yangzi regions (with its huge consumption markets) (Marshall 1976, 26–27; Zhu, Jiang, and Zhang 1995, 147), he deprived the new Guangxi clique warlords of the transit taxes they levied along the Xijiang, an important source of income for them (Burton 1933a, 1933b).

But this is not the whole story. Jiang Jieshi speculated widely on the national consensus about the need to eradicate opium. By organizing a complete and credible plan of opium suppression, the Nanking government established itself as the only legitimate authority in that regard. Jiang himself, as a leader, benefited from the Six-Year Plan, as the propaganda that accompanied it cleverly suggested that he was the heir of Lin Zexu (Paulès 2007, 207–209). Also worthy of attention is the fact that the new opium laws were in tune with the international commitments of China. Jiang received praise from the League of Nations for his new opium policy, thereby increasing his political stature.⁴³

Historically, it has not been uncommon for the law to be used as a tool by a centralizing power struggling with centrifugal forces. For example, during the late medieval age, King Philippe le Bel of France used the right of appeal to the Paris Parliament to assert his authority over parts of his kingdom that were under the domination of powerful barons

(Favier 1978, 93–94). Guangdong is an excellent example of how national laws enacted by the Nanjing government regarding the Six-Year Plan seriously challenged the legitimacy of local autocrats like Chen Jitang.

In the flow of official publications aimed at celebrating the achievements of the Six-Year Plan, the absence of Guangdong Province (as well as Guangxi) was glaring.⁴⁴ This was unbearable to the Guangdong intellectual elites. They soon urged Chen Jitang to take similar action.⁴⁵ Undoubtedly, in Chen Jitang's eyes, enforcing the Six-Year Plan in Guangdong would have meant a serious breach in his autonomy. So in late 1935, he made an attempt to launch his own five-year anti-opium plan (also aimed at suppressing gambling). The program consisted of inquiring about the situation regarding opium and “organizing a counting of the smokers” (*juxing dengji* 舉行登記) (in 1936) and then making plans according to the outcome of the inquiry (in 1937). 1938 would be devoted to promulgating anti-opium regulations, forbidding the opening of new opium dens, starting to produce “nonaddictive opium” (*zhizhi wuyin xishi yapian* 制止無癮吸食鴉片), and reducing the quantity of opium consumed by smokers (1939). By the final year, 1940, complete prohibition was to be enforced (*Judu yuekan* 95:20–21 [December 1935]). To say the least, this plan was vague and unconvincing. It is important to observe that the projected suppression campaign was supposed to end in 1940, the same year as the Nanking Six-Year Plan: obviously Chen's aim was to show that Guangdong's anti-opium action was not lagging. There would be more projects of this sort in the last months of Chen Jitang's rule in Guangdong. But all convey the same impression of being mere gestures attempting to save time, and nothing concrete came out of them (Paulès 2010, 131–133).

It is generally accepted that the death of Hu Hanmin (who had since late 1931 taken residence in Hong Kong and provided moral support to Chen's regime) on May 12, 1936, was decisive in depriving Chen Jitang of his legitimacy and led to his fall two months later. Even if it is difficult to state the extent to which opium politics also undermined Chen's legitimacy, it seems certain that they did so.

Conclusion

The Guangdong authorities faced a dilemma regarding opium during most of the period from 1912 to 1936. On the one hand, this substance was considered a symbol of China's weakness and backwardness and its suppression was deemed a priority. But on the other hand, opium taxes were an indispensable source of fiscal income.

Before 1924, the authorities tried to overcome this dilemma either by enforcing an opium prohibition or by secretly deriving profit from opium traffic, but without granting it legalization (the monopoly of Long Jiguang in 1915 and 1916 was an exception). The year 1924 was a turning point, as Sun Yat-sen decided to legalize the drug. The authorities then openly ruled an opium monopoly but tried their best to come out with “acceptable” opium regulations. Laws were necessary tools, as some degree of official implication was deemed necessary for better control over the management of opium and to derive more revenue from it. Regulations became more accurate and comprehensive and proved successful in increasing opium revenues. Yet the Guangdong monopoly never took the shape of government control over all facets of the circuit. Traditional tax-farming arrangements with local opium merchants (though under stricter supervision) remained the core of the opium monopoly.

Considering the period as a whole, the dichotomy between warlords and non-warlords seems irrelevant. Power holders who can rightly be labeled “warlords,” like Long Jiguang (from 1913 to 1915) and the old Guangxi clique, profited from opium, but in a rather limited and discreet way, as they didn’t dare legalize it. It was the allegedly progressive regime of Sun that enacted legalization. Moreover, regarding matters related to opium, continuity prevailed between the Guomindang and Chen Jitang during the period from 1924 to 1936.

As to the relation between central and local opium laws, this article shows the lasting influence of the 1906 Ten-Year Plan, which remained a strong paradigm during the whole period in question. In several instances, features of the Guangdong opium laws were directly inspired by the Ten-Year Plan, most notably the yearly time frame and the distribution of smoking permits.

Just like other power holders, warlords had to be concerned about public opinion.⁴⁶ This article reveals that the Nanking regime used the Six-Year Plan (1934–1940) as a way to delegitimize the regime of Chen Jitang and deprive it of the considerable public support it enjoyed in Guangdong. It is important, therefore, to underscore that central and local laws did not simply coexist but sometimes actually *competed* with one another. This is a crucial and overlooked part of the struggle between Nanking’s and China’s centrifugal forces.

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Notes

- 1 The first attempt to deal with opium laws on a truly scholarly basis helped establish this trend, as it deliberately focused on central government laws, even while paying some attention to the provincial-level implementation of the Ten-Year Plan (Yu 1934, 1, 139–146).
- 2 During the nineteenth century, the general opinion in China regarding opium was negative, but the issue was at least up for debate. In that regard, the last decade of the nineteenth century represented a turning point: thinkers like Liang Qichao or Yan Fu considered opium to be one of the main causes of China’s weakness and a source of shame (*guochi* 國恥) for the country. Along with other practices, like foot binding or prostitution, opium smoking became a way to elaborate on the plight of China. The opium smoker dozing on his couch became a metaphor of China as the sick man of Asia. This was one of the main reasons for the Qing’s commitment to eradicating opium.
- 3 For example, the beginning of Article 2 of the May 1911 agreement between China and Great Britain over the matter reads as follows: “The Chinese Government have adopted a most vigorous policy for prohibiting the production, the transport, and the smoking of native opium, and His Majesty’s Government has expressed their agreement therewith and willingness to give every assistance” (FO 228/2444). The Chinese version may be found in Yu (1934, 259).
- 4 Yan Xishan is the most famous for his anti-opium action in Shanxi, the province under his control (Harrison 2006, 163–173; Wang Hongbin 1997, 371).
- 5 Guangdong gongbao 廣東公報, no. 124 (December 12, 1912), no. 163 (February 13, 1913); clippings from the Canton press, as translated in the file OM GGI 65400.
- 6 See FO 228/1869 (Intelligence report on Canton for the four months ending January 31, 1913); OM GGI 65400 (Note from the Canton French consul to the Gouvernement Général de l’Indochine concerning the Revolution in Guangdong, August 10–17, 1912).
- 7 See FO 228/1869 (Intelligence report on Canton for the four months ending January 31, 1913); *SCMP*, March 8, 1913; April 24, 1913; and May 16, 1913.
- 8 *SCMP*, September 4, 1913; Statistical Department of the Inspectorate General of Customs (1914, 992); *Guangdong gongbao*, no. 370 (October 16, 1913).
- 9 See FO 228/2461 (Report from the Canton English consul, April 23, 1915); FO 228/2462 (Report from the Canton English Consul dated October 19, 1915); *Huaguobao*, April 8, 1915; June 17, 1915.
- 10 This was indeed a rather Kafkaesque situation. A letter by John Jordan, the English Ambassador in China, dating May 1915 is illustrative: “The Governor of Kiangsi [Jiangxi] has defined his position with a touch of humour [*sic*]. He says that he has no objection to strangely labelled chests coming into his province as a curiosity, but he reminds all concerned that opium smoking is forbidden in Kiangsi and that off goes the head of any person who touches or tasted the forbidden article” (FO 350, Jordan Papers).

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- 11 See FO 415 (Report of the Colonial Office dated 19 January 1916); FO 228/2462 (Report from the Canton English Consul dated October 19, 1915); Statistical Department of the Inspectorate General of Customs (1914, 1050).
- 12 National archives no. 2 (Nanjing), series no. 679 (maritime customs), file no. 32409, Canton current events and rumors, report dated April 25, 1916; file no. 3285–3399, letter dated April 25, 1916.
- 13 *Jindu tiaoli* 禁煙條例 (Opium prohibition rules) (January 16, 1924), article 7 (in Ma 1998, 763).
- 14 *Caizhengbu jinyan zongchu jieyan yaogao zhuanmai zongju zuzhi zhangcheng* 財政部禁煙總處戒煙藥膏專賣總局組織章程 (September 29, 1926) (in Ma 1998, 822–824).
- 15 *Caizhengbu jinyan zongchu jieyan yaogao zhuanmai zongju shoumai yaoliao zanzing guize* 財政部戒煙藥膏專賣總局收買藥料暫行規則 (September 29, 1926) (in Ma 1998, 824–825).
- 16 For more about Chen Jiongmeng, one of the key figures of early Republican Guangdong, see the biographies by his son, Chen (1999), and Duan, Ni, and Shen (2006).
- 17 See, for example, *Guangdong qunbao*, September 21, 1921, and *Minguo ribao*, February 14, 1922.
- 18 For an illuminating account of the so-called “betrayal” of Sun by Chen Jiongmeng, see Fitzgerald (1996, 147–154, 198–203).
- 19 It was widely believed that the late 1922 defeat of Chen Jiongmeng had to do with his idealism regarding gambling and opium and his choice to enforce a policy of strict prohibition no matter what political risks were involved (Jarman 2001, n.p.).
- 20 Slack (2001, 69) accurately notes that, the Guangxi government and Cang Zhiping in Xiamen also legalized opium during the same period (the first months of 1924).
- 21 “*Jinbushengjin* 禁不勝禁, *buru yujinyuzheng* 不如寓禁于征, *jiyi suode zhi kuan* 即以所得之款, *wei beifa fei yun* 為北伐費云,” *Guangzhou minguo ribao*, December 17, 1923.
- 22 I have mentioned the elite consensus over the need to eradicate opium, which took root in the 1890s; the situation during the Republican period was the same (Paulès 2009, 499).
- 23 This was a slogan for the National Anti-opium Association (*Zhonghua guomin juduhui* 中華國民拒毒會), which was founded in 1924. Many examples can be found in *Zhonghua guomin juduhui* (1931). See also *Judu yuekan* 拒毒月刊, no. 8 (January 1927), p. 6.
- 24 For example, *Jinyan dubanshu dingding zhaoshang ming tou jieyan yao fensuo zhangcheng* [Regulations regarding the process for recruiting detoxification medicine merchants and retailers by the opium suppression superintendent’s office], *Guangzhou minguo ribao*, January 22, 1924; January 23, 1924.
- 25 The extent of smuggling made it difficult to find someone willing to farm out the opium revenues. The main concern of the various heads of the *jinyan dubanshu* (opium suppression superintendent’s office), up to the middle of 1925 would be to release the grip of the mercenaries over the opium market (*Guangzhou minguo ribao*, February 25, 1924; April 8, 1924; April 28, 1924; and September 2, 1924).
- 26 This is not to say, of course, that they are fully reliable: a careful investigation into other sources, such as Canton and Hong Kong newspapers, anti-opium activists’

- surveys, collections of historical materials (*wenshi ziliao*), and diplomatic reports, is necessary.
- 27 It was a clever move to hold Liu and Yang responsible, but, as has been stated, they were enrolled by Sun to drive Chen Jiongming (who had successfully enforced the prohibition of opium) out of Guangdong. Moreover, Liu and Yang were not the only ones to profit from opium between 1923 and 1925. Some local strongmen who were still faithful allies of the Guomindang in July 1925 (like Li Fulin) had done exactly the same (Paulès 2010, 82–93).
- 28 One famous example of the political elites' fascination with planning is the Fifty-Year Plan for national economic development issued by Sun Fo in 1928 (Kirby 2000, 141–142).
- 29 Of course, Chinese administrative circles had long known about gradual long-term policies—for hydraulic works, for instance—but such policies were not framed in a tight and regular timetable, reflecting a new perception of time that took shape during the Xinzheng (Bastid-Bruguière 2001, 41–54).
- 30 This is true even of intellectual figures like Zhang Junmai, who were more inclined to take a critical stance toward the Soviet Union (Chi 1986, 147–149).
- 31 *Caizhengbu guanyu niding jieyan baozheng guize* 財政部關於擬訂戒煙保證規則 (October 1925) (in Ma 1998, 815–816); *Guangdong caizhengting gongbu jieyan baozheng guize* 廣東財政廳公佈戒煙保證規則 (May 1929) (in Ma 1998, 917–918); *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, June 15, 1935; June 17, 1935.
- 32 MAE, Série Asie, 1918–1929, sous-série affaires communes, file no. 55 (Report by the Canton French Consul dated February 1924).
- 33 For example, it is worth noting that the opium administration would remain under the authority of the Ministry of Finance up to the launching of the Six-Year Plan (it was then put under the authority of the Military Commission).
- 34 Chen Dayou (1963, 125); MAE, Série Asie 1918–1929, sous-série affaires communes, file no. 56 (Letter from the French Consulate dated September 5, 1928); *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, August 3, 1928, quoted and translated in FO 371/13252.
- 35 *SCMP*, August 6, 1929, quoted in MAE, Série Asie, 1918–1929, sous-série affaires communes, file no. 53 (Report by Lieutenant Laurin dated October 9, 1929). No more precise mention of the currency is made besides “dollar,” but I am assuming it is the Canton dollar.
- 36 Estimating opium revenues and their part in the province's fiscal income during this period is a complex issue discussed in detail in Paulès (2010, 126–127).
- 37 For a detailed account of the 1931 anti-Jiang movement whereabouts, see So (1991, 191–199).
- 38 Interestingly, the Guangdong sugar monopoly created in June 1934 faced the same sorts of constraints, in particular intensive smuggling, and shared some of the main features of the opium suppression system (farming, subfarming, sales quotas) (Hill 2010, 148–155).
- 39 Yet some regulations concerning them appeared sometimes (see *Guangzhou minguo ribao*, February 25, 1924).
- 40 *Guangdong jinyanju bugao* (Notice by the Guangdong Opium Suppression Bureau, dated December 7, 1934), GA, Series no. 2/2, file no. 78.
- 41 MAE, Nantes, Pékin, Série A, file no. 155 (Report by the Canton French Consul dated December 15, 1932).

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- 42 There is, nonetheless, an exception: for reasons I have been incapable of deciphering, Huo Zhiting decided to appear as vice-head (quite ironically) of the *Guangdong Jinyanju* (*Xianggang gongshang ribao*, March 17, 1936). For an account of Huo's career, see Wu (1987, 325–333).
- 43 MAE, Série Asie, 1930–1940, sous-série affaires communes, file no. 115 (Minutes of the 22nd Session of the Advisory Committee on Traffic in Opium and Other Dangerous Drugs).
- 44 For example, see the periodicals *Jinyan jinian tekan* 禁煙紀念特刊 and *Jinyan banyuekan* 禁煙半月刊.
- 45 See *Judu yuekan* 90:8 (June 1935); *Huazi ribao* (March 12, 1935); *Xianggang gongshang ribao* (March 26, 1935 and June 9, 1935).
- 46 For example, Alfred Lin (2004) makes clear the fact that Chen Jitang used an elaborate welfare policy as a way of reinforcing his legitimacy.

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- Huaguobao* 華國報

Huazi ribao 華字日報
Jinyan banyuekan 禁煙半月刊
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