

Nanking Restaurant. Tracing Opium in Calcutta, 2006

'Not the opium-eater, but the opium, is the true hero of this tale; and the legitimate centre on which the interest revolves,' writes Thomas De Quincey in his novel *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1822). He continues: 'The object was to display the marvellous agency of opium, whether for pleasure or for pain; if that is done, the action of the piece has closed.'

De Quincey did more than merely describe the marvelous power of opium - its ability to induce visions and horrible nightmares. *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* can be read as a manual, a guidebook with advice, instructions as well as warnings for prospective opium users. De Quincey explains that he prefers to go to concerts under the influence of laudanum, as it stimulates 'the sensual pleasure of music'. He sets aside one evening each week for this, and by doing so incorporates into his leisure activities, the consumption of an opium preparation to enhance aesthetic pleasure. His descriptions of his opiate ramblings through the streets of London, another of his diversions, become the inspiration for later psychogeographical experiments; a new gateway to the modern city through chemical reveries, the conscious derangement of the senses. De Quincey transforms opium from being an anaesthetising medicine to a portal on to what he calls 'the secret inscriptions of the mind', journeys in time to forgotten memories, which seem to be carved from the very darkness of sleep - an often dangerous and frightening enterprise. Opium intensifies De Quincey's experiences: the colours in his dreams become stronger, but at the same time the shadows grow deeper, reinforcing the 'fearful realities' of the drug. One such reality is opium addiction, regarded in De Quincey's day as an unavoidable and rarely discussed side effect of taking the drug. This demon, which De Quincey evokes in his novel, is only later - at the end of the 20th century, and for quite different reasons - assigned a new identity: the drug abuser.

Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions* establishes the genre of 'drug literature,' exploring drugs as a way of mining consciousness written while under the influence; in doing so he introduces the idea of recreational use. His contribution constitutes an important aspect of the modern western history of opium. The other, more prosaic side of the story has to do with opium's production and trade. Karl Marx describes the opium business as making 'gold out of nothing' resulting in enormous fortunes that 'sprang up like mushrooms in a day'. Opium is the quintessential capitalist raw material - the purchase and sale of dreams - and as a commodity it is surrounded by a hallucinatory mysteriousness as if its 'real' components cannot quite be separated from its effect. Apart from *Confessions*, nothing has more greatly influenced the formation of Western views of narcotic substances and a modern 'drug history' than the British East Indian Company's illicit sale of opium in 19th century China. The enormous fortunes that Marx refers to were made here. The centre of this trade was the city of Calcutta in India.

Calcutta, capital of Bengal and until 1912 capital of British India, known as the City of the Palaces and as Kali-kata or Kalik-shetra - named after Kali, the Hindu goddess: red-eyed, tongue hanging from her mouth, adorned with a necklace of skulls, enveloped in inky darkness. Her image is everywhere in the city: in temples, at the back of butchers' shops, hanging from the rear-view mirrors of taxis, among the magazines on the street-sellers' stands and in the Victoria Memorial, the historical museum, where I caught sight of Kali at the entrance to the exhibition celebrating the foundation of Calcutta in 1690, which for more than 300 years was erroneously ascribed to the Englishman Job Charnock.

I came to the city in 2005 at the invitation of Calcutta Art Research, and was curious to experience the place as the City of Opium - the historical centre of the opium trade, which made Calcutta the second most important city in the British Empire in the 19th century. While walking through the many exhibition rooms at the Victoria Memorial, I hoped to find drawings, photographs or descriptions of the parts of town associated with the business. To my great surprise, I found none. Perhaps it was a deliberate omission? Worn out by my futile search among the many historical artefacts and pictures, my eyes settled on a diorama of a flat delta and a little village on a salt marsh by the

Hooghly River – the original settlement that would become Calcutta. The accompanying wall text said: 'No other Indian city benefited in quite the same way from British rule, but no other city had to pay as high a price either'.

Although opium was omitted from the exhibition at the Victoria Memorial, the story of the British East Indian Company's illegal sale of the drug in China is anything but secret. The export triggered the ire of Chinese authorities who struggled in vain throughout most of the 19th century to prevent the flood of opium into the country. This escalating conflict led to the two opium wars in 1841 and 1856, when Great Britain succeeded in defeating the Chinese army so as to protect the opium trade. The veiled history is also evident in the vast fortunes amassed from Great Britain's aggressive expansion of opium production. 'Black Earth', as Bengali opium is called, was cultivated in poppy fields, which the British had seized from the great Mogul princes. And when demand increased it was grown in areas expressly cultivated for the crop. The poppy harvest was processed in the British East Indian Company's sprawling factories in the town of Patna and near Benares. From there the refined opium was transported to Calcutta where it was stored and auctioned, and then shipped on to China. In 1830, the sale of opium made up a sixth of the gross national product of British India.

'They are not dead, but sleeping', writes Thomas De Quincey of the many forgotten memories that emerge in his opium-shrouded dreams. The ability of the drug to push to the surface events that had been spirited away to the far recesses of the mind led De Quincey to see the brain as a palimpsest, a membrane or scroll with innumerable layers of script. Nothing is erased completely, however. Everything is there, even if it is concealed. The bottom layers can be excavated by applying the right 'chemical', and seemingly lost incidents are retrieved. When I was in Calcutta, I began to see the city itself as a palimpsest. The crowds of people and the heavy traffic incessantly sweeping through the streets took on the form of sediments, just as the ruins, the building projects and changes I noticed during my daily wanderings all seemed to hide or reveal occurrences. De Quincey used an opium induced altered state as a door to the past; I on the other hand, wanted to find places in the city which could be connected with the history of the drug. I questioned everyone I met about opium. The film director Nilanjan Bhattacharya suggested I talk to Sumit Roy.

Sumit Roy lived on a shady street in the Calcutta suburb Dum Dum, named after the muffled explosions, which once reverberated from the notorious British munitions factory in the area. He received me in his study, a dusty high-ceilinged room with worn 1950s leather furniture and smoking mosquito coils. Roald Dahl's *Book of Ghost Stories* lay on the desk, as well as an illustrated volume about the Rolling Stones, bound in leather so as not to disintegrate in the humid tropical climate. Roy leafed through it while talking impassioned about the band and rock music. Later when we had settled in, he told me about opium and drugs, about transactions ending in disappointments and unnecessary danger because of theft or deceit, and also about secret places in Calcutta's underworld like the opium den called Fung's. Roy explained that he frequented Fung's for a period of time at the start of the 1980s, just before the place was closed down by the authorities. It was the epitome of a Chinese opium den, a dimly lit room decorated with oriental rugs and curtains, with the customers lying on mattresses on the floor smoking opium in long bamboo pipes. The house was off Central Avenue on Bowzabar Street. Roy spoke energetically then would suddenly pause and seemed to drift away. For a moment he would sit lost in thought, shrouded in an intricately embroidered shirt that looked like something the Stones could have worn.

There was not much left of what had once been Calcutta's oldest Chinatown. The former Chinese buildings were scattered like small islands in a new district of office towers. Yawning holes between the blocks indicated the renewal was still under way. Only one house was left at the address Roy had given. It was a dilapidated two-storey building framed by small shrubbery clinging to the walls like an unkempt beard. The main door of the house had disappeared, but I was warned not to enter; it was rumoured that the place was used as a depot for contraband. Instead I succeeded in getting onto a roof of a nearby building. From this new vantage point, the Chinese house was even more reminiscent of an exposed layer from a distant past. I also noticed that an unusually large number of black crows circled the rooftop. My mind took flight: the planet Saturn, crows but also ruins, bricks, authorities,

sedatives, visions, melancholy... I paused and wondered whether Saturn would bring me back to De Quincey as I studied the house again in an attempt to uncover further and more revealing connections. Then I noticed the words on the sign above the door of the building. Written in chiseled, weatherworn letters, it said: NANKING RESTAURANT. 'Nanking' as in the Nanking Treaty.

The first opium war ended in the defeat of China and the signing of The Nanking Treaty in August, 1842. This accord, which secured the opium trade and expansion for Great Britain, went down in Chinese history as one of the greatest injustices to have befallen the country. This resulted in millions of Chinese opium addicts, and, amid the instability of the ensuing decades, it left countless impoverished Chinese with no alternative than to migrate to Europe, Australia, the US, or colonial cities like Calcutta looking for work on railways, in mines or in cities that were to be built. With them the immigrants brought their opium-smoking habit. Soon opium dens appeared in many major cities. At the end of the 19th century, places like London, New York and San Francisco had hundreds of opium dens. Both the financial success of the Chinese immigrants and their social and personal misery were often ascribed to use or abuse of the drug. Opium dependency was publicly associated with Chinese excesses, and drug abuse was considered to be a disease, which could spread from the Chinese immigrant districts and infect other parts of the city. In one of the darker chapters of the history of the 19th century the Chinese were demonised in connection with the trade, abuse and dependency on opium – a fallacy that greatly affected popular views of opium and other narcotic drugs in the following century – while Great Britain and the British East Indian Company successfully obfuscated their roles.

I was thinking of this when I placed my camera in front of the former warehouse of the East Indian Company, which sat a couple of hundred yards from the bank of the Hooghly River and just next to Calcutta's great flower market. The area was hectic with activity as workers unloaded numerous lorries and dragged sacks into the buildings, that are still used to store goods. While I was adjusting the camera settings, I became aware of the people passing through the viewfinder. Only those who were standing completely still would appear on the negative because of the long exposure time. Anybody moving would either disappear or be inscribed as a foggy shape at the bottom of the frame. They would appear as small holes in the time-space continuum, something that could perhaps point to the even larger holes in our perception - a connection to the possibility of travelling backwards or forwards in time - that drugs like opium have unlocked.

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