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Psychoactive Revolution and Transnational Networks

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Psychoactive Revolution and Transnational Networks

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Psychoactive Revolution and Transnational Networks



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Overview

The connection and clash between Asia and the Anglophone world were, in part, facilitated by what David T. Courtwright calls the “psychoactive revolution,” a process in which hunger, the need for food, was replaced by desire and addiction in the modern world. Networks between these regions deepened and proliferated as stimulants and sedatives such as tea, opium, and coffee became increasingly accessible and popular around the globe.

For example, Britain’s taxes on tea, a commodity imported from China, inadvertently sparked the American Revolution and national independence from the British empire in the late eighteenth century. At the same time, Britain’s imperial expansion changed what Indian farmers grew: poppies replaced food crops in colonial India as opium gradually became the dominant commodity in the Sino-British trade. The opium brought by British merchants from India to China ended up giving both cause and name to the midcentury Anglo-Chinese Opium Wars (1839-42 and 1856-60). These conflicts were followed by Britain’s acquisition of Hong Kong and the legalization of the opium trade in China. Later, the emerging coffee shops in Asian port cities such as Madras, Shanghai, and Tokyo in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century presented a Western lifestyle symbolizing modernity and

cosmopolitanism.

Exploring the various connotations of and imaginings about psychoactive substances can enrich our understandings of globalization and modernity. These connotations and imaginings, as shown in the suggested materials, are often more complicated than we may think. The industries that produce these substances reinforce not only global connectivity but also social or colonial stratification. Moreover, since substances are both plants and commodities, studying them reveals the intersection between imperial expansion and environmental transformation.

Examining representations of substance use additionally encourages students to consider how transnational networks affect ideas about race, gender, identity, and even imperial and literary forms. Substance use, to borrow the eighteenth-century physician John Brown's medical theory, provides two different kinds of physiological models: an expansive pattern for stimulation and excitement; and a disease model for dependence and overdose. These physiological models were politicized and intertwined with imperialism, liberalism, and racialization in the nineteenth-century transnational context. Writing about substance use also influenced the development of aesthetics and literary forms, as writers created new genres and expanded existing ones to represent foreignness, masculinity, and race and to reflect on concepts of individuality, performativity, and social relations.

Structure and Organization

This lesson plan engages with the roles that substances played in mediating networks between Asia and the Anglophone world. I have divided the materials into four sections, each focusing on a specific facet of those roles. Each section contains a series of topics and questions that might be useful for instructors who are interested in including these materials in their courses.

The first section asks how writings about substances conceptualize globalization and its possible forms. The second section looks at the idea of foreignness for both China and the Anglophone world, exploring how substances participated in producing knowledge of the cultural other and imagining an unknown threat associated with the other. The third section

explores whether substances can tell us something new about racialization and whiteness and provide a form to provincialize the center of the empire. The fourth section examines how addiction participates in the emergence of new aesthetics and spaces in transnational networks.

This lesson plan does not attempt to provide a standard four-week unit but rather four approaches alongside materials that contribute to those approaches. The materials can be incorporated into courses relevant to Victorian literature and culture, Asian Studies, Comparative Literature, Empire Studies, Medical Humanities, Critical Race Studies, and so on. Instructors can directly adopt a section, divide a section into different weeks, or select some of the materials from a section.

Suggested Materials

A. PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES AND GLOBALIZATION

The global circulation of psychoactive substances was interwoven with Britain's imperial expansion in Asia. To illuminate this connection, the following materials not only consider the debates about the drug trade but also look at the cultivation of psychoactive plants and medical theories justifying substance use. As a group, these texts explore how representations of psychoactive plants and studies of substances' medical effects provided new forms for authors to imagine empire, colonial agency, and globalization. By examining the globality of psychoactive substances, this section thus brings Empire Studies into conversation with the Medical and Environmental Humanities.

Primary Texts

Brown, John. *The Elements of Medicine; or, A Translation of the Elementa Medicinæ Brunonis. With Large Notes, Illustrations, and Comments*. Printed for J. Johnson, 1788. *In particular, see chapters 2 and 3 (pp. 3–37).*

Ghosh, Amitav. *Sea of Poppies*. Picador, 2008.

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. "From *The Communist Manifesto*." 1848. *Karl Marx: A Reader*, edited by Jon Elster, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 225–35.

Secondary Texts

Courtwright, David T. "Introduction: The Psychoactive Revolution." *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World*, Harvard University Press, 2001, pp. 1–5.

Gallagher, John, and Ronald Robinson. "The Imperialism of Free Trade." *Economic History Review*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1953, pp. 1–15.

Keogh, Luke. "On the Move." *The Wardian Case: How a Simple Box Moved Plants and Changed the World*, University of Chicago Press, 2020, pp. 86–103. *In particular, see the section on "Robert Fortune and Tea" (pp. 87–94).*

Sample Discussion Questions

1. How does Brown define and talk about "excitability"? How does Brown's theory of excitement conceptualize the relationship between self and world? How does this relationship speak to new forms of global connections – such as "free trade" and capitalism – in Marx and Engels, Ghosh, Courtwright, and Gallagher and Robinson?
2. At the same time, how do Ghosh and Courtwright think about globalization's connection with the drug trade?
3. What's the relationship between the expansive pattern (e.g., substance-induced stimulation and excitement) and the disease model for dependence and overdose in Brown? How do these medical models provide new literary forms and rhetorical strategies for Marx and Ghosh to reflect on imperialism and capitalism?
4. How does *Sea of Poppies* associate the global circulation of psychoactive substances with environmental transformation? How is nature imagery (e.g., rivers, opium fields, opium seeds, the sea, stars) used in the novel? How does the novel's use of nature imagery shed light on or complicate the "artificial" and the societal, such as transnational networks, colonialism, and the agency of the colonized? How does the novel mediate the contrast between fluidity and rootedness, both of which are symbolized by poppies?

A. SUBSTANCES AND FOREIGNNESS

This section examines how both East Asia and the Anglophone world associated substance use (using tea or opium) with foreignness. It looks at the connotations this association could generate in literary works and periodical writings: How do these texts present the foreign? How does the imagined invasion of foreign substances into individual bodies challenge or confirm the Sinocentric or Anglocentric worldview? How is gender hierarchy involved with these imaginings of foreignness?

Primary Texts

Fortune, Robert. [*A Journey to the Tea Countries of China; Including Sung-Lo and the Bohea Hills; with a Short Notice of the East India Company's Tea Plantations in the Himalaya Mountains*](#). John Murray, 1852. *In particular, see chapters 10–15 (pp. 182–271).*

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *Cranford*. 1853. Oxford University Press, 2011.

Gutzlaff, Charles. [*Journal of Three Voyages along the Coast of China in 1831, 1832, and 1833, with Notices of Siam, Corea, and the Loo-Choo Islands*](#). Frederick Westley and A. H. Davis, 1834. *In particular, see chapters 2 and 3 of “Journal of the First Voyage” (pp. 67–152) and chapter 5 of “Journal of the Second Voyage” (pp. 276–315).*

Lin Zexu. [“Letter to the Queen of England, from the High Imperial Commissioner Lin, and His Colleagues”](#). *The Chinese Repository*, vol. 8, no. 10, Feb. 1840, pp. 497–503.

Secondary Texts

Frank, Caroline. “Manly Tea Parties: The Idea of China in Boston’s Rebellion.” *Objectifying China, Imagining America: Chinese Commodities in Early America*, The University of Chicago Press, 2011, pp. 175–202.

Rappaport, Erika. “Packaging China: Advertising Food Safety in a Global Marketplace.” *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World*, Princeton University Press, 2017, pp. 120–43.

Sample Discussion Questions

1. How do Gutzlaff's and Fortune's travel narratives use substances such as tea and opium to create, confirm, or complicate the image of the Asian other far away from Britain?
2. While Chinese and Anglophone authors consider opium or tea a foreign commodity, how does this foreignness help make a connection between substances' "poisonous" effects and the theoretical other's threat, especially in Lin and according to Frank?
3. How is this foreign commodity or even threat connected with domesticity and femininity, when, for example, tea drinking is characterized as women's hobby and selling tea is represented as women's employment (see Gaskell, Frank, and Rappaport)? How does this connection in these representations give agency to women and foreignness? What kind of intimacy or even solidarity does this connection establish?

A. ADDICTION AND RACIALIZATION

This section looks at the intersection of substance use and racialization in English literary texts. The materials and questions focus on substances' transformative effects, that is, how white characters are racialized, rather than how non-white identities are stereotyped in writings about addiction. As, from Thomas De Quincey to Robert Louis Stevenson, white addicts were identified as Asian-like, animal-like, or deformed, the distinction between the white and the non-white in depictions of drug abusers was gradually blurred in the nineteenth century. Making the deformed other a doppelgänger or a part of the self, writings about addiction challenge racial classification and the concept of race by showing the possibility of whiteness being contaminated.

Primary Texts

De Quincey, Thomas. "Confessions of an English Opium-Eater." 1821. *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*, Penguin Books, 2003, pp. 3–88.

Dickens, Charles. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. 1870. Penguin Books, 1985.

Le Fanu, J. Sheridan. "Green Tea." 1872. *Green Tea: And Other Weird Stories*, Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 96–124.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. 1886. Oxford University

Press, 2008.

Secondary Texts

Chang, Elizabeth Hope. "Display Case and Den." *Britain's Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Stanford University Press, 2010, pp. 111–40.

Makdisi, Saree. "'Irregular Modernization': Charles Dickens and the Crisis of Occidentalism." *Making England Western: Occidentalism, Race, and Imperial Culture*, The University of Chicago Press, 2014, pp. 195–232.

Sample Discussion Questions

1. How do racial characteristics in these works visualize addiction? At the same time, do they also flatten and stereotype the addict? What is the relationship between singularity and generality, as addicts are racialized? How do these racialized features interact with whiteness in the representations of addiction?
2. In what kinds of spaces are the racialized individuals displayed in each work? What role do these spaces play in racialization?
3. How do the racialized addicts challenge the stability of whiteness and the assumed equation of modernization with Westernization? How do these depictions provincialize the center of the British empire?

A. SUBSTANCES, OBSESSION, AND TRANSNATIONAL AESTHETICS

Materials in this unit engage the connection between substances and aesthetics: What aesthetic categories are made possible by writings about substance use when addiction to substances is presented as obsession with objects (such as Dorian Gray's beautiful opium box), spaces, lifestyles, or beliefs? What's the relationship between such aesthetic categories and the transnational context?

Primary Texts

Doyle, Arthur Conan. "The Man with the Twisted Lip." 1891. *Sherlock Holmes: Selected*

Stories, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 203–24.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. 1897. Oxford University Press, 2006.

Zhang Changjia. “Opium Talk.” 1878. *The Fall of the God of Money: Opium Smoking in Nineteenth-Century China*, by Keith McMahon, translated by Keith McMahon, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002, pp. 193–215.

Secondary Texts

Lavery, Grace. “Loving John Ruskin.” *Quaint, Exquisite: Victorian Aesthetics and the Idea of Japan*, Princeton University Press, 2019, pp. 113–37.

Sample Discussion Questions

1. How does addiction to an imported drug in “Opium Talk” contribute to the cult of sentiment in traditional Chinese poetics? How is Dorian’s obsession with opium interwoven with East Asian aesthetics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*?
2. How do public spaces where people consume substances, such as tea shops, cafes, and opium dens, contain Oriental/Western aesthetics in British/Asian contexts in Doyle, Wilde, and Lavery? What do we make of such spaces in late-nineteenth-century texts? For example, how do they challenge the distinction between the domestic and the foreign? How is the foreign made domestic, and how is the domestic made foreign in such spaces?

Developer Biography

Menglu Gao is an Assistant Professor of Victorian Literature at the University of Denver. She specializes in nineteenth-century British and Anglophone literature, with research interests in medical humanities, empire studies, Anglo-Chinese transnational studies, and critical theory. Her current book project examines how medical theories relevant to opium use and addiction provided new ways for nineteenth-century authors to imagine the structure of the British empire. Her work has appeared in *Literature and Medicine*.

Header Image Caption

Anonymous. "[Commissioner Lin and the Destruction of the Opium in 1839.](#)" c.1840.

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