

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSIONS

The search for the original sin brings us, indeed, in or near the Garden of Eden, the Middle East. More importantly, we are confronted with many connotations surrounding the use of *Papaver* species, including the opium poppy, *Papaver somniferum*. So, up to the beginning of the 16th-century small quantities of *Papaver*s are used among many herbs for personal food and energy (oil of the seeds) and for economic, medical and luxury or recreational reasons. The last two applications in particular could be directly connected to death and poison, to impotence as well as to a sexual palliative or temporary stronger sex activity, to a restricted use among the elite (warriors, etc.). Indeed, in the Middle Eastern medical and court life of the Ottoman empire, many of these elements of *Papaver*s were known. It was surrounded with legends and more or less embedded in an elite culture.

Arab and Muslim traders spread hallucinogenic products, knowledge and customs from the Middle East into the North Indian societies via Hormuz, Surat and similar merchant cities from—say—the 14th-century onwards. At that time it was just a very small item in an extensive trade assortment of these caravan and maritime merchants.

In other words, China has nothing to do with this “original sin”. It is also ridiculous to refer to Neolithic circumstances to explain the use of opium as an aphrodisiac; its history can only start where all relevant elements are available concerning ecological, economic, social and cultural preconditions. The most important aspect for our study is: there was *no opium problem* nor an “Opium Question” as a mass phenomenon!

But why then referring to some “original sin”? The answer can be found at the provisional end of our history. A modern highly ambiguous British writer on *The Paradise* also came across Muslim opium producers and traders in Afghanistan. To introduce the second part of his historical analysis, covering the years 1000-1500 (ACE), he talks about such a meeting with an Afghan opium farmer and ‘his dangerous but very pretty crops’ (!):

The opium, the farmer said, was not as healthy as it looked ... Did he smoke it? No. People said Iranians liked it, but he personally had never tried the

stuff. How did it make them feel? He shrugged. Like they were in *al-jenna*, the Garden of Paradise. No, he couldn't sell me a few kilos ...¹

This British dealer in Paradise reacts like one of the British soldiers in Helmland, who are accused of only guarding the poppy fields and playing arch-angel at the gate of Paradise in stead of fighting the Taliban, who 'also got rid of hashish and opium.'²

The earliest Western intruders in the Middle Eastern world, those of the 16th and 17th centuries, started to create these "Afghanistan interest(s)" and committed the original sin. They pointed to bewildering aspects of the opium use in a contradictory way as well, because they were confronted for the first time with a regular use of new kinds of herbs and plants in medicine, the kitchen, religion or elsewhere in the Levant, Middle East or India. Their curiosity about what could be useful for themselves or in the militant exchange they organized with these new worlds, also changed in these centuries in a rather drastic way in the wake of an intensification of Western imperialism and colonialism: opium became, first and foremost, an isolated "Asian product" unconnected to any *original* social, ecological and economic context. This isolation was executed under the most barbarous circumstances: the original sin.

Did an Opium Question originate in the 17th, develop in the 18th-century and explode in the 19th-century? Indeed, how this happened and what are the consequences still felt today form the subject of the following historical analysis, which does not aim at legitimizing any behavior.

Because the English were by far the most exuberant profiteers of the Opium Problem, their performance will be discussed first. It gives us the opportunity to sketch the general case, whereupon the analysis of the Dutch, French or Chinese performances can provide us with the necessary details, definitions of an Opium Question and comparisons. In particular the Dutch assault of the East is interesting not so much due to Jan Huygen van Linschoten's text as to their "first commitment of the original sin", the example which was followed by all other Western opium interests.

¹ K. Rushby, p. 39.

² Idem, p. 43.