ALCOHOL ADDICTION IN ENGLAND AND OPIUM ADDICTION IN SINGAPORE: SOME DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

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It may seem farfetched to compare English alcoholics, treated as voluntary patients in a very permissive English mental hospital, with forcibly detained Chinese opium addicts treated in a Singapore Opium Treatment Centre. Certainly the authors—of whom one had been connected with the work of the English alcoholic unit from its beginnings, the other with the Singapore Opium Treatment Centre from its start—expected to find, in the main, far-reaching differences. However, a number of informal exchanges of personal experiences and impressions, gained quite independently of each other, led to the conclusion that besides a number of differences, not surprising in view of the differences in the drugs, in the populations and in the sociocultural aspects, there emerged more than a few aspects in which the problems closely resembled each other.

I. THE SINGAPORE OPIUM TREATMENT CENTRE**

(Leong, See Bibliography, 1959)

Up to 1941, the smoking of opium was legal in Singapore. Addicts were registered and could buy opium from government chandu (opium) retail shops. In 1942 there were 16,552 addicts on the Singapore registers. After World War II, the smoking of opium became illegal, and punishable by fine or imprisonment. No adequate provision was available for the treatment of addicts who might have desired to give up opium, and many turned to illegal sources for their supplies of the drug. Those who were arrested and imprisoned, usually for periods of two months, received no opium during this imprisonment, but no other medical measures followed after release. In general, addicts did not go to doctors

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**Singapore officially has more than one “Opium Treatment Centre,” and Dr. Leong was designated medical officer, “Opium Treatment Centres.” Except for official purposes, however, the one set up on St. John's Island—some miles from Singapore but included in Singapore territory—is generally regarded as “the centre.” It is so referred to in this paper when “centre” is mentioned in the singular (to the exclusion of the other official “centres”). Other “official centres,” notably the hospital in the Singapore Local Prison, are concerned, of course, in the total treatment process.
for treatment, and no government institution existed for it; but there were a number of philanthropic and semi-religious “temples,” in which “treatment” covered the withdrawal period only, effecting a “cure” within a fortnight and without carrying out any follow-up measures.

In 1955, the government set up facilities for opium treatment. Legal provisions were made to enable persons who had been convicted to undergo treatment, the court sentence reading: “12 months’ treatment at the Opium Treatment Centre.” It was up to the prison and medical departments jointly to carry this out in practice. Addicts were remanded and examined by the doctor while the rehabilitation officer investigated their social and family backgrounds. The advisory committee then submitted a report on each addict and advised the court on the individual’s suitability for treatment. From August 1955 on, when the writer (L.H.K.) was appointed medical officer, Opium Treatment Centres, he daily examined addicts who had been committed and, in the course of daily discussions, became more and more interested in what he saw and in what they told him about their lives and their addiction problems. There were the questions as to why they took opium, what kind of persons they were, whether they could be “cured” and by what means.

Practically all these Singapore addicts were Chinese, coming from the main “tribal” groups: Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese. They were mainly unskilled laborers, semi-skilled workmen, masons, boatmen, hawkers, and a few clerical and other sedentary workers. Most of them were illiterate, and those who were educated had only received elementary Chinese educations. Their ages ranged from the twenties to the fifties, the greater number being in the 45 to 55 age group. Many had not become addicted until in their late twenties. The average number of years of addiction (i.e. from the time they started smoking opium) was 18.

As to their mode of taking the drug, they were smokers by choice, and only through necessity did they resort to swallowing. After a pre-addiction stage which they well recognized (calling it “pia p’oon,” “knocking the pan”) and which lasted from a few months to one or two (or, as some of them averred, even more) years, they became addicted. They smoked one or two packets several times a day (the average amount for a day was 3.4 packets). One packet contains 11 gr. of prepared opium, costing Straits