

Tea and Opium: Variations

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Tea and opium are as left and right, as east and west, as day and night: as different, and as inseparably entwined. The following notes are intended as just as many contributions to the joint history of tea and opium – which is also the history of our joint world.

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Tea. With its fresh green leaves and its small white flowers *Camellia sinensis* gives a modest impression, at least in comparison with its more eye-catching relative the camellia.

The scientific name implies a Chinese origin, but the actual circumstances are surrounded by legends. One of them tells how the monk Bodhidharma – who, known under the name of Putidamo, was the first to bring Buddhist meditation techniques to China and who, according to his first known biographer Yang Xuanzhi, originated from Persia, – how Bodhidharma, after studying the mountain wall deep inside the cave where he had withdrawn for seven years, finding himself drifting off to sleep for a moment, pulled his razor from his black robe and cut off his eyelids.

From the spot where they fell to the ground the



first tea plant grew. In the wild it can reach a height of several meters (the north Indian variety *assamica* up to twenty), but as a cultivated plant it is controlled more tightly. The shoots are picked regularly together with a varying number of leaves, all depending on the intended end product. The complicated preparation – a combination of drying, rolling, airing, steaming or roasting, sifting and in some cases even smoking, fermenting and pressing – begins as soon as the leaves are harvested and gives various results with regard to taste, scent and colour. The Chinese language paints a broad palette from shimmering white, by way of yellow, green and *wulong*, to rich red and earthy black.

Opium. If the tea plant is associated with the day and with wakefulness, the opium poppy belongs to the realm of the night, of sleep, even death. Once again the species epithet is revealing: the literal meaning of the Latin *somniferum* is “bringer of sleep”.

The family name *Papaver* on the other hand is of uncertain origin, as obscure as the plant itself. The hypotheses stretch from the Assyrian or one of its forerunners to a pre-Indo European substratum, from the outermost of Europe to the innermost of Central Asia. Nor is it certain if *soma* – the sacred plant which is praised to the skies in the hymns of *Rg veda* and which, under the similar name of *haoma*, also exists in the Zoroastrian ritual –, if *soma* compares to the opium poppy or any other plant



with similar properties. That the same word, even if at a later date, got the secondary meaning “moon” could be explained with reference to both the shape of the fruit capsule and the colour of the milky sap. A narrow, swaying stem, which can grow to almost a meter in height, carries first a veil of delicate petals tinged in the clearest of white to the deepest of purple (usually with a darker spot at the base) and then a large, bluish fruit capsule swelling with small, bluish seeds. They are used as a spice for breads and filling for cakes, but contain only small amounts of the active ingredients for which the plant is most known. These are instead extracted from superficial cuts into the as yet unripe seed capsule from which the milky, pale tears emerge, are left to dry and finally scraped off. The result is a sticky, amber coloured substance that in turn can be refined in different ways, depending on the intended end product. Tea can be had in many different colours, opiates – especially morphine, codeine and heroin – only in shades of white.

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Roads. Landscapes fill the field of vision. The gaze is set in motion: forward, at the same time outward and inward, or sideways along the open surface of the image. Along a red grey stony desert or low growing yellow green grass. Under the grave faces of rocks – but also over softly billowing, surging, yielding mountain ridges.



The road, long and winding, runs like a black band through the landscape. Electricity poles of raw concrete measure out the required length, but without the white tacking-stitch of the centre line the road seems it could go on forever. The antennas on the height above are like needles in a pincushion, the noise from the engines like the sound from an old sewing machine. The piston moves back and forth, the crankshaft moves around and around. The crankshaft moves around and around, the needle moves up and down. The principle is the same: as old as it is simple, but already a revolution.

By the entrance to the exhibit we see the picture again – a still image, the only one – of a black and white car in a landscape of muted colours, presumably a 1967 model of the Deutscher Volkswagen type 1. The license plate is embellished with Arabic numbers. Or, to be exact, by East Arabic numbers in their Persian form (۲۲۲۵).

Tea #2. In Chinese, black tea (*hei cha*) is not the same as black tea in the western sense. It refers instead to a green tea, which after the customary preparation, is put through a secondary fermentation that serves to prolong the keeping qualities and to deepen the taste. The most famous variety is made in the city of Pu'er in Yunnan, near the borders of Burma, Laos and Vietnam. Black tea in the western sense is described by the Chinese as red tea (*hong cha*).

The men in Farhad Kalantary's video work *A New*



Beginning drink red tea, either locally grown in the regions around Lahijan by the southern coast of the Caspian Sea or else imported from global producers such as India, Sri Lanka and Kenya. They drink it from clear glasses on deep plates, and the sugar bowl is never far away. White sugar, brown sugar. Fingers picking absent-mindedly at the coarsely cut pieces.

Hands moving, slowly or even slower, in and out of the picture. Large cauldrons, shiny or black as soot, or else small, fragile kettles.

Earth. First one spade, then two, digging deep into the loose soil. Among the weeds sticks have been planted.

A shadow falls on golden straw. The shadow raises its arms; the pitchfork lays the hay in its place. Straws drift from the ground.

The sound of a farming machine, probably a threshing-mill. The crankshaft moves around and around, the sieve move back and forth.

Sheep with black faces, boys with canes, dogs with tongues hanging out. Traffic jam.

Opium #2. As a lethal poison and simultaneously one of nature's most potent pain-relievers the dried tears of the opium poppy have, more than both speech and writing, been deserving of the classic epithet *pharmakon*. In the absence of doctors, opium has been used as medicine – and as intoxicant – since prehistoric times. Occasionally it is diluted



with sugar; the Chinese mixed it with linseed oil to make it easier to smoke.

The men in Farhad Kalantary's video work *A New Beginning* smoke opium; no doubt brought from Afghanistan, probably produced in the province of Helmand, possibly smuggled via the city of Herat. They smoke it in pipes whose heads of glazed clay look like small, round pots. The mass is smeared around the opening of the smoke chamber and is lit against the half burnt embers¹ in the fireplace. Hands move in and out of the picture. Breathe out to blow life into the embers, breathe in to blow life into the soul.

We never see their faces, but what they smoke already hints at who they are. "Opium, we just don't feel it. It is for old people."

Men. An old man drinks his red tea, combs his white hair, sings the love songs of his youth. He has faith in God. The principle is as old as it is simple, but already a revolution.

Two old men drink tea. They speak – to themselves and with each other – of generosity and greed, honesty and dishonesty. The peaceful, familiar conversation hints that they are related.

Old men drinking tea. Old men smoking opium. Hands, rings, cigarettes. Conversations, songs, deep breaths, the clinking of glasses – and, almost impossible to discern if you haven't already heard it, the sound of a radio searching among the frequencies, searching for another description of reality. Voices



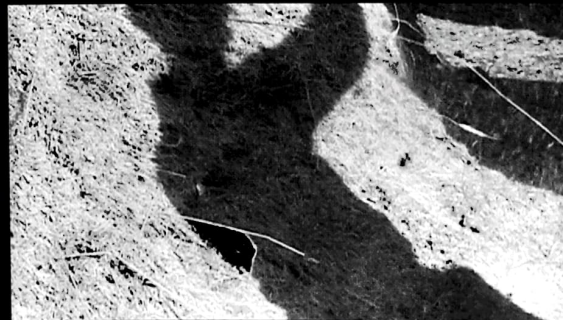
from Iraq, from Israel, even from America. *Winston tastes good like a cigarette should.*

An old man washes his hands. Slippers of leather, tiles of stone, drops of water. On our way through the exhibit, this image – in Super 8, the only one – becomes the last one. Water runs down the drain. The narrow road lacks rewards.

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Silk. Baggy brown pants, worn black shoes. Jackets of coarse cloth, white tablecloths with red edgings. A piece of purple, loosely woven or else knitted. Warp and weft.

Silk is the first raw material that I miss in the video work *A New Beginning*. Since it was with threads of silk that these roads were first connected to other kinds of roads, to roads leading to other places: westward towards Baghdad, Damascus and Antioch – partly along the ancient royal road from Susa to Sardis – but just as well eastward towards Teheran, Nishapur, Samarkand, Kashgar, Dunhuang, Lanzhou ... Since it was with threads of silk that this landscape was first tied to other kinds of landscapes, to landscapes that would blossom, bear fruit and be impoverished together with it. And since it was with threads of silk – almost impossible to discern if you have not already seen them – that these old men and their varying destinies were first connected to other men and women, old and young, and to their varying destinies.



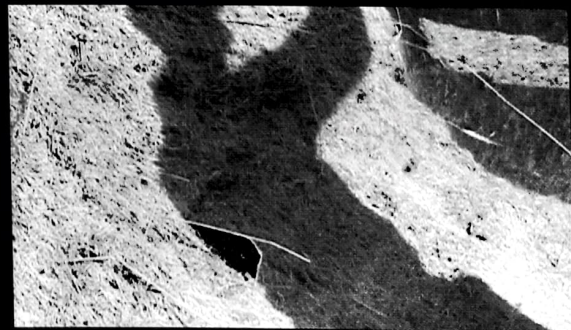
Days. We travel through a landscape without shadows. Along rough stones or sparse, yellow green grass, in North Africa or the Middle East – but always under the same blazing sun.

All roads but one lead to Rome. The remaining one leads us in the exact opposite direction.

Tea #3. Red tea in clear glasses. Indiscernibly small particles – the remains of tea leaves – follow their orbit through a liquid which slowly gets more and more upset, starts to ripple, simmer and tremble. Clean water, piping hot, without warning pours out of the glass, in through the spout, back down into the pot. A concentrate, dark and cloudy, remains in the glass.

Black tea is a product of the Silk Road: pressed into cakes and wrapped in paper it preserved its taste even after hundreds of miles along the caravan trails. The nomads on the Eurasian steppe mixed it with milk, a tradition which Manchu horseback riders brought to the Chinese court when they conquered Beijing in the middle of the seventeenth century. It might just be from them that the English first got the idea.

Opium #3. The Phoenicians were the first to extend the continent's tangle of trade trails over the Mediterranean Sea, by connecting its land routes to their own sea routes. Via colonies such as Carthage more and more of the old world's riches flowed out into a Europe which had not yet begun to see itself as a continent. Not until Alexander – the Greeks called



him the “great” (*meGas*), the Persians the “damned” (*gojastak*) – did the tide begin to turn, but not for the last time.

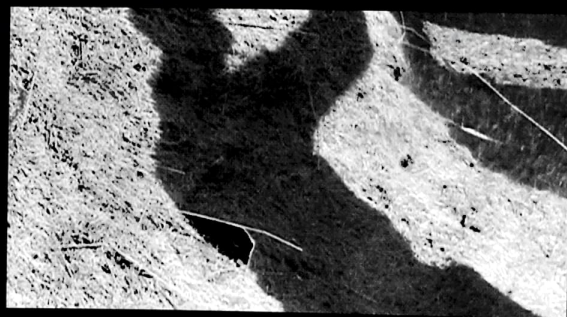
The opium poppy is believed to have come to Iran with Alexander’s army; both *afyun* and *taryak*, the most common words for opium in both Arabic and Persian, originate from the Greek language. The domestic expression *hashish al-fuqara*, “the poor-man’s hashish”, is however at least equally characteristic. Among people in general it more than anything became a way to deaden the gnawing feeling of hunger, to endure hopeless labour or to calm the mind before an approaching battle.

Whether religion is opium for the people remains a disputable question. The inverse assertion, however, applies to most historical circumstances.

Nights. The remaining road goes through a nocturnal, almost black-and-white landscape. Arrows, lighted, guide us.

A car in muted colours – an Ahura Mazda 323 Combi, photographed in Fujichrome, from the middle of the 80s – slowly comes to a stop. Fluorescent tubes high above throw a ghost-like light. A man in uniform knocks on the window: *Waffen, Ammunition, Kommunikationsradio?*

Oil. The piston moves back and forth, the crankshaft moves around and around. The principle is as old as it is simple, the fuel far older. Their explosive combination in the combustion engine is, on the



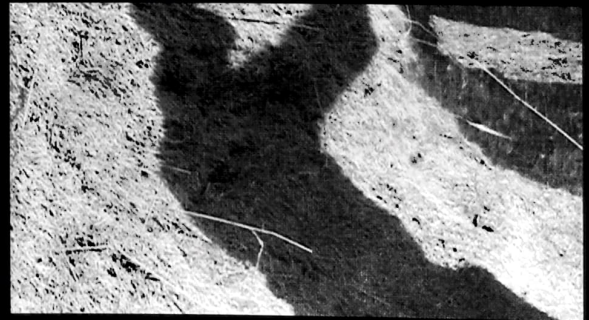
other hand, of a considerably more recent date.

Oil is the other raw material that I miss in the video work *A New Beginning*. From Baku and its “black city” – eternalized at the turn of the last century by cinematographers such as Alexandre Michon and Vasili Amashukeli – to today’s free trade zone in Kuwait City, it is roughly 2000 km. Iran lies along the way, its capital, Teheran, barely halfway. According to recent statistics Iran is the world’s fourth largest oil producer – during one hundred years of extraction it has produced more than 60 billion barrels – and it still contains the third most extensive deposits. Neither during the occupation by the allies, nor during Mossadeq’s short-lived ministry, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s authoritarian monarchy or Komeini’s authoritarian theocracy, have the people succeeded in escaping its subterranean destiny.

Quoting a contemporary Iranian philosopher: “There is no darkness in this world which has not its mirror image in oil.” *Petromania: Norway-Iran and return.*

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Silences. The sound of the wind whistling in the microphone – not strongly, but still deafeningly – drowns all other sounds: noises from engines, clinking glasses, voices engaged in conversation. No matter. To Farhad Kalantary the most important is what is not heard, the most telling, what is not said.



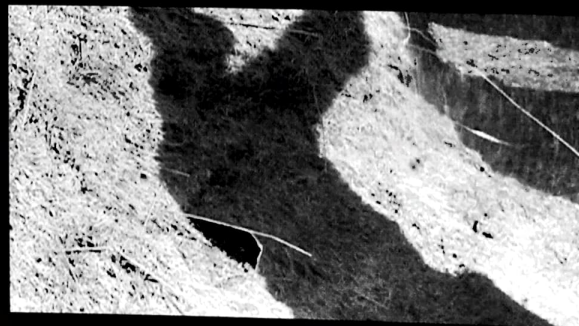
On the one hand, the emphatic silence that hides an incessant, unvoiced accusation. But what does such a silence really want to say? – On the other hand, the irrelevant, everyday moments in which we will always recognize ourselves since they resist each attempt at political overthrow, each *coup d'état*, each revolution. But is this fact in itself subversive or irrelevant?

The voices of the living are not heard, cannot be heard. Only the dead may speak.

Silk #2. The contours shiver. The movement shifts both direction and speed: often softly, sometimes more hesitantly – but always indiscernibly. A/D. The contours flicker.

Foreground and background glide over each other as folds in the glossiest of weave. Fine threads, intertwined, overlap: the warp from a son to his father and mother, from a father to his son and daughter – and the weft from a brother to his sister and brother, from a friend to his friends and their friends. Layers upon layers of weave in the excessive, immeasurable body of society. Goods and services move through veins and arteries, speeches and elections through lungs and air passages, impulses and ideas through nerves and spine.

It is there, under the skin, that the story² takes place – from the chronic arrhythmia of modern financial crises, over the slow respiration of dynasties and empires to the small, incessant synapses of everyday life.

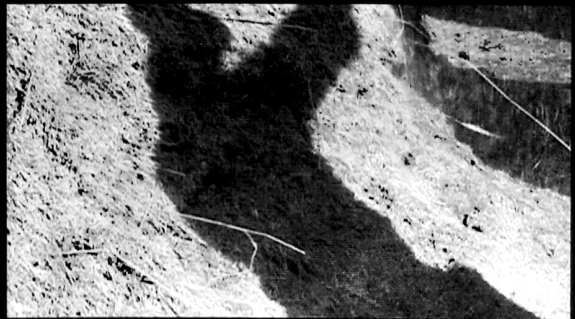


Women. A pair of hands – a woman's, the only ones – rinse mint in a red plastic sieve. Leaves apart, stems apart. And then, slowly but firmly, she begins to fasten the former to the latter.

Hands, numberless, pick tea. A shoot, one or two leaves, up to twenty kilos per day. Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Hatton, Haputale: nowhere is the postcolonial condition as close to its colonial origin, the local as close to the global, salaried work as close to slavery. In this way the female tea pickers of Sri Lanka give precarity a face. Three times ill-fated: born as a woman instead of as a man, as Tamil instead of Sinhalese, as Indian Tamil instead of Sri Lankan. A subaltern tiger.³ Who will help her to fasten the leaves to the stems?

Opium #4. Persian opium, among Chinese connoisseurs known as *bositu* or *jinhuat*, was long considered the foremost in the world: pressed into cakes and folded in paper it preserved its taste even after hundreds of miles along the caravan trails. But all good things come to an end.

In 1729 the Chinese Emperor proclaimed his fateful ban against the use of opium. The consequences, with far too many ramifications to take in here, comprise an outer as well as an inner enemy. With its iron-clad war ships, fuelled by fire and steam, “the phantoms from the North Sea” proved impossible to conquer. In comparison, the “opium eaters” should have been defenceless victims, but the increasingly unreflecting campaign for detoxification, an unholy

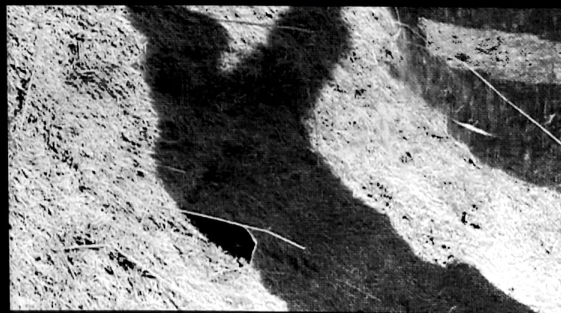


alliance between Chinese nationalists and Christian missionaries, actually resulted in a number of considerably more dangerous drugs. Laudanum, morphine, heroin: easier for doctors to administer, easier for users to hide, easier for smugglers to transport. One by one the cures turned into new poison.

Nowadays Persian opium is grown in Afghanistan. Borders are redrawn, but the poppy fields are still in bloom – and opium is still the religion of the people. According to a current UN report Iran has more addicts per capita than any other country in the world and a market which is believed to turn over about 3 billion dollars annually. But the pipe is for the old ones. “For us, it’s heroin. And for those younger than us, it’s crack and glass...”

Voices. “At first I thought waves were breaking on its shores. Then I realised that for six feet up, the rocks were crusted with salt. They gleamed through its mist where all else had faded, in a wavering beam of dimming curves and promontories. A few white birds swam alongside, like pieces broken off the shore.”

The voice belongs to Colin Thurbon, one of the foremost travel writers in contemporary English literature. The place is Chichast, the “sparkling” – in Latin *Lacus Matianus* after the surrounding kingdom, today Lake Urmia after the nearby city. It is said that Zoroaster, ancient Persia’s great religion founder, was born here, but his teachings were soon



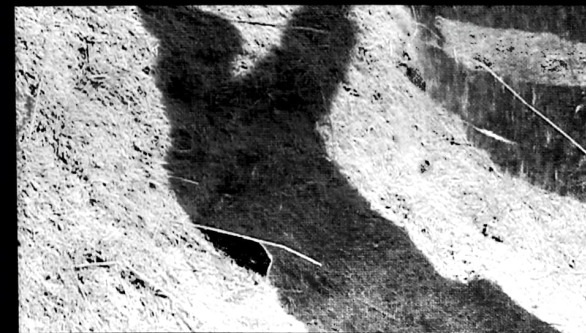
overshadowed by other, more far-flung preachings. Urmia was for a long time known as a Christian stronghold and Lake Urmia, at least among Muslim geographers, as the “lake of schismatics”.

The name remains surprisingly apt. As the Arabic spring turns into a Mediterranean summer and almost – but only almost – into an Israeli-Palestinian autumn, more and more gather, along the shores and the new built bridge, to voice their disapproval: due to the drainage, partly as a result of human influence, the lake risks becoming a salt desert. The regime in Teheran looks very seriously at the situation. In the course of the year, hundreds of demonstrators are imprisoned.

According to official information half of all prison sentences and three-fourths of all death sentences in Iran are for drug-related crimes. How many of them are, in reality, political sentences is not clear, but statistics have undeniably escalated with the political situation.

Tea #4. For close to two hundred years the relationship between east and west, the Chinese empire and the British, rested on a precarious trade balance: tea for opium, export for import, profit for loss. Silver as currency, India and Sri Lanka in the scale.

In 1848, half way between the Treaty of Nanking and the *Arrow* Incident, the Scottish botanist Robert Fortune succeeded in secretly bringing out seeds and cuttings of *Camellia sinensis* from China – and, more crucially, knowledge of how to take care



of the cultivations and prepare the harvests. The consequences, with much too many ramifications to take in here, include revolutions and counter-revolutions, colonisations and de-colonisations – and, last but not least, new land and new markets. Tea in clear glasses, sugar in bowls. Fingers picking absentmindedly at the pieces. The scene is ordinary, but far from irrelevant. A small miracle, even.

Histories. A shadow falls on the ground. In the same way my own shadow falls on the picture, becomes a part of the projection. One reality layers on another – and so reminds us that both really are one and the same. The cuts are accentuated by short stills, frozen moments.

This is another statement that we could dare to put forward, if not as a general law, then at least not far from one. Whether we approach the multitude of individual stories or history⁴ as a collective singular, local situations or global processes, the elusive moment or the recurring routine, we must always search for that point where a linear movement passes into a circular, where way and life converge. Whether we write with light or just with pen and paper, it is only at this point that the past becomes legible – as strata on a mountain wall, or as wrinkles in a hand or a face. (And anyhow, most of us spend most of our time in front of the computer these days. No wonder that we need a reminder now and then.)

History taught film to turn back time. Film taught



history to catch it in flight. Both move freely between times and places, between long shot and close-up. In the poetics of everyday life they find their common challenge.

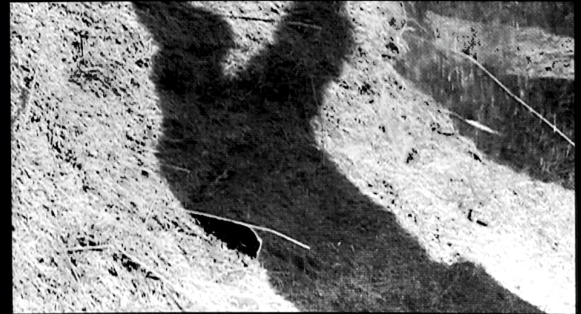
Silences #2. Tea and opium, opium and tea. We began with a simple combination, but end inevitably with a more complex configuration, a glass bead game with a multitude of possible outcomes.

Tea in clear glasses. Mint in a red plastic sieve. The glass pours out, leaves are fastened to stems. The principle is as old as it is simple, but already a revolution. Another, less experienced filmmaker could very well have hesitated – but Farhad Kalantary does not hesitate, at least not nowadays. A sugar cube between his teeth helps him keep the food down.

Tea in clear glasses. White sugar, brown sugar. Fingers picking absentmindedly at the coarsely cut pieces. – Is God in the sugar cube? One never knows, but some still seem to think so.

“I am a lighthouse on the sea / I catch fire and burn.” A streak of light, the spark of recognition, the glow of love. – Is God in the picture? Some still seem to think so.

Voices, numberless, along shores and bridges, on streets and squares. The water’s salt, the salt of the earth. – Is God amongst us? Yes, some still seem to think so.





1. As well as “ember”, the Swedish word knota can mean “bone”.
2. As well as “story”, the Swedish word historia can mean “history”.
3. In the original, this doubly untranslatable phrase amounts to a compound play on words which involves the Swedish expression en svensk tiger (meaning either “a Swedish tiger” or “a Swede keeps silent”), coined for a World War II propagand a campaign meant to foster secrecy towards foreigners, as well as the title of Indian literary theorist Gayatri Spivak’s well-known essay “Can the subaltern speak?”.
4. See above, note 2.