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The Pursuit of Pleasure Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History (1500-1900).

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Peer reviewed

Matthee, Rudi. *The Pursuit of Pleasure Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History (1500-1900)*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

In *The Pursuit of Pleasure* Matthee studies the role of wine, opium, tobacco, tea and coffee during the Safavid and Qajar periods of Iranian history. Through his analysis, he reveals deeper insights into the cultural and social shifts of early modern Iran.

The book is divided into two sections: the first, which includes chapters one through six covers the Safavid period. This portion of the book is especially focuses on wine consumption and production. The second portion (chapters seven through ten) studies the Qajar period and it focuses mainly on the “new stimulants” (coffee and tea) as Iran became more integrated into global trading networks.

The first chapter briefly describes the political structures within Iran during the Safavid and Qajar periods, giving particular attention to important leaders and the struggle for power between secular and religious authority.

The second chapter focuses on the impact of wine in the Safavid period, especially the role it played in courtly life and its slow evolution from a beverage publically flaunted by the Shah to a private one.

Chapter three traces the history on the prohibitions on wine, demonstrating that religious leaders had relatively little power for most of this period, and that bans on alcohol were always designed with a political motivation.

Chapter four discusses opium use, pointing out that unlike wine, opium was commonly used in all strata of society (115) and it was rarely banned by the ruling elites despite its widespread usage and damaging effects.

Chapter five discusses the early spread of tobacco. While secular and religious authorities initially resisted tobacco, they both tempered their criticism when the Shah began to tax tobacco and the clerics began to use it.

Chapter six focuses on the coffee trade and the difficulty that foreign trading companies had in penetrating the Iranian market. It also emphasizes the role that coffeehouses played as social gathering places to discuss politics and culture.

Chapter seven details how the ruling Qajar dynasty attempted to portray an image of sobriety because their source of authority was the protection of the Islamic faith. It continues to show how despite this official attitude, drinking was still practiced and had in fact expanded to the urban poor and came to symbolize resistance to orthodoxy.

Chapter eight explores the role that tobacco and opium played in the Iranian economy, particularly in the conversion of farmland from cereals to cash crops, and in the role of a tobacco concession in the Tobacco Revolt. This chapter also contrasts the increasingly public nature of opium consumption versus the more private nature of tobacco consumption (235) revealing the difference that Iranians perceived between public and private space.

Chapter nine examines the worldwide economic and political changes that caused the Iranians to slowly shift from being a coffee drinking society to a tea drinking society. Matthee, puts special focus on the role that falling prices (due to increased production and competition between importers) played in turning tea from an elite drink to one that even the poor could enjoy.

Chapter ten chronicles the resurgence of coffee houses, which actually served tea at this period. It also details two periods in which the government decided to crack down on coffee houses as sources of

immorality, as well as an entrance point for Western corruption.

Matthee's work was thoroughly researched but it deserved better editing. The author also switches from western to Islamic dates without warning creating unnecessary confusion. Otherwise, this study was highly effective in using an analysis of intoxicants to reveal the deeper values social changes in early modern Iran.

Joshua Lourence¹

¹ The author, being also an editor, recused himself from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.