

Abstract:

This article traces the early stages of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia and examines the relationship between the Chinese pioneers in the region and the opium trade of the British. The article stresses the importance of the “Water Frontier” settlements in the Gulf of Siam and the Malay Peninsula. It suggests that opium changed the relationship between Chinese merchant-capitalists and Chinese laborers in the region and acted as the basis for a long-term partnership between the merchants and the colonial powers with wealthy Chinese merchants acting as opium revenue farmers. In particular, it argues that the peranakan Chinese or locally-born Chinese, particularly those in Singapore and the other Straits Settlements, emerged as the key figures in the opium farming syndicates that grew up in Southeast Asia during the nineteenth century.