

Preparing Opium for America: Hong Kong and Cultural Consumption in the Chinese Diaspora

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This article studies how emigrants' consumption, conditioned by social values and taste transplanted from the home country, affected long distance trade. As tens of thousands of Chinese went to North America, Australia and New Zealand from the time of the Gold Rush, a market for Chinese consumption goods arose, with prepared opium being a leading commodity. Chinese, both at home and abroad, consumed opium by smoking and demanded opium to be boiled in a particular way, As brands prepared in Hong Kong were widely acknowledged as the best, the export trade in Hong Kong's opium to these high-end markets became extremely lucrative. Producers elsewhere resorted to different ploys to get a Hong Kong stamp on their products. The Hong Kong government manipulated different groups of Chinese merchants inside and outside Hong Kong to maximize its revenue from the opium farm, while rival merchant groups sometimes combined to trump the government. The situation not only offers a lesson for the study of state-business relations but also undermines the popular claim that the Hong Kong government practiced *laissez-fairism*. On another level, the study, by highlighting the consumption of one particular commodity, draws attention to the Chinese diaspora as transnational cultural space.