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Fear and Desire: The Opium Den in the Asian Diaspora Constructed as Chinese Space

The 19th century foreign residence restrictions and limitations in China sent foreign missionaries and merchants to the Chinese diaspora of South East Asia and Indonesia. There, Chinese (mostly) merchant communities drew attention from missionaries, merchants, local populations, and colonial authorities. The epitome of Chinese diasporic identity was the opium den, which non-Chinese observers constructed through firsthand accounts, journalist writing and artistic representations. In fact, the attraction of these communities was in many ways their “Chineseness” outside of China, and alongside that both the fear of opium taint and the lure of the exotic in general and opium in particular. On the one hand, the assumption that opium smoking was a pervasive and uniquely Chinese practice tainted these ethnic communities. Outside of China these populations conjured a danger toward local and non-Asian women that was not the case represented by the feminized male Chinese opium smoker of China, in recline. This paper focuses on the contradictory implications and consequences of making the opium den representative of the Chinese diaspora; a place where both fear and desire could be manifested -- in direct contradiction to the feminized opium smoker in China proper who is only hurting himself or his family. Inside China the Chinese female opium smokers are threatening to men, while it is only outside of China that Chinese men are threatening -- and to white women particularly. Without dislodging any perceived associations with opium, and smoking in particular, a contradictory and unassailable construction of Chineseness emerged from the colonized spaces.