

The Business of Addiction: Columbia University's Connection to the Opium Trade

Columbia University & Slavery Seminar
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The tale of the fraught relationship between humans and opium spans the rise and fall of multiple empires, countless actors, and previously unimaginable innovations. This essay sheds light on a fraction of this story. As a product of the Columbia University and Slavery seminar, this paper explores Columbia University's ties to the opium trade. The most immediate of these connections can be located at Low Memorial Library, a structure synonymous with Columbia's prestige and home to core administrative offices. This central building on campus, which houses the administration including the President's office, was funded with money originating from the Opium trade. This exchange played a key role in shaping global capitalism through the euphemistically named "China Trade." The United States capitalized on this exploitative framework to accrue wealth that was foundational to American fiscal and cultural institutions. The colloquially named American "Boston Brahmins" were young men who followed Britain's lead into Guangzhou, China. These young Brahmins were from America's elite Northern families who entered the practice of smuggling opium into China largely through the shipping industry. These American merchants entered "Canton"—the name they gave Guangzhou—and lived lavishly. They developed a taste for Chinese goods and objects—and an aversion to the Chinese themselves. One of these merchants, Abiel Abbot Low—acquired the fortune that his son Seth Low would use to build Columbia University's Low Memorial Library.

Now, this building stands in a central position on campus and holds offices of the highest power and essential campus.¹ The building's namesake, Seth Low, is himself among the most influential presidents of the University. Furthermore, the building is an icon to the longstanding connection to the philanthropic ties to the Sackler Family. Today, the Sackler family played a key role creating Purdue Pharmaceuticals and unleashing the opioid epidemic upon countless Americans. The opium trade created a web of "afterlives," with one significant impact being its

¹ Columbia University Libraries. "Offices of the Presidents." *Rare Book & Manuscript Library Blog*, May 18, 2020. <https://blogs.cul.columbia.edu/rbml/2020/05/18/offices-of-the-presidents/>.

legacy on Chinese Americans in the United States. Additionally, merchants involved in the opium trade often also participated in the slave trade. These trades were deeply interconnected, as consumers in the United States drank tea from Asia financed by Southern cotton using London bills and Chinese opium.² This cyclical pattern raises ethical concerns about the sources of Columbia University's finances.

Opium and Empire

Opium has a long history of fueling empires. The rise of global capitalism coincided with the distribution of opium.³ From the sixteenth to twentieth century, the expansion of Europe relied on drugs such as tobacco, alcohol, and opium.⁴ The birth and expansion of the American Empire was no different. Early on the British East India Company found opium to be a valuable commodity.

Europeans first ventured into Asia in search of spices. The scope of the word “spice” has a large breadth at first encompassing nutmeg and cloves, after that cacao and sugar were in high demand – then tea, and finally, opium. In addition to spices, there was a keen European interest in Asian goods such as silks and China. Before opium, there was a historic flow of goods from Asia into Europe. There was a bullion deficit– meaning historically, Europe had always desired to purchase more from Asia than they could sell to Asian markets. Items like ginseng and furs were demanded from Europe yet at some point the market would become satiated. Additionally, goods such as sealskins and beaver skins were capped at the carrying capacity of the

² Norwood, Dael. *Trading Freedom: How Commerce with China Defined Early America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 111.

³ Zieger, Susan. "Opium and Logistical Nightmares." *English Language Notes* 60, no. 1 (2022): 122-138. muse.jhu.edu/article/856823, 122.

⁴ Trocki, C. (1999). *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy: A Study of the Asian Opium Trade 1750-1950* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203601532>, 8.

environment. Opium was revolutionary because not only did Britain have a near-endless supply, but it was a good that created an insatiable appetite.

The staggering amount of money made from opium allowed for the development of a system of powerful merchant houses, banks, and insurance companies. Opium became one of the first widely commercialized products. The pools of capital earned from the opium trade led to the standardization of fiscal relations and commercial land and labor.⁵ Yet, these systems were unequal; they were built upon colonialism and exploitation. British merchants and banks made fortunes out of Chinese addiction establishing the structure of racial capitalism.⁶

The infant United States of America turned to the lucrative “China Trade” to repair deep economic wounds from the Revolutionary War. Independence came at a high price, and the United States Continental Congress was deeply in debt on top of the nation's staggering loss of property and lives. The Articles of Confederation lacked the power to establish systems to tax and trade with other nations. American elites hedged their bets on an economic hail mary—pursuing the “China trade” or “East Indies trade.” This risk proved fruitful, from 1790 onward, the China Trade provided much-needed commercial profit. Additionally, the success spurred diplomatic power and national pride—leading the first federal Congress to continue to encourage trade with the establishment of special tariff and drawback provisions.⁷

The Boston Brahmins

The American merchants that traveled to China became the closest counterparts to an American Aristocracy. These merchants largely hailed from the privileged white settler families—

⁵ Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy*, 9.

⁶ Laster Pirtle WN. Racial Capitalism: A Fundamental Cause of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic Inequities in the United States. *Health Educ Behav*. 2020 Aug;47(4):504-508. doi: 10.1177/1090198120922942. Epub 2020 Apr 26. PMID: 32338071; PMCID: PMC7301291.

⁷ Norwood, Dael A.. *Trading Freedom: How Trade with China Defined Early America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.7208/chicago/9780226815596,17,34>.

those who had British ancestry and settled early in the Northeast. This “Brahmin Class” of Americans benefited from elite educations still recognizable today—Phillips Academy Andover, Phillips Exeter Academy, Boston Latin School, followed by a university degree at Yale, Harvard, or Brown.⁸ The merchants that found their fortunes in Canton had family names that remain recognizable today as pillars of cultural and fiscal institutions. Peabody, Brown, Delano, Coolidge, Forbes, Russell Perkins, Bryants, and Low: all participated in the smuggling of opium into China.⁹ Their class and race, however, shielded these merchants from the social stigmas associated with extracting a fortune from exploitation.

Perhaps the merchant’s experience in the “floating city” in China played a role in shaping these merchants’ expensive tastes. As Americans became more familiar with China, they realized it was more effective to stay in China, becoming “Resident Merchant.”¹⁰ Their life in China was as carefully curated as the American-made name “Canton” they had given to the area of Guangzhou where they were staying. Before the First Opium War (1839–42) destroyed it, the “Canton system” was a series of ports along the Pearl River Delta that allowed a flourishing of American trading houses and ships.¹¹

By the 1820’s all the dominant American trade firms relied on resident merchants in Canton. Life for these men could be characterized as “upholstered comfort.” They lived lavishly—wine flowed freely, they bathed in earthenware tubs encrusted with dragons, and their beds were engraved with their family helms.¹² Yet, they were relegated to a small southwestern enclave of Guangzhou away from the people of China. On a small strip of land no longer than a

⁸ Ghosh, Amitav. *Smoke And Ashes: Opium's Hidden Histories*. United Kingdom: John Murray Press, 2024, 170.

⁹ Ghosh, A. (2024). *Smoke And Ashes: Opium's Hidden Histories*. United Kingdom: John Murray Press.

¹⁰ Norwood, Dael A.. *Trading Freedom: How Trade with China Defined Early America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.7208/chicago/9780226815596,60>.

¹¹ Norwood, *Trading Freedom*, 2.

¹² Downs, Jacques M., and JR Frederic D. Grant. *The Golden Ghetto: The American Commercial Community at Canton and the Shaping of American China Policy, 1784-1844*. 1 ed., Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, HKU, 2014. muse.jhu.edu/book/35841, 38.

quarter mile, the Thirteen Factories”— the buildings in which the merchants resided and conducted business— were housed. Foreigners were not allowed to bring their wives or children with them and were only allowed to reside during the trading season. Thus, Chinese authorities clearly intended to ensure that these American traders did not establish a permanent presence in Guangzhou.

Though the fantastical presence of American “Canton” was temporary, the actions of these American traders would be felt for generations in China. Though their Protestant backgrounds and upper-crust status protected their image back home, it is undeniable that these merchants were directly involved in distributing opium into China, supervising the sale of chests full of opium to Chinese smugglers. Some, like Robert Bennett Forbes, spent so much time smuggling opium into the holds of ships that he fell ill because of the “effluvia of opium.”¹³

Sackler Family

The Sackler family led Purdue Pharmaceuticals, the company that created OxyContin, an opioid painkiller. Initially intended as a painkiller, the drug quickly led to widespread abuse and addiction, sparking the ongoing opioid epidemic in the United States. Purdue Pharma faces over 2,500 lawsuits for misleading the public about the drug's addictive nature.¹⁴ Today, opioid overdoses have claimed more American lives than car accidents or gunshot wounds.¹⁵ Many argue that this tremendous toll is the result of the terrible choices made by one family dynasty.¹⁶ Arthur Sackler, one of the patriarchs of the Sackler dynasty, created a close philanthropic relationship with Columbia University by initiating donations there before even his alma mater, New York University. In 1959, Arthur Sackler arranged for the "Sackler Gift" to support the

¹³ Ghosh, *Smoke and Ashes*, 197, 201.

¹⁴ Keefe, Patrick Radden. *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty*. New York: Anchor, 2021, 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶ Keefe, *Empire of Pain*, 7.

study of East Asian studies. He also envisioned the "Sackler Fund," which would support research and the acquisition of new objects to be added to the "Sackler Collection".¹⁷ Columbia University became essential in branding the Sackler family as established and wealthy, rather than the "self-made" new money perception that Arthur Sackler despised.¹⁸ Arthur Sackler was deliberate about how the public perceived these gifts—no photos or press were announced with these donations. As historian Patrick Radden Keefe commented, Arthur sought "prosperity, not publicity".¹⁹ However, this approach shifted over time. With advice from his personal attorney, Michael Sonnenreich, Sackler became more insistent on the visibility of the Sackler name within Columbia University. He dreamt of building the "Sackler Museum" on campus and proposed installing a plaque in Low Library to recognize the Sackler Collection and memorialize his father, Isaac Sackler.²⁰

Have They No Conscience?

Opium not only erected physical structures such as Low Library but cultural constructs as well, including ones that shaped Columbia in no less meaningful ways. The legacy of the opium trade was both cultural and physical. As early as the 1840s, opium and its symptoms of "vice" became racialized with the Chinese in America. These racialization's appeared in many forms of media and became grounds for xenophobia and racism.

In evaluating the legacies of these "American Dynasty Families," it is unavoidable that the question of culpability arises. "Is this just 'business as usual?'" Perhaps these young men simply did not realize the ramifications of their actions. However, the argument that the traders were unaware of the implications of the drug they were trading holds no credence. Well before

¹⁷ Keefe, *Empire of Pain*, 82.

¹⁸ Keefe, *Empire of Pain*, 83.

¹⁹ Ibid., 83.

²⁰ Keefe, *Empire of Pain*, 85.

the nineteenth century, both European and American medical scholars demonstrated an understanding of the impact of opium. It was a well-known fact that it was addictive and detrimental to the body. Furthermore, the moral qualms that some traders expressed was evidence of their awareness of their corrupt behavior. Some tried to rationalize their actions with justifications such as Robert Bennet Forbes wrote in a letter to his wife Rose Forbes he thought it was, “it was rarely used in excess” or it was a “necessary product” for the Chinese. In 1839, Captain Ben Forbes of the Forbes family wrote to his wife Rose that the opium he had brought into the country had been “much less deleterious effect on the whole countryside than the vile liquor made of rice called ‘samshue.’”²¹ Yet, within the same year he wrote to her again saying that “perhaps Providence took away my fortune because I made it in Opium. What I make this time will be free from that stain.” Perhaps, the guilt from this “stain” followed him to the grave. In 1882—the same year that the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed—in his *Reminiscences* he wrote “the only inscription I desire on my gravestone is ‘he tried to do his duty.’”²²

Not all the American Merchants in Canton carried the same guilt as Ben Forbes. Historian Jacques Downs theorizes that while in Canton the merchants developed “racially motivated resentment, fear, and disdain” towards the Chinese.²³ Within Canton, underlying hostility to the residents of China outside of the “floating city” created a solidarity between the foreign residents.²⁴

Each of the American men who entered Canton for business bore responsibility for the devastating impacts of the opium trade. Collectively, these merchants worked to enhance a

²¹ Forbes, Robert Benet. "Letter from Robert Bennet Forbes to Rose Forbes." February 27, 1839. Forbes House Museum, Forbes House Museum, <https://www.forbeshousemuseum.org/digital-opium-exhibit/>.

²² Forbes, Robert Benet. "Letter from Robert Bennet Forbes to Rose Forbes." February 27, 1839. Forbes House Museum, Forbes House Museum, <https://www.forbeshousemuseum.org/digital-opium-exhibit/>.

²³ Downs, Jacques M., and JR Frederic D. Grant. *The Golden Ghetto: The American Commercial Community at Canton and the Shaping of American China Policy, 1784-1844*. 1 ed., Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, HKU, 2014. muse.jhu.edu/book/35841,339.

²⁴ Downs, *The Golden Ghetto*, 52.

system they knew was immoral. Each trader protected and promoted the business of opium at the expense of the Chinese.²⁵ Far from home and public knowledge, these men perpetuated a system that destroyed countless nonwhite Lives, both in India where the opium was produced and in China where it was consumed, to enrich just a few.

The Low Family

The first Low to enter Canton was William Henry Low. He arrived in Canton to work for the prominent American trading firm Russell & Co. when he was twenty-three. His business endeavors were wildly? successful– in approximately two years he had already made approximately a million in today’s dollars.²⁶ Yet, in a case of tragic irony, Low suffered from sunburn and was prescribed laudanum– an opiate to which he became addicted.²⁷ His brother sent him on a voyage aboard the *Akbar* in hopes that he would become well. As the ship approached the New York Harbor he jumped overboard and subsequently drowned. At twenty-nine, he left his head trading post to his nephew, Abiel Abbot Low.²⁸

Abiel Abbot Low was born to a well-established merchant family in Salem, Massachusetts. Like many elite Salem men, Low attended Harvard and worked as a clerk for an import-export firm in Massachusetts.²⁹ A. A Low worked as a partner at Russell & Co., for eight years, from 1833 to 1841. He returned to the United States to find his trading house A. A Low & Brothers, which became a leading firm in the China Trade.³⁰

²⁵ Trocki, C. (1999). *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy*, 161.

²⁶ Le Pichon, Alain. “William Henry Low’s Canton Trades: Reading of a Letter by a Young American Merchant about His Work in Canton, 1840-1841.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 49 (2009): 105–25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23891837>.

²⁷ Le Pichon, *William Henry Low*, 120.

²⁸ Le Pichon, *William Henry Low*, 121.

²⁹ Ghosh, Amitav. *Smoke And Ashes: Opium's Hidden Histories*. United Kingdom: John Murray Press, 2024,195.

³⁰ Holloway, Laura C, 1848-1930. *Famous American Fortunes and the Men Who Have Made Them*, Philadelphia: Bradley & Co., 1884, 416.

A.A. Low had a son, Seth Low, named after Abiel's late father. Seth Low served as mayor of New York from 1902–1903 before the trustees selected him as Columbia's eleventh president. During his administration, Low oversaw the college move from Midtown to an eighteen-acre plot in Morningside Heights. He employed the architectural firm McKim, Mead, and White to design the new campus at the site of the former Bloomingdale Asylum. Financing the new campus was difficult as the purchase of the Morningside Heights plot meant there was only enough money to build incrementally. Seth Low himself gave a million dollars of his late father's fortune to build a library at the center of the campus. Named in to memorialize Abiel Abbot Low, Columbia's Low Library was erected.³¹



They washed their hands of red

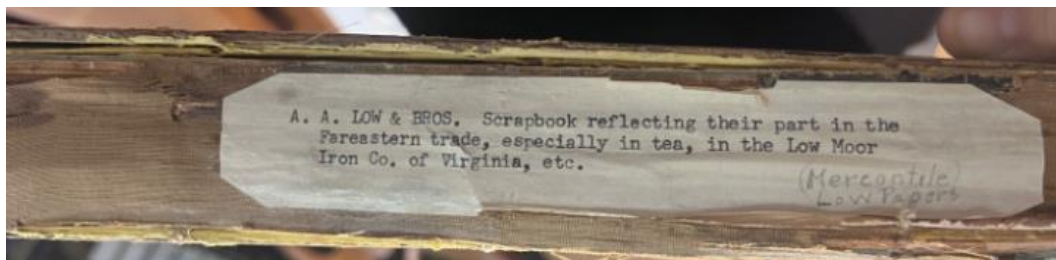
There were several reasons that upon their return to the US, the American Canton merchants quickly invested their fortunes into railroads. Logistically, the traders had experience with managing large-scale projects and their imperial successes in Canton likely inspired similar domestic pursuits. Perhaps it was also a means of whitewashing their fortunes from any association with the stigma of both Chinese and opium. Regardless of their motivations, the tragedy that American merchants conducted in Canton resulted in their return home with a strengthened faith in America's manifest destiny.

The discussions of a road to the "East" were built off ideologies that had long been in the discourse of the American Frontier. This nationalist project had been floated a few times by

³¹ "CONSTRUCTING COLUMBIA," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, November 12, 2009, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs20091112-02.2.3&srpos=1&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-Abiel+Abbot+Low+Andrew+Dolkart----->.

various investors but because of the scale of the project had never been brought to fruition.³² The return of the Canton merchants with newfound fiscal power brought fresh resolve to the project. A vanguard of the project, Asa Whitney, a former “China trader,” stood before Congress and proposed that a railroad bridging America would “unleash a flood of light, life, and liberty, which would spread over, enlighten, and enliven the heathenism of all Asia.” This time, Whitney’s timing was perfect– the Polk administration was expanding the nation through bloodshed, opening more territory for the proposed railroad to cover. ³³ Ultimately, the birth of the transcontinental railroad welded together ideas of trade, imperialism, and technology into the framework of the American empire.

Among the opium traders that invested in the railroad were the Forbes clan, who bought complete control of the Michigan Central railroad, and John Cleve Green, Forbes’s co-worker in Canton and large benefactor to Princeton University. ³⁴ The Low family also invested in American infrastructure through the Low Moor Iron Company. The New York Public Library Archive holds a scrapbook from the Low Family that chronicles various accounts of the Low family’s involvement in both the “China Trade” and the railroad business.



³² Norwood, *Trading Freedom*, 99.

³³ Norwood, *Trading Freedom*, 100–102.

³⁴ Ghosh, *Smoke and Ashes*, 186.

Memos detailing the finances of the Low Moor Iron Company are signed by “Treasurer? A. A. Low.” Other documents signed by “Edwd A. Low, ” likely Edward Allen Low, suggest that the involvement in business was a family affair. The analysis of the Low family's involvement in the iron and railroad business as well as the construction of Low Library stands not to frame these actions as inherently evil, but rather, to show the depth in which money from the opium trade in Canton has been embedded into the framework of America.

Racializing the Chinese with “Vice”

Two distinct profiles emerged from opium. One was the white philanthropic merchant, as epitomized by Abiel Abbot Low. The second was the proliferation of the “vice-ridden Chinaman”—or as the New York Times printed over 4,000 times, the “Heathen Chinees.”³⁵ The Boston Brahmins who made their fortunes trading opium in Canton, China returned to New York with monetary and political influence. In addition, they arrived expressing strong anti-Chinese rhetoric.³⁶ Their rhetoric intertwined with xenophobic and racist sentiments that were particularly loud within the labor movement.³⁷ As opposition towards Chinese immigration intensified, attitudes toward opium began to change. Smoking opium became largely associated with the Chinese laborers and quickly became a scapegoat to substantiate calls for the ousting of the Chinese.³⁸

These sentiments were brought into political discourse in 1848 when the California Gold Rush led to an influx of Chinese immigrants who settled in communities referred to as

³⁵ *TimesMachine - The New York Times*. Accessed December 8, 2023. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/browser>

³⁶ Ghosh, A. (2024). *Smoke And Ashes: Opium's Hidden Histories*. United Kingdom: John Murray Press.

³⁷ Lee, Erika. "The Chinese exclusion example: Race, immigration, and American gatekeeping, 1882-1924." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 21, no. 3 (2002): 36.

³⁸ Brown, Richard Harvey. “The Opium Trade and Opium Policies in India, China, Britain, and the United States: Historical Comparisons and Theoretical Interpretations.” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 30, no. 3 (2002): 623–56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23654609>, 639.

Chinatowns. An increasingly competitive labor market, raising fears of “yellow peril,” the fear that the Chinese carried disease, and Chinatowns becoming associated with vice: all led to the institution of statewide immigration policies.³⁹ Fear over a perceived “Chinese Invasion” in both a cultural and economic sense swept through California. Political opinions such as H.N Clement’s were heard around the county. Clement stood before the California State Senate Committee and called out: “The Chinese are upon us? How can we get rid of them?”⁴⁰ The response came on May 6th, 1882, when Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. It prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers for the next ten years and barred the Chinese from attaining naturalized citizenship. This watershed act became the first in United States history to ban a group of people based on race and class alone.⁴¹ In addition to blatantly banning the Chinese from America, legislators quietly drafted 'anti-opium' laws with similar intentions. The birth of anti-opium legislation in America was more accurately concerned with expelling the Chinese than the toxicity of opium. Thus, when opium smoking was banned in 1909, so were the Chinese.⁴²

Edward Said asserted that “Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through.”⁴³ In the 19th and early 20th century New York, the popular “yellowface” theater was a medium that the Chinese were seen “through” and not “looked at.” Yellowface theater— the practice of white actors dressing up as Asian characters to portray exotic curiosities, villains, and fools— dominated the portrayal of Asian Americans. In New York City, yellowface theater promoted crude social and cultural stereotypes about Chinese Americans. Furthermore, it allowed these stereotypes to take up a physical embodiment. White actors oftentimes used

³⁹Sabharwal, M.; Becerra, A.; Oh, S. From the Chinese Exclusion Act to the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Historical Analysis of “Otherness” Experienced by Asian Americans in the United States.

⁴⁰ Lee, Erika. "The Chinese exclusion example: Race, immigration, and American gatekeeping, 1882-1924." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 21, no. 3 (2002): 36.

⁴¹ Ibid.,37

⁴² Brown, *Opium Trade and Opium Politics*, 641.

⁴³ Edward W. Said. 1979. *Orientalism*. Vol. First Vintage books edition. New York: Vintage, 207.

racialized stereotypes to inform the makeup they applied to represent the Chinese characters. Oftentimes tape or latex appliances were added to the eyes to make a mockery of monolids. Speaking to the widespread occurrence of this racist process— the yellow-tinted greasepaint, No. 16, was colloquially known as “Chinese.”⁴⁴

The most beloved of these plays was “A Trip to Chinatown (1892),” which held the title for longest-running Broadway musical with a tenure of thirty years.⁴⁵ The song “Chinatown, My Chinatown” took on a life outside of the play. It became a jazz standard played by Louis Armstrong, Billy Murray, and other jazz greats. At first glance, the lyrics are seemingly innocuous—

*Chinatown, my Chinatown,
Where the lights are low,
Hearts that know no other land,
Drifting to and fro,
Dreamy, dreamy Chinatown,
Almond eyes of brown,
Hearts seem light and life seems bright
In dreamy Chinatown*

Yet, analyzed through the lens of the context that it was released in— late 19th century Chinatown, these lyrics tell a different story. The lyrics “Drifting to and fro” reference a common racial epithet against the Chinese at this time— “opium fiend.” The phrases “seem light” and “see bright” characterize the Chinese as high from smoking opium creating a “dreamy” Chinatown. As early as the 1840’s, smoking opium had been racialized as “Chinese Vice.”⁴⁶ This sentiment appeared in New York City guidebooks, and newspapers, and was written into

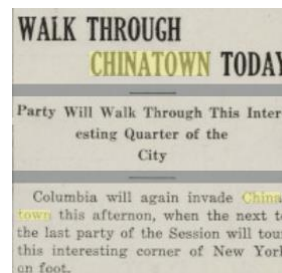
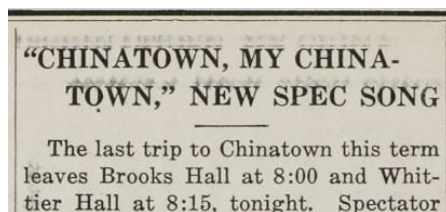
⁴⁴Lee, Josephine. "Yellowface Performance: Historical and Contemporary Contexts." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. 25 Feb. 2019; Accessed 7 Dec. 2023.

<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-834>.

⁴⁵ Garrett, Charles Hiroshi, 'Chinatown, Whose Chinatown? Defining America's Borders with Musical Orientalism', *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century* (Oakland, CA, 2008; online edn, California Scholarship Online, 24 May 2012)

⁴⁶ Garrett, Charles Hiroshi, 'Chinatown, Whose Chinatown? Defining America's Borders with Musical Orientalism', *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century* (Oakland, CA, 2008; online edn, California Scholarship Online, 24 May 2012)

the medical canon with the 1868 text *The Opium Habit*. This book taught both physicians and the public that opium could not intoxicate Europeans, however, it “seems to habitually intoxicate the Oriental.”⁴⁷ These sentiments reached students in upper Manhattan— in 1902, *The Columbia Daily Spectator* ran a promotion for students to go see the play *A Trip To Chinatown*.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Chinatown, My Chinatown, was boasted as a “New Spec Song.”



The 1899 Broadway melodrama *The Queen of Chinatown* followed the story of a heroic Lieutenant Harry Hildreth who comes to rescue his sister after she is drugged and kidnapped by the Chinese man “Breezie.” The poster depicts racialized versions of the Chinese— wearing “peasants clothes” with elongated eyes and a queue— a traditional braided hairstyle that was not common in 1890’s Chinatown.⁴⁹ The setting is an opium den, with smoke billowing from several opium pipes. Standing apart from these details are three young white women wearing pink, two of them strewn out on beds high on opium and the other standing frightened by the door. To many white New Yorkers, this scene depicted the true peril of opium— a substance that facilitated racial mixing and sexual transgressions with the Chinese.⁵⁰ White women who entered

⁴⁷The Opium Habit, Library of Congress. Accessed December 8, 2023. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcmassbookdig.opiumhabitwithsu00newy/?sp=16&st=image&r=-1.382,-0.04,3.764,1.804,0>

⁴⁸ “A trip to Chinatown,” Promotion, March 1902, *Columbia Spectator*, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19020318-01.2.45.2&srpos=4&e=-----en-20--1-byDA-txt-txIN-Chinatown----->

⁴⁹ Godley, Michael R. “The End of the Queue: Hair as Symbol in Chinese History.” *East Asian History*, no. 8 (1994): 53–72. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/ielapa.961009528>.

⁵⁰ Lui, Mary Ting Yi. *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and Other Dangerous Encounters in Turn-of-the-Century New York City*. United States: Princeton University Press, 2020

Chinatown and engaged with the Chinese posed a tremendous threat to the racial and social hierarchy of late 19th and early 20th century New York.

As Said's definition of orientalism encapsulated, the "Orientals" were still being "conquered," this time, by Columbia students.⁵¹ In August 1915 *The Columbia Daily Spectator* wrote "Columbia will again invade Chinatown this afternoon" in an advertisement for a chaperoned walking tour.⁵² Although most likely intended metaphorically, this line rings painfully true.

Conclusion

The American-made name "Canton" represents a palatable legacy of American entrepreneurship without exploitation, addiction, or imperialism. The opium trade scaffolded the beginnings of systemic opiate addiction that continues to haunt society. This crisis was exacerbated by the actions of the Sackler family, who used philanthropy to create strong ties to Columbia University. Canton traders were driven by the pursuit of profit, political power, and perceived moral superiority. To achieve this, they invested in physical and cultural symbols that showcased their presumed superiority and, by extension, the inferiority of the Chinese. Cities in the United States named Canton, buildings like the Low Memorial Library, and the transcontinental railroad serve as reminders of the rewards Americans reaped from exploitative business practices in China.

⁵¹ Edward W. Said. 1979. *Orientalism*. Vol. First Vintage books edition. New York: Vintage, 207.

⁵² "Once again will invade Chinatown," *Columbia Spectator*, August 2, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19150802-01.2.4&srpos=19&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-Chinatown----->.

The widespread impact of the Canton traders' derogatory rhetoric appeared in the depiction of the Chinese in the American media. Yellowface theater portrayed Asian characters within racist racial hierarchies, feeding into the narrative of the 'heathen' Chinese that was widely used as grounds for Chinese Exclusion. In contrast, the Canton traders attempted to solidify their narratives in history as simply philanthropic, morally just businessmen.

The opium traders used their privilege of race, class, and monetary power to whitewash the origins of their fortune, staining the image of Chinese Americans in the process. Wong Chin Foo, a late 19th-century Chinese civil rights activist, wrote words that have held relevance through time. Describing American ideology, he stated: “Do unto others as you wish they would do unto you,” or “Love your neighbor as yourself,” is the great Divine law which Christians and heathen alike hold, but which the Christians ignore. This is what keeps me the heathen I am!”⁵³

⁵³ Foo, Wong Chin. “Why Am I a Heathen?” *The North American Review* 145, no. 369 (1887): 179. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25101276>.

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