

Document 4.11: “A Voyage with Opium Smugglers” by William Hunter, between 1825 and 1844

In 1824, William Hunter first sailed to Guangzhou out of New York aboard the Citizen as a supercargo. He was responsible for the business end of the voyage. In his book he gave extensive details of the trading system and social, commercial, and domestic lives of the participants in the China trade prior to the Opium Wars.

Although during the southwest monsoon little general business went on, transactions in opium were very active. It was the period when the new drug arrived. Sales were made to brokers for cash (only) against orders on the receiving ships. The orders would be sent down by “smug boats,” which carried the opium to its several destinations....

On delivery of the opium, the receiving ships were paid five dollars per chest, which was called *cumsha* (literally “gold sand”)¹, and two dollars per chest...if the order was not presented within several days....

Needless to say, the opium trade was prohibited by Imperial edicts as well [as] by proclamations of the Guangzhou authorities. The Chinese who dealt in “foreign mud” [opium] were threatened even with capital punishment, but so perfect a system of bribery existed (with which foreigners had nothing whatever to do) that the business was carried on with ease and regularity....

Opium was never found for sale in Chinese shops in Guangzhou. Nor were there any signs by which one could judge where it was prepared for sale or for smoking, it being used in no other form....

As an opportunity offered to get a practical experience of this trade, which was carried on with all the secrecy possibly by the few engaged in it, I [decided] to take a run up to

¹ A fee to bribe officials

Namao². We owned at the time a Boston clipper schooner called the *Rose*, which, in 1837, was leaving for [Namao] with a quantity of opium sold at Guangzhou for delivery there, and an additional number of chests to try to market. The whole cargo consisted of nearly 300 chests of the Guangzhou value of about \$300,000.³...

We made sail and started with a moderate southwest monsoon.... The weather proved delightful, the wind steady, and the sea smooth.... We had no sooner furled sails and made everything shipshape when "His Excellency" approached.... When [cigars] and a glass of wine had been offered, the "Commodore" inquired the cause of our anchoring.... The [captain] gave him to understand that the vessel, being on her way from Singapore to Guangzhou, had been compelled, through contrary winds and currents, to run for Namao to replenish her wood and water.

[The Chinese official anticipated this explanation and pulled an official edict from his boot that his secretary read aloud:]

AN IMPERIAL EDICT

As the port of Guangzhou is the only one at which outside barbarians are allowed to trade, on no account can they be permitted to wander about to other places in the "Middle Kingdom" [China]. The "Son of Heaven," [the emperor] however, whose compassion is as boundless as the ocean, cannot deny to those who are in distress from want of food, through adverse seas and currents, the necessary means of continuing their voyage. When supplied they must no longer loiter, but depart at once. Respect this!

The [official and his secretary] were then invited to the cabin to refresh, which being done, we proceeded to business. The Mandarin [official] opened by the direct questions, "How many chests have you on board? Are they all for Namao? Do you go further up the coast?"... Then came the question of [the bribe], and that was settled on the good old

² A small island off the coast of China

³ This amount would have the purchasing power of \$6,524,000 in 2006. <http://eh.net/hmit/>

Chinese principle (that customs in such matters are the same everywhere). Everything being thus comfortably arranged, wine drunk, and [cigars] smoked, His Excellency said: “I announce my departure.”...

Chinese buyers came on board freely the moment they saw the “official” visit had been made. A day or two after, several merchant junks [sailed toward them]. As they approached we distinguished a private signal at their mastheads, a copy of which had been furnished to us.... We hoisted ours, the junks anchored close to us, and in a surprisingly short time received from the *Rose* ... the opium which had been sold at Guangzhou, and there paid for, deliverable at this anchorage.... [The opium] had been already packed in bags, marked and numbered....

Source: Hunter, W.C. *The “Fan Kwae”⁴ at Canton Before Treaty Days, 1825–1844*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Company, 1882. 64–70. Reprinted in Kublin, Hyman, ed., *China: Selected Readings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968. 117–120.

⁴ *Fan Kwae* is another Chinese word for “barbarian,” a foreigner, someone not literate in Chinese.