

# Opium and gambling houses as places of sociability

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There have been recently an obvious interest for places of sociability in the urban studies of the late Qing and Republican period. Some scholars have convincingly argued about the key role of tea houses and brothels. At stake was the viability of the Habermas concept of public sphere in a Chinese context.

On the contrary, the role of opium houses and gambling dens as places of sociability have so far been underestimated for two main reasons. First, no dedicated studies of these establishments exist. Second, these place, to say the least, have been kept in low esteem. They were supposed to be stuffy, dirty and unsightly rooms hidden in backstreets, and mostly patronized by shady characters. My paper will take the example of 1930s Canton to show that there were different categories of gambling and opium houses and that only a portion of them could be fairly described as gloomy and dangerous places.

Besides their obvious mission of providing a space for table gambling games like the famous *fantan* or the consumption of opium, these places were strategic venues in terms of local sociability. In particular, it is incorrect to imagine customers of the opium houses taking their drug separately there and then reclining on their couches in a stupor. Actually, opium houses were commonly patronized by small groups of friends during their leisure time or by colleagues after a day of work. During and after the time they were smoking, these people used to chat together or with other habitués.