

THE 19TH-CENTURY CHINESE DIASPORA AND A TRANSPACIFIC SALT FISH FOODSCAPE

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In the 19th century, more than 2.5 million people migrated from China to places throughout the world. This process was the catalyst for multi-directional flows of people, things, money, and ideas that maintained connections between Chinese home villages and diaspora communities abroad. Food played a central role in these flows, and diaspora communities localized their foodways by combining imported foods from China with locally available ones and by transplanting Chinese crops and food production techniques. Foodways in the diaspora responded to social and political pressures abroad and to consumer demand in China, as Chinese food industries sold to both the diaspora and the larger markets of China itself.

I leverage the notion of foodscapes to explore the multiple flows between Chinese diaspora communities and home villages in China. I use fish data from Chinese archaeological sites in the American West as a case study to show how Chinese diaspora foodways were tied to local, regional, and global flows through the multi-directional movement of Chinese-produced salt fish. The trade of this ingredient, ubiquitous at Chinese archaeological sites in North America, was impacted by Chinese taste preferences, importation of Chinese fishing technologies, racist anti-Chinese legislation, and market demand in China. I use data from urban and rural North American Chinese contexts including the kinds of fish present, their relative abundance, and their fisheries of origin to highlight the existence of a transpacific salt fish foodscape, and I explore its implications in understanding the broader relationships between Chinese communities abroad and at home.

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