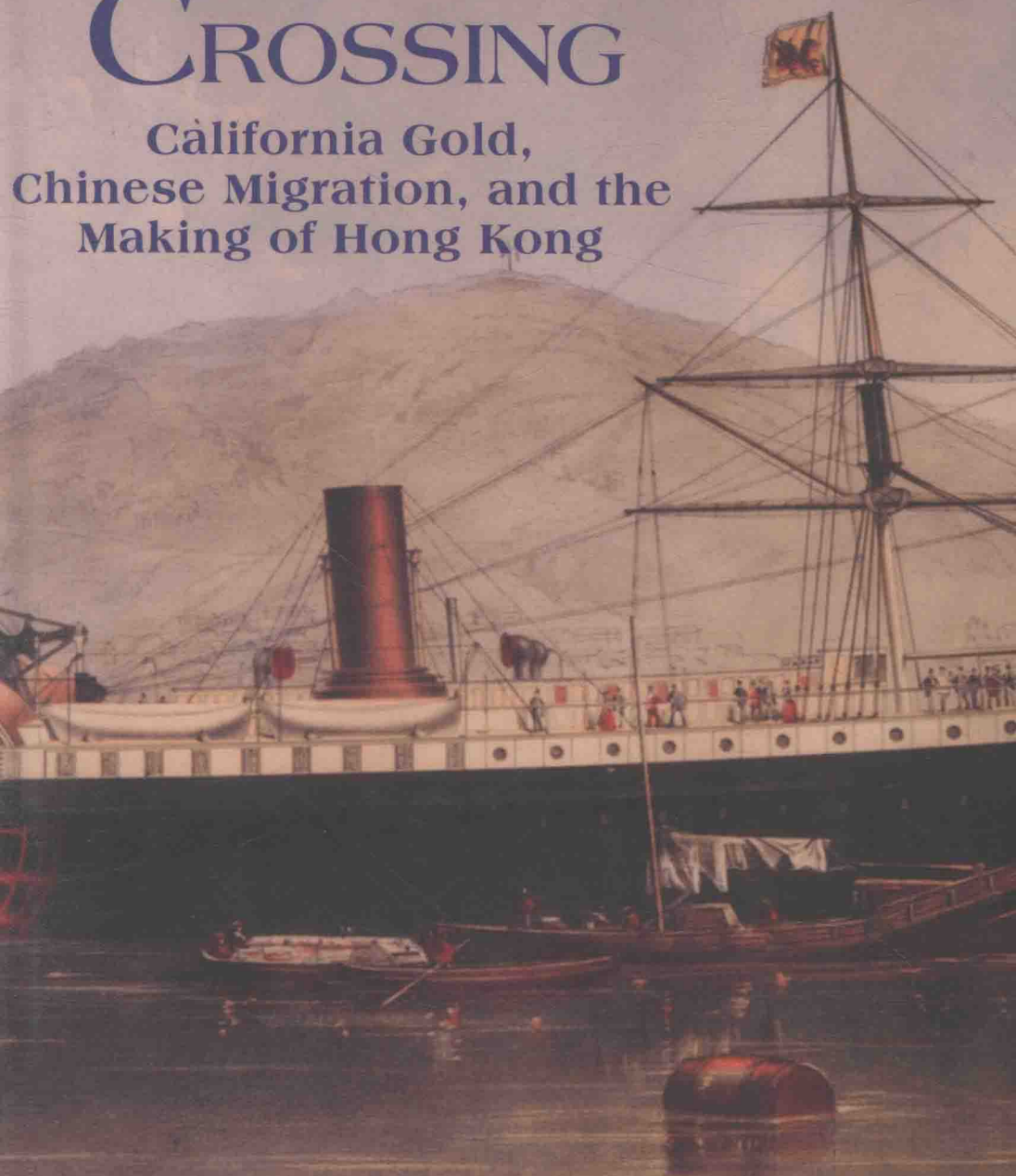


PACIFIC CROSSING

California Gold,
Chinese Migration, and the
Making of Hong Kong



Elizabeth Sinn

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Note on Romanization

It is impossible to standardize the romanization of Chinese names. Names of persons, institutions, and places are romanized in the way they most frequently appear in contemporary Western-language documents. The pinyin system is applied to the rest.

Note on Currencies and Weights

Currencies

Several currencies circulated in Hong Kong during the nineteenth century. Silver Mexican and Spanish dollars (of roughly equal value) were the most common for the purpose of trade. US gold dollars also circulated, but to a lesser extent, and they were generally less valuable than the Mexican dollar; from 1873, a US silver trade dollar was specially minted for the China market and became extremely popular in the Hong Kong region, but it was withdrawn by the federal government in 1887.

Hong Kong government accounts were kept, and civil servants paid, in sterling until 1862 when the Hong Kong silver dollar came into being; the latter was valued on a par with the Mexican dollar. Other currencies included East India Company rupees and Chinese silver taels and copper cash. Western companies kept accounts in dollars while Chinese merchants as a rule kept accounts among themselves in silver taels. Migrants returning from overseas exchanged in Hong Kong whatever currencies they had into silver taels for use in China.

Despite fluctuations, for most of the period under discussion in this book, one Mexican/Hong Kong dollar equaled around 4 shillings and tuppence (2 pennies) and 0.72–0.75 taels of silver. One pound equaled \$4.80 and around 3.45 taels of silver. The standard American dollar, though nominally at par with the Mexican dollar, was often traded at a discount, sometimes at as much as US\$1.20 to one Mexican dollar. The American trade dollar, which had a higher silver content, was more likely to have traded at par with the Mexican dollar.

Weights

1 tael = 1.33 oz (37.42 grams)

16 taels = 1 catty (1.3 lbs/600 grams)

100 catties = 1 picul (133.33 pounds/60 kilograms)

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Introduction

The California Gold Rush, one of the most momentous events in nineteenth-century world history, changed Hong Kong's destiny in many ways.

The discovery of gold at Sutter's mill, 75 miles from San Francisco, on January 24, 1848—almost seven years to the day after Hong Kong's occupation by the British in 1841 and five years after it formally became a British colony—set off a remarkable migration movement: within a relatively short time span, tens of thousands of people flooded into California, coming not only from the East Coast of the United States but from different parts of the world, including Mexico, Chile, Europe, Turkey, China, and Australia. By 1852, the population of San Francisco, which was just 459 in 1847, had grown to 36,154.¹ The volume of trade rose. Between 1849 and 1851, over 1,000 ships called at San Francisco,² bringing not only people but also goods to feed and clothe the migrants and to build the rapidly growing city. Half a million tons of cargo were discharged between 1849 and 1856.³ The city was not only a growing import market of free-spending consumers but soon, with the increasing number of entrepreneurs and gold as capital to fuel commercial ventures, it developed into an entrepôt on a global scale. The impact was immense. Whereas the world's major trading zone had hitherto stretched westward from China, Southeast Asia, India, the Middle East, Europe, and across the Atlantic to the East Coast of the United States, San Francisco's thriving maritime trade transformed the Pacific from a peripheral trade zone to a nexus of world trade.⁴ The Pacific century had arrived.⁵

This major shift in the global economy had far-reaching consequences for Hong Kong. Though the city fronted on to the Pacific, the ocean had hitherto been of only minimal interest to it. Its main *raison d'être*, as far as the British

were concerned, was to serve as an entrepôt for its trade with China. It was presumed that goods from Britain and India would be stored and sold at the new colony and Chinese goods would be exported from it. Hong Kong's existence was to augment rather than change the old trade pattern; the main routes were still along the coast of the China Sea, down through Southeast Asia, through the Indian Ocean and onward to Europe. One development, probably unforeseen, was the role Hong Kong played in the regional trade—both coastal and riverine—between north and south China, which would later extend into Southeast Asia as well. In the 1850s, this south–north trade (*nanbei* trade, known locally as Nam Pak trade), increasingly pivoted on Hong Kong, was to grow immensely, and the east–west California trade was to act as an important catalyst for this growth. For the moment, however, as far as being part of the global trading system was concerned, the oceans that were most relevant to Hong Kong were the Indian and the Atlantic, *not* the Pacific.

The gold rush transformed the Pacific into a highway linking North America and Asia, and in the process transformed Hong Kong into Asia's leading Pacific gateway. Both during and after the gold rush, California presented a world of new opportunities—as a market for goods and shipping, and as a migration destination for tens of thousands of Chinese “gold seekers.” Hong Kong seized these opportunities and prospered.

As news of the gold discovery spread, word got around about the shortage of everything in California, and the high prices that people there, flush with easy money, were willing to pay. Hong Kong merchants responded by sending shiploads of goods for the consumption of the thousands, and then tens of thousands, of Argonauts, as the gold seekers were known. San Francisco appeared for the first time in the Hong Kong government's *Blue Book*⁶ of 1849 as a destination of its exports, an indication of California's sudden rise to relevance. These exports included everything from building materials, beverages, clothing, hats, and shoes, to huge amounts of tea.⁷ Some items, such as coffee and gin, champagne and wine, had come a long distance before being re-exported eastward across the Pacific.

Hong Kong shippers had a great advantage by being much closer to San Francisco than the Atlantic ports. Ships from the American East Coast, departing from such ports as Boston and New York, and sailing around the Horn, took