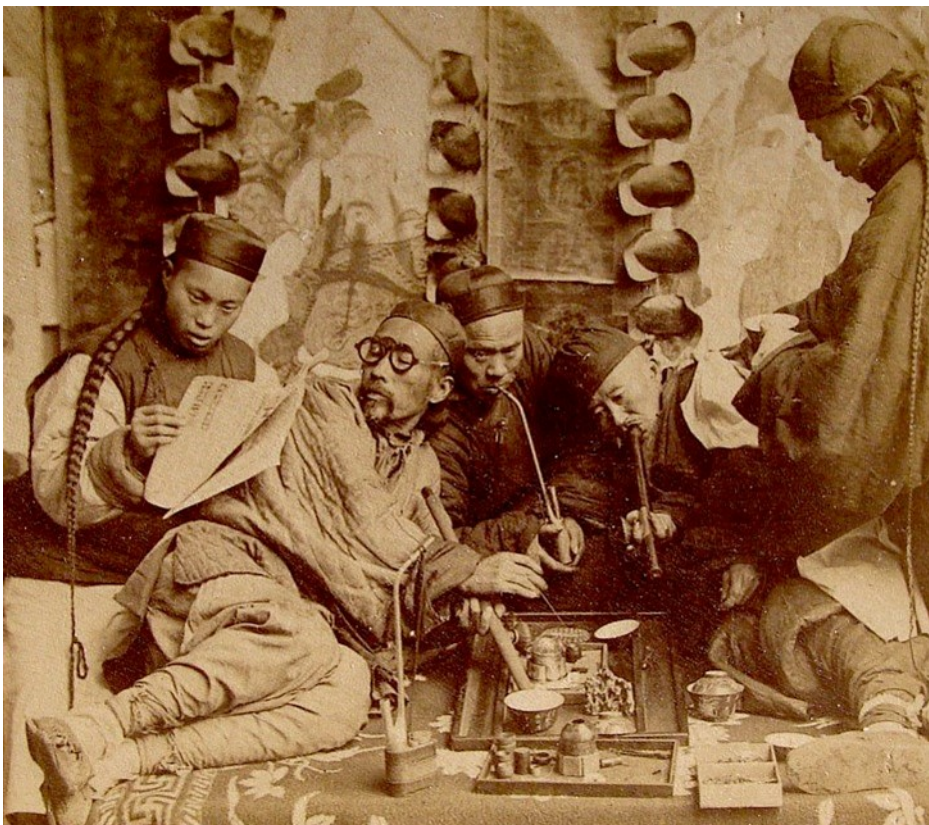


# Containers for Long Life Mud: Silver Opium Boxes of the late Qing Dynasty

By Philip Cheong

Opium as a medicinal drug has had a long history in China beginning in the Tang Dynasty, when Arab traders introduced opium as part of their trade merchandise in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Through time, opium was used both medicinally as well as an aphrodisiac. Up until the early Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), it was a taxable commodity, but in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it became illegal to sell opium due to the nefarious and addicting consequences of its consumption. The primary reason why opium addiction became so rampant was the large importation of opium by the British in order to counteract the trade imbalance that the Chinese had over the British. Due to the large quantities of porcelains, silks, teas, and exotica that the Chinese were exporting to Britain, there was a tremendous flow of silver specie into China from Britain and her colonies. With this advantage and having no desire for British goods with the exception of certain luxury goods like fancy clocks, and North American beaver pelts, tobacco and ginseng, this became a serious drain of silver from Britain. The British soon discovered that they could reverse this silver drain by importing opium at a great profit from their recently acquired Indian colonial possession into China. What began as a trickle soon became a flood. In 1729, a recorded two hundred chests of opium was



Note the opium boxes on the left of the lower tray, along with the lamp and two different types of opium pipes. The man with the spectacles is likely holding an opium needle used to prepare the pea sized ball of opium over the flame before inserting it into the bowl of the pipe.

Picture Source:

[www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/opium-canton.jpg](http://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/opium-canton.jpg)



Late Qing Dynasty photo of an upper class lady with bound feet and wearing nail guards sitting next to a table with an opium pipe and a spittoon. Image courtesy of Royal Ontario Museum, 2000.106.53\_1\_20

imported into the country, this number rose to one thousand in 1767, to ten thousand annually between 1820 and 1830 and forty thousand chests annually by 1838.

The Chinese Imperial authorities attempted to wipe out this illegal trade unsuccessfully and their efforts led to several conflicts known as the Opium Wars which saw territorial and political and economic concessions to Britain and other western powers. With this huge influx of opium and its popular widespread use within all social classes, a genre of paraphernalia for the consumption of opium came about.

Opium, which resembles a black tarry substance (think of molasses in winter), can be consumed in a number of ways for the narcotic qualities to be appreciated. However, it was discovered that the most effective way for the drug to manifest its narcotic effects most quickly into the bloodstream was to smoke it. For this, the basic paraphernalia included a pipe, a lamp, a spoon headed needle, and containers to hold the opium which are referred to as opium boxes, the subject of this essay. These boxes would have likely made their first appearance in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and were manufactured up until the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century during the Republican Period in China.

Opium boxes, like its relatively distant and harmless cousin, the snuff bottle, was produced in a variety of materials commensurate with the social class of the owner and these include brass, paktong (a type of white brass), cloisonné, jade, organic materials like ivory and horn, and the material of interest for the Silver Society of Canada, silver. For the upper class consumer, silver would have been one of the materials used and this was a measure of their social standing and wealth. The degree of workmanship and decoration was a reflection on their wealth, taste and education. Again, like snuff which was offered routinely to guests, opium smoking was an established social ritual in certain circles. All the examples illustrated in this essay are from the Eiley Collection at the Royal Ontario Museum and author's collection.

The use of silver in China to create luxury objects is relatively late in comparison to bronze vessels which date back several thousand years. The earliest widespread use of silver has been in inlaid work on bronze vessels



A small parcel-gilt silver lobed circular box and cover. Tang dynasty (618-907). Photo Christies Ltd, 2011



Opium box with cover decorated with precious objects and a bat symbolizing happiness on the cover. Silver, 19th century Ht: 3.8 W: 3.8 cm, © ROM Images 992.172.3.1



Opium box with cover decorated with archaic script. Silver and enamel, 19th century Ht: 5.3 W: 4.8 cm, © ROM Images, 992.172.6.1

dating from the Eastern Zhou Period (770-255 B.C.). From the Western Han Period (206 B.C. to 9 A.D.) onwards, silver ornaments and vessels are to be increasingly found, but the artistic zenith of silver production is arguably during the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907), where many of the techniques employed have been in used since.

Not much antique silver has survived from before the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) in appreciable numbers. This is primarily due to the intrinsic value of the material which was regularly melted down during periods of conflict to pay troops and debts. What early material that does survive, survives only because they were buried as mortuary goods intended for the use by the deceased in the afterlife. These objects have only come to light as construction and transportation projects, archaeological excavations and looting of tombs became common in the in the last two centuries.

Silver opium boxes, like those of other materials, came in two different shapes - cylindrical and oblong, and in a size small enough to fit into the palm of the hand as the opium was costly. They were also conveniently portable this way as the owner would be able to carry it around just like its distant cousin, the snuff bottle. Some boxes are unadorned while others are decorated with symbolic designs and phrases such as “Fresh fragrance and beautiful taste” or “If you use it regularly, you may extend your life” in reference to opium being called “long life mud”.

As with silver from the Qing Period, the bases are sometimes marked with the maker’s or shop mark and more often than not, an assay mark indicating pure silver. However, this can be misleading as there was no particular silver standard and the purity can range from roughly eighty to nine-seven percent silver. Little research has been done on silver workshops in any of the western languages, so not much is known about the silversmiths at this point. However, the Chinese are particularly good at keeping records and information about the workshops and the silversmiths can likely be found in local gazetteers.



From left to right: Opium box with cover decorated with precious objects and a bat symbolizing happiness on the cover. Silver, 19th century Ht: 3.8 W: 3.8 cm, © ROM Images, 992.172.3.1, Opium box with cover decorated with horses. Silver, 19th - 20th century Ht: 2.3 Diam: 2.3 cm, © ROM Images, 992.172.26.1, Opium box with cover decorated with archaic script. Silver and enamel, 19th century Ht: 5.3 W: 4.8 cm, © ROM Images, 992.172.6.1, Opium box with sleeve and cover, the sleeve decorated with cymbidium orchids. Silver, 19th - 20th century Ht: 3.3 L: 3.1 cm, © ROM Images, 992.172.35.2



From left to right: Opium box with cover, the bat design on top conveying happiness and the animal on the side, an auspicious wish. Silver; copper, 19th century - 20th century Ht: 3.5 L: 4.2 cm, 992.172.16.1, Opium box with cover, the sides decorated with Daoist symbols. Silver, 19th - 20th century Ht: 2.9 L: 3.2 cm, © ROM Images, 992.172.42.1, Opium box with cover decorated with figures. Silver, 19th - 20th century Ht: 3.2 L: 4.2 cm © ROM Images, 992.172.50.1



From left to right: Opium box, Silver, late 19th century, Ht 4 cm D cm. Lid decorated with a figure of Shou Lou, the Daoist god of longevity. Base marked with workshop mark, Opium box. Silver, late 19th century. Ht 5 cm W 5 cm Body and lid decorated with stylized archaic script with two workshop marks on the base. Both Collection of the author.



Leaf shaped box: An example of possibly another type of opium box in the shape of a leaf used for storing opium pellets. 19th century. L 5.6 cm. The lid is decorated with a Daoist deity. Collection of the author.

Different methods of decoration would have been employed on these silver boxes.

Techniques such as engraving and incising, repousse, and cloisonné and niello were used and the designs can range from the unadorned box to Chinese legends, Daoist and Buddhist symbols, poems, flowers, landscapes, precious objects, and auspicious symbols. The scope of the designs are varied and diverse and the messages delivered on the designs could be suitable for special occasions such as weddings and birthdays. Considering that these little boxes contained the material that caused the destruction and ruin of many lives, they are still beautiful objects in their own right and would have many engaging and heartbreaking stories to tell if they could talk.



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