

An Opium Pipe in a Collection and in Journalism: A comparison between a Chando Pipe from the Bragge Collection at the British Museum and ‘East London Opium Smokers’, *London Society: An illustrated magazine of light and amusing literature for the hours of relaxation*, Jan 1862-Dec 1886 (July 1868)

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Abstract: Opium in Victorian English literature has long been associated with mystery and Eastern danger. From Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*, through to Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oriental characters have handed out doses of oblivion to customers in East London. But, whilst opium’s power to transform and affect the body and mind of its users has garnered ‘a strange yearning’ and ‘superstitious dread’¹ from its Victorian audience, its appreciation is demonstrated through a continued desire to read and observe examples of it in collections and periodicals. In this essay I will compare a Chando Pipe from the Bragge Collection at the British Museum and the article ‘East London Opium Smokers’ (July 1868), noting how both the public and collectors’ enthusiasm for opium was not limited to the drug’s effects, but also the tools and craftsmanship of the pipes that facilitated its usage.

The opening paragraph of ‘East London Opium Smokers’, an article from *London Society*, printed in July 1868, suggests that, ‘[t]here exists a strange yearning to make more intimate acquaintance with the miraculous drug concerning which there is so much whispering, and at the same time a superstitious dread of approaching it.’² This intrigue highlighted by the anonymous author of this piece is, mirrored, to a certain extent, by a journalistic story printed two years later on 16th December 1870 in the *Birmingham Daily Post* where the writer exclaims, ‘On Wednesday night, some hundreds of people gazed with wonder on the magnificent collection of pipes of all nations collected during many years by Mr. Wm. Bragge, F.S.A.’³ Both examples encapsulate a public interest in a recurrent theme across press and literature, in which the exotic paraphernalia for using tobacco and narcotics is exaggerated to a novel excitement for the unseen whilst at the same time cementing attitudes that these tools are ‘other’ and not English. As Barry Milligan highlights, ‘the lure of opium smoking for the uninitiated thus has nothing to do with a developed taste for the practice...it is instead due to the appeal of the exotic inherent in this purportedly Oriental luxury.’⁴ In the periodical press, newspapers and literature, the exotic appeal of opium about which people enjoyed reading, generally focused on a relatively small area of London’s and Liverpool’s docks. Despite this restricted influence, individuals such as Reverend George Piercy reflected a national fear of Chinese contagion and unchristian behaviour. If the fear underlying this reaction was concerned with Chinese assimilation into British culture, then the exotic tool facilitating this contagion was the opium pipe. In this comparison I will assess the strange device capable of raising this curiosity and alarm, and differentiating opium from its use as an

¹ ‘East London Opium Smokers’, *London Society: An illustrated magazine of light and amusing literature for the hours of relaxation*, Jan 1862-Dec 1886 (July 1868) p.68.

² *Ibid*, p.68

³ ‘The Pipes of all Peoples’ in the *Birmingham Daily Post*, December 16th, 1870 in Bragge, William, *Bibliotheca Nicotiana* (Birmingham: Privately Published, 1880) pp.1-8.

⁴ Milligan, Barry, *Pleasure and Pains; Opium and the Orient in 19th-Century British Culture* (London: The University Press of Virginia, 1995) p.100

everyday medicine for pain relief, to that of producing exotic oblivion.⁵ Taking an example of the remains of a Qing dynasty opium pipe from the collection of Mr. William Bragge (see Figure 1), and comparing it to the description of the pipe in ‘East London Opium Smokers’ I will explore how in each example the pipe serves as a gateway into, not only the apparent world of Lascars and bedraggled Chinamen, but through ornate designs and craftsmanship a more refined appeal of a romanticised Orient.



Figure 1: William Bragge ‘Chando’ Pipe⁶

There are obviously several distinctions to be made between the two examples chosen for comparison, particularly the differing purposes of the two, one of utility and one of ornament. William Bragge, typifies the nineteenth-century collector: his career as a civil engineer and steel manufacturer, facilitating his compilations. He gathered a wide range of objects, arguably his two most famous collections being his 1500 volume anthology on the Spanish writer Cervantes, which was donated to the Birmingham Free Library in 1879, and his gathering of 13,000 pipes and other smoking paraphernalia and equipment, from which the physical example of an opium pipe is taken for this comparison.⁷ Of the thousands of objects that Bragge collected, only twenty five examples are listed in the *Bibliotheca Nicotiana* in relation to Chinese opium pipes.⁸ The example chosen is one of only two examples listed as ‘Chando’ pipes. In both examples the specific reference to Chando, highlights a knowledge of specific preparations for opium usage. Chando, or what we may presume to actually be Chandu or Chandoo, is a high quality form of opium prepared and primed for smoking. That Bragge chooses to differentiate the pipe by labelling it as ‘Chando’ asserts that they are of a specific design for a higher quality drug. The quality of the drug is also assessed in ‘East London Opium Smokers’ where our author describes in detail the process carefully carried out by Mr Chi Ki who charges his clients for the ‘trouble of frizzling

⁵ Berridge, Virginia. ‘Victoria Opium Eating: Responses to Opium use in Nineteenth-Century England’, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Summer, 1978) p. 437-461.

⁶ Photo taken by Joe Dunnage, 3rd January 2013, with permission of the Asia Department of British Museum, (c) Trustees of The British Museum (Please see Online Collection Database Reg number – 1885,1227.85 for details).

⁷ G.B. Smith, rev. Carl Chinn, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, available from <http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/101003223/William-Bragge>

⁸ Bragge, William, *Bibliotheca Nicotiana* (Birmingham: Privately Published, 1880).

and preparing the drug'.⁹ Whereas Bragge includes this description to specifically catalogue his ornament and differentiate it from pipes which may have used a lesser preparation of opium, the description of Mr Chi Ki's opium is the key to understanding the dangerous delights of the drug in his establishment.

The Bragge pipe which is associated with a high quality preparation of opium offers the potential to draw comparisons between the quality of the craftsmanship of the pipe and the quality of the drug that is being imbibed through it. Although now Bragge's example is missing the porcelain sections of the pipe, from the *Bibliotheca Nicotiana* we know of its blue and white detail as it was meticulously listed as the following:

[25.] Opium Pipe; 16½in. long; bamboo; globular head, porcelain, blue and white, 2in. diameter. (Chando)¹⁰

The other example of a Chando pipe within the Bragge collection is described similarly as;

[26.] Opium Pipe; 14in. long; bamboo; cylindrical head, porcelain, blue and white, 2in. x 1¾in. diameter (Chando)¹¹

What is clear about both these examples is that, as the journalist from the *Birmingham Daily Post* (1870) had suggested, these pipes had been transformed from their original purpose of smoking, to that of an object to be, 'gazed [at] with wonder', invoking instead an idealised image of smoking and oriental tradition, where the design carries as much power as the utility. This translation of the pipe's primary function is further evolved with the later addition of a sticker reading; 'Chando Pipe Intl Exn 1873' (see Figure 2). In being labelled, documented and positioned on display the audience is made aware of the pipe's original function, smoking, but is directed more towards the pipes decoration and craftsmanship. The labels allow for the ornament to decay over time but not detract from its ability to encapsulate a 'strange yearning' and interest. Without its attachments, the pipe is merely a piece of nineteenth-century bamboo. However, when understood in conjunction with the *Bibliotheca Nicotiana*, and the history of display and ornament in the nineteenth-century international exhibitions,¹² the pipe, although no longer fit for its utility, is still able to conjure a mystical, oriental image.

⁹ 'East London Opium Smokers', p.71.

¹⁰ Bragge, William, *Bibliotheca Nicotiana*, p.137.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.137.

¹² At the date of publishing this essay I am still investigating which International Exhibition the pipe was shown at. However, based upon the records of World Fairs and International Exhibitions in 1873, we may suggest that it was The Third International Exhibition (1873) which was held in London.



Figure 2: Description of label on Bragge Pipe ¹³

Bragge is the first to acknowledge this transformation from smoking tool to ornament and rightly observed in the Preface to *Bibliotheca Nicotiana* that, ‘The decoration of pipes and of smoking appliances generally thus adds a new chapter to the “Grammar of Ornament.”’¹⁴ Owen Jones, the nineteenth-century architect, and author of *The Grammar of Ornament* outlined thirty-seven propositions which he advocates as the ‘general principles in the arrangement of form and colour, in architecture and the decorative arts’.¹⁵ Intended to condition the way in which people designed the ornaments of carpets, ceilings, wall elevations and fabrics,¹⁶ Bragge’s attempt to pull objects of everyday utility into categorisation can best be appreciated in parallel with proposition five; ‘Construction should be decorated. Decoration should never be purposely constructed.’¹⁷ The pipe, created primarily for its utility, is decorated in the Bragge example with blue and white porcelain, reminiscent of Chinese design, and although we cannot actually see the design of this porcelain on this example, the fact that the ‘globular head’ is decorated in the first place, lends credence to the suggestion that opium pipes were not merely tools for smoking, but could be appreciated as pieces of craft themselves. If Bragge wishes for his pipes to be considered in light of Jones’ philosophy, it is also useful to understand his opinions regarding Chinese design, and how he felt it should be interpreted. Whereas Jones initially acknowledges a ‘happy instinct of harmonizing colours’¹⁸ in Chinese ornamentation, he continues to suggest their porcelain is ‘remarkable for the beauty of their outline...but only in a minor degree.’¹⁹ What aligns the marvel and wonder of the Chinese ornament may then focus on its alien difference to Western art. Jones writes that ‘Chinese ornament is a very faithful expression of the nature of this peculiar people; its characteristic feature is oddness – we cannot call it capricious, for caprice is the playful wandering of a lively imagination; but the Chinese are totally unimaginative, and their works are accordingly wanting in the highest grace of art –

¹³ Photo taken by Joe Dunnage, 3rd January 2013, with permission of the Asia Department of British Museum, (c) Trustees of The British Museum.

¹⁴ Bragge, William, *Bibliotheca Nicotiana*, pp.1-8.

¹⁵ Jones, Owen, *The Grammar of Ornament* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1868) p.5.

¹⁶ Jespersen, John Kresten, ‘Originality and Jones’ *The Grammar of Ornament of 1856*’, *Journal of Design History*, Vol.21 No.2 (2008) p.143.

¹⁷ Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, p.5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.86.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.86.

the ideal.’²⁰ By Jones’ reckoning, the aspects of the opium pipe that the public would be expected to wonder at are its oddness and foreignness, relating to Milligan’s suggestion that the uninitiated observer of opium was lured in by its exoticness.

Whereas the pipe in the Bragge collection demonstrates the translation of utility to ornament, and emphasises Oriental design, the opium pipe described in ‘East London Opium Smokers’ celebrates the eastern ‘miraculous’ and ‘superstitious’ aspects attached to the narcotic usage of the pipe. At first glance the author describes the pipe as, ‘an instrument like a flute, with a wooden cup with a lid to it screwed on at a distance of about three inches from the end. It was not a flute, however, but a pipe – the pipe.’²¹ The emphasis on ‘the’ adds to the pipe’s infamy and establishing it almost as the Platonic ideal which fills the young customer with excitement making him, ‘lick his lips’.²² On closer inspection of the text the pipe can draw several similarities to the Bragge’s example, yet these are of basic structure and nothing more. The author of ‘East London Opium Smokers’ describes the pipe as, ‘simply an eighteen-inch length of yellow bamboo with the cup of dark-coloured baked clay before mentioned fitted into a sort of spigot hole near the end.’²³ The main difference between the two pipes is the material used for the ‘bowl’: Porcelain for the Bragge example and clay for Mr Chi Ki’s. Both Bragge’s and Chi Ki’s pipes are of similar length, yet the author of ‘East London Opium Smokers’ distinguishes Chi Ki’s pipe as one primarily of utility, vacant of any beauty. The cup of ‘dark-coloured baked clay’ does not create an image of ornamental beauty unlike the blue and white porcelain of Bragge’s pipe. Furthermore, the finish of the bamboo in each example is worth our attention. The bamboo from the Bragge collection is polished and shaped to be smooth and refined, yet the bamboo in the article is ‘simply’ a length of yellow bamboo. Emphasis is placed on the rudimentary and basic nature of the design of the pipe in the article, focusing on the power the pipe has to be used as an object of addiction rather than one of aesthetic appeal. This difference in quality of finish is completed by the lack of accessory to the pipe where the author notes, ‘there is no mouthpiece to the pipe; the stem is cut sheer off, leaving something as thick as an office ruler to suck at.’²⁴ However, this lack of finish is ultimately of no consequence as the buyer of Mr Chi Ki’s opium takes, ‘the bamboo fairly into his mouth...the spirits of ten thousand previously smoked pipe-loads stirred to life.’²⁵

Although we may distinguish a discernible difference between the craftsmanship of these two pipes, and assume that these pipes carry an incomparable price, it is in the ‘ten thousand previously smoked pipe-loads’²⁶ that the worth of the pipe must be measured against. A distinction is needed to assert the difference between a pipe being used for its original purpose and a pipe being collected and shown at international exhibitions. The price of the pipe as an article is openly discussed at length, including the following conversational exchanges:

‘He’s been offered five pound for that pipe,’ remarked English Mrs. Chi Ki, who appeared to be almost as proud of it as was her husband. ‘A gentleman offered him five pound for it last autumn.’

‘Why didn’t he sell it, and buy another?’ was my natural question; but at this old Chi Ki chuckled, and hugging the pipe chafed its bowl tenderly with his jacket cuff.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.87.

²¹ ‘East London Opium Smokers’, p.70.

²² *Ibid*, p.70.

²³ *Ibid*, p.70.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.71.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.71.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.71.

‘It’s worth ten pounds,’ said his wife; ‘it has had nothing but the best opium smoked in it these fourteen years.’

And she went on further to enumerate the many excellences of the pipe; from which I gathered that its value was not after all as fanciful as at first appeared; since half a given quantity of opium would yield more satisfaction when smoked in a ripe, well-saturated old pipe than the whole quantity in a comparatively new one.²⁷

The worth of the pipe is again further confirmed when Mrs. Chi Ki advises the author, ‘there are only two pipes, one for the parlour, and one for the best room – this room.’²⁸ Just as the level of craftsmanship in the Bragge pipe suggests that opium smoking was not reserved for the lower classes with the rich indulging in elaborate designs for their pipes, the end of ‘East London Opium Smokers’ raises a parallel interest in the process of opium smoking which is also classless and permeates all the way through to royalty. Mrs. Chi Ki confirms this by saying, ‘I was ill in bed when the Prince of Wales and the other gentlemen came up here to see the smokers.’²⁹

The fact that opium can draw this level of interest is ultimately reflected by the text in which the article appears: *London Society; an illustrated magazine of light and amusing literature for the hours of relaxation*. This may call into question the reality of this described visit to an opium den; it does suggest that it is a topic that people wished to indulge in during their ‘hours of relaxation’. Furthermore, whether this account is wholly true did not detract from the article being republished as far afield as America, in which it appeared in the *Flag of Our Union*, under the re-titled, ‘English Opium Smokers’ in September 1868.³⁰ It suggests that these articles had the power to create public opinion and shock, as can be seen in the way the American author introduces his text, suggesting that, ‘We take the following account of the manner in which opium is smoked in London, from an English journal. The practice is on the increase.’³¹ Undoubtedly in capturing the public’s interest in this manner, there was a resounding influence on the literature that followed through to the end of the nineteenth century, from Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins through to Arthur Conan Doyle and Oscar Wilde.³² Milligan highlights that, ‘even before nineteenth century readers entered these authors’ fictional opium dens, they were veterans of the East End and its opium establishments, having vicariously traversed the narrow alleyways of Bluegate Fields in countless magazines, newspapers, and books presenting reports from “roving correspondents”’.³³ Considering that the intrigue of the opium pipe for the collector depends on a mixture of the pipe’s back story and craftsmanship, it may well be perceived that the reaction and interest to pipes in the Bragge collection is born out of articles such as ‘East London Opium Smokers.’

Comparing these two pipes highlights that, just as any other tool or ornament, there was a range of craftsmanship in their execution. One area that has not been focused upon, yet is perhaps one of the most intriguing, is that both pipes are strongly associated with China. Although London imported opium from India and Turkey, it is the Chinese that garner attention most prevalently in the media. One of the underlying interests, and also a perceived danger associated with the opium pipe, can be linked to the nineteenth-century paranoia about Chinese contagion. Reverend George Piercy indulged in portraying the potential for Oriental

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.70.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p.72.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p.72.

³⁰ ‘London Opium Smokers’, *Flag of Our Union* (1854-1870); Sep 12, 1868; *American Periodicals*, p.589.

³¹ *Ibid*, p.589.

³² There are references to opium in Dickens’ *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Collins’ *The Moonstone*, Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, and Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

³³ Milligan, *Pleasures and Pains*, p.85.

contagion through the use of opium and exclaimed, 'It begins with the Chinese, but does not end with them!'³⁴ Yet 'East London Opium Smokers' does nothing to suggest that there is an impending epidemic surrounding opium usage. The author writes, 'sometimes, I was informed, trade was so slack that not more than two or three customers would apply all day long'.³⁵ Yet, though there is contention due to the generic use of the term 'Chinaman' which included most references to Oriental, there is census evidence to suggest that the hysteria surrounding eastern contagion, although highly exaggerated, did reflect an increase in Chinese immigrants in the mid to late nineteenth century. Milligan notes, 'most notably, the Chinese population in England had been growing rapidly over the previous three decades – from a meagre 78 in England and Wales in 1851 to 665 by 1881, with a sudden dramatic increase in the mid-1860s according to contemporary census reports.'³⁶ I suggest that this growth in population was of little consequence in terms of creating interest for opium smoking. Just as De Quincey had glamorised the use of opium in the previous century, Chinese immigration, and the smoking of opium, only created a new vessel in which the public could wonder at this exotic eastern drug.

Essentially, we may suggest that the collectors of opium pipes were merely individuals who played out an interest of the mysterious eastern drug to the next level. Instead of just wondering at the descriptions laid on in the periodical press, collectors bought the actual pipes and in doing so drew attention to not just the narcotic impact of the drug, but the range and breadth of craftsmanship associated with the ornament. Still this drug continues to appeal through its mysterious and Oriental nature well into the twenty-first century. Although many pipes were destroyed in the crackdowns on opium smoking in China, the fine examples that do exist still fetch great sums of money for their craftsmanship and design. On the 10th November 2010, Christie's of London auctioned several lots of opium pipes belonging to the late Trevor Barton; all three lots surpassed their estimated valuation price, the highest, estimated at £1500-2000, being sold for £26,250.³⁷ Sales such as this highlight our continued love affair with the instrument that could summon a 'strange yearning' and 'superstitious dread' just as it did in the nineteenth century.

³⁴ Piercy, George, 'Opium Smoking in London', *Friend of China* 6 (1883) pp.239-240.

³⁵ 'East London Opium Smokers', p.71.

³⁶ Milligan, *Pleasures and Pains*, p.84.

³⁷ Christie's, London, Interiors Auction Brochure (10th November 2010) p.72.

(further information and pictures relating to the lots available at <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot/six-chinese-opium-pipes-19th-century-5376464-details.aspx>).

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