

Bryn Williams, Graduate Student
Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology
Stanford University
bryn@stanford.edu

Opium Pipe Tops at the Market Street Chinese Community in San Jose

Introduction

The first Chinatown in San José was located at Market and San Fernando streets (Young Yu 1991). This area was first settled by the Chinese in the late 1860s, but was destroyed by a fire in 1870 (ibid). Two years later many members of the Chinese community returned to the Market Street area and rebuilt at the site of the old Chinatown. This new Market Street Chinatown was occupied from roughly 1872 to 1887 (ibid). At its height in 1887 “over a thousand Chinese were living and working on Market and San Fernando Streets. During festivities and holidays hundreds more from outlying areas came into Chinatown” (Young Yu 1991:29). The Market Street Chinatown also served as a social and communal hub for the estimated 2,695 (Allen Rebecca et al. 2002:13) Chinese who were living and working in Santa Clara County. Although this population is much smaller than the 21,700 Chinese living in San Francisco (who represented 29% of the state’s Chinese population (Sen 1999:68), it was a fairly substantial percentage of San Jose’s 1880 population of 12,567 (Association of Bay Area Governments) and contained a wide range of businesses including “at least a dozen grocery stores, a fish market, a temple, three restaurants, numerous barber stands, clothing shops and general merchandising stores” (Yung Yu 1991:22).

The Market Street Chinatown was destroyed by arsonists in 1887 (Allen and Hylkema 2002:49). Many of the displaced residents relocated to one of the two new San José Chinatowns that were formed after the arson: the Woolen Mills Chinatown – a bachelor community attached

to a mill, and the Heinlenville Chinatown – a merchant and family community (Allen and Hylkema 2002; Young Yu 1991).

The Site of the Market Street Chinatown was excavated in 1985 under the auspices of the San Jose Redevelopment Agency. This was a “rapid recovery” project in every sense of the word; the site was excavated as bulldozers were constructing what was to become the Fairmont Hotel. After the excavation, the artifacts were placed in a warehouse and left alone for 15 years. Stanford University received this collection after it had passed from the control of the Redevelopment Agency to History San José. Stanford University, in partnership with History San Jose, is now undertaking steps to analyze the materials from the Market Street Chinatown. This paper grew out of that analysis.

This paper focuses on a small aspect of life in the Market Street Chinatown, an aspect of life that in historical narratives of the Chinese is often either over emphasized or ignored completely. An aspect of life that was quite often used for political purposes in the past, and still sparks political controversy in the present (Courtwright 2001; Walker 1991). This paper focuses on the opium pipes and opium pipe fragments that were recovered from the Market Street Chinatown.

I will present my research in three parts. First I will contextualize opium use within a broader framework, speaking shortly of some of the dangers and theoretical implications present when studying drug use in general, and opiate use specifically; and I will discuss the history and practices related to Opium use in overseas Chinese communities. In the second part of this paper I discuss the assemblage that has been catalogued at the Market Street Chinatown and present the conclusions I have drawn from my study of these artifacts. Finally I will explore possible research questions that could be addressed in the future.

The Dangers of An Archaeology of Opium

Discussing a subject as politically loaded as opium use is fraught with potential difficulties. How does one study opium use in Chinese overseas communities without reinscribing Orientalist images of depraved Chinese opium addicts selling their wares in seedy opium dens? How can we explore and perhaps explain an activity that was definitely present at the Market Street Chinatown without falling into those same dangerous stereotypes?

In their volume Archaeologies of Sexuality, Schmidt and Voss outline four pitfalls that can trap researchers studying another politically dangerous topic: sexuality. I don't mean to stretch a point, or to make a facile analogy between sexuality and drug use, as they are very different topics; but the Voss and Schmidt article provides a useful template through which to understand some of the primary dangers involved with the study of opium use. Dangers that seem to be at least slightly analogous to the dangers involved with a study of sexuality. First we must beware of understanding drug use as a medically essentialized notion - giving primacy to the physiological sensations caused by the drug in the interpretation of the drug's meaning and focusing exclusively upon the psychological addiction and physiological dependence that repeated heavy opiate use certainly causes. Second we must beware of drug negativity - dismissing all drugs and drug users as inherently "bad people." For example it has been common to exaggerate the "criminal menace" of drug users (Courtwright 2001). Third we must avoid projecting contemporary "drug hierarchies" into the past - it is not tenable to begin with the *a priori* assumption that patent "medicine" containing morphine was somehow viewed as "better" or more "legitimate" than smoked opium in the community we are studying. Finally at the other end of the spectrum are the lascivious treatments of drug use present in such books as De

Quincey's Confessions of an English Opium Eater or the scenes depicted on the cover of Courtwright's Dark Paradise and the illustration in Stirling's (1913) book [see figures 1 and 2]; treatments that either glamorize or exoticise opium use.

While an archaeologist can never completely escape his or her subject position – all knowledge is created in a specific cultural milieu (Shanks and Hodder 1995:19), it is possible to, again following Voss and Schmidt, take steps that mitigate these dangers. One could examine drug use in the past as a social experience. The archaeologist would try to understand the role that drug use plays in the daily social lives of the individuals in the communities where the drugs were being used without assuming that these drugs occupied the same social space that they do in the archaeologists' community. In this case, the archaeologist wouldn't assume that there was the same clear separation between medicine and recreation, and the same link between intoxication, criminality, and danger.

Opiate Use in the United States

Extensive opium smoking in China is a fairly recent phenomenon. Although opium was used in limited ways before the 1700s the introduction of smoked opium into China was largely a result of British attempts to establish a market for the opium that British companies were growing in India (Janin 1999). Until the end of the first opium war Chinese authorities regularly passed laws designed to restrict, and finally to prohibit the importation of opium into China (Janin 1999; Stirling 1913). After the first opium war ended in 1842, the British Empire forced the Chinese government to open its markets to opium. Domestic production of opium in China shot up, and soon China was producing much of the opium that was being consumed within its borders (Janin 1999). Opium was not grown in the United States (Courtwright 2001) so the

opium consumed in the United States had to be imported. In the years during which the Market Street Chinatown existed, the tax on smoking opium was as high as 182% of the value of the opium (Courtwright 2001:16). To avoid this tax clandestine operations, many of which were organized by Chinese Tongs, smuggled both raw and cooked opium into the United States (ibid.).

Smoking Opium

Unlike tobacco pipes, which tended to be made out of one piece, opium pipes had multiple often complex parts (Stirling 1913). At the very least an opium smoker would need a bamboo or wooden pipe, a ceramic pipe bowl (in this essay, unless I specifically refer to “wooden” or “bamboo” pipe, the words “pipe” and “pipe top” are interchangeable with the “ceramic pipe bowl”), a heat source – usually an opium lamp, and various scrapers and instruments (Stirling 1913) [see figures 2 and 3 for examples of opium paraphernalia].

Although I confine my artifact analysis to paraphernalia related to smoked opium, it is important not to be under the false impression that opiate use was confined to Chinese communities, or that smoked opium was the only opiate used in the United States at the time. During the time that the Market Street Chinatown existed, opiate use in the United States was widespread: “During the Civil War nearly 10,000,000 opium pills and over 2,841,000 ounces of other opium powders and tinctures were issued to Union forces alone” (Courtwright 2001:54). Despite this massive infusion of opiates into the armed forces of the United States, the majority of people addicted to opiates were women who had picked up the habit from prescription medicines that contained opiates (Courtwright 2001). During the same time that the Market Street Chinatown existed, 24.5 percent of prescriptions given out by doctors in New Orleans

contained opium or morphine, and by 1900 as many as 23 percent of all doctors were addicted to the drug (Courtwright 2001:38-41). Opiates were also regularly added to patent medicines during this time (Courtwright 2001).

In contrast to morphine and opiates in patent medicine and prescriptions, smoked opium was almost exclusively consumed in Chinese communities, primarily in California and the West (Courtwright 2001:62). Much of the Opium smoking in Chinese communities appears to have been a social enterprise carried on in communal places (Stirling 1913). Most opium smokers in the United State were male, and they tended to be young (Courtwright 2001:63). However, at the time, a full 3/4 of the Chinese population in California were male (Allen et al. 2002: 13) so the degree to which this statement is simply a product of the community demographics is difficult to determine.

When smoking, an opium smoker would first warm the opium over a heat source until it was malleable, and then would place it into the pipe with a specially designed pin. The pipe would be turned upside down and placed over a heat source allowing the smoke would rise up through the pipe and enter the smokers lungs (Stirling 1913; Courtwright 2001).

The Assemblage

The parts of the opium pipes most prominent in the Market Street assemblage were the ceramic pipe tops. These pipe tops were primarily located in a single bag that had been pre-sorted from the rest of the collection, but not yet cataloged. This bag contained pipe tops from different features and contexts jumbled together. In the lab I catalogued and analyzed these pipe tops as well as a few more complete pipe tops that had been pre-sorted into the “small finds”

box. There may be extant pipe tops in the collection owing to misrecognition during the initial sorting procedures or due to the partiality of the collections catalogued at Stanford.

To the best of my knowledge none of the more valuable (Stirling 1913) bamboo and wooden pipes themselves were found at the site. This may be due to poor preservation conditions, a strong heirloom effect, or the collection and sampling techniques used during excavation. To the best of my knowledge we also have not catalogued any glass opium lamps or tin opium containers from the site [for examples see figure 3], but I am optimistic that we will find examples of these types of paraphernalia. Their preservation should be more likely than that of the organic wooden pipes, and we have not even begun to explore the metal remains and have only recently started to catalogue the glass artifacts.

The catalogued pipe tops represent a minimum of 95 different vessels that were found from 13 distinct features. The Breakdown by MNI (Minimum Number of Individual pipe tops) by feature is as follows:

Feature 00 – 7	Feature 18 – 18
Feature 01 – 2	Feature 18b – 11
Feature 02 – 2	Feature 20 – 13
Feature 03 – 4	Feature 23 – 1*
Feature 07 – 8	Feature 28 – 2
Feature 13 – 23	Feature 33 – 2
Feature 17 – 1	

Total = 95

* The fragment of feature 23 is catalogued as an opium pipe, but I believe it to be of indeterminate function.

The individual pipe tops in the collection show a remarkable degree of formal diversity both within and between features [see figure 4]. Pipe tops of dramatically different shapes and sizes were found in similar contexts [see figure 5]. There are no two pipes that are exactly alike,

and even those which appear to have been made from the same design [see figure 6] are of slightly different sizes, have slightly different rim diameters, and are decorated with different marks. This extreme formal diversity creates problems when trying to establish a coherent typology.

In attempting to establish a useful typology for my analysis I turned to typologies created from opium pipe tops excavated from other California Chinese communities. In their analysis of opium pipe tops recovered from the Riverside Chinatown, Wylie and Higgins presented a four-part typology, classifying their pipe bowls into the following categories:

Round Bowls	176
8 Sided Bowls	17
6 Sided Bowls	2
4 Sided Bowls	3

Total = 198 (Wylie and Higgins 1987: 327-328).

They then classified the pipe tops based into four distinctive manufacturing techniques, and further into individuals types that they illustrated.

Allen et al. in their analysis of materials excavated from the Woolen Mills Chinatown simply divided their opium pipe tops into Earthenware and Stoneware:

Pipe Bowls: Earthenware	8 in feature 501
Pipe Bowls: Stoneware	4 in feature 501
Pipe Bowls: Stoneware	2 in feature 502

Total = 14 (Allen et al. 2002)

I found that the typology developed by Wylie and Higgins was not one that could reasonably be emulated in an analysis of the data from the Market Street Chinatown. Wylie and Higgins found that “few bowl types have more than one technique and that virtually all the types within each technique share other characteristics, such as clay and Chinese marks” (Wylie and Higgins 1987: 346). In the assemblage from the Market Street Chinatown, the formal variation

was so great that stable typologies would likely obscure variation more than it would reveal similarity and patterns.

I decided to broadly classify the pipe tops found at the Market Street into categories that Wylie and Higgins label “expensive” and “inexpensive.” “Inexpensive pipe tops [were] made with earthenware and little decoration, while expensive [pipe tops were] made with stoneware and have thicker walls and more decoration” (Wylie and Higgins 1987: 346). Laying aside the theoretical questions that words such as “expensive” and “inexpensive” bring up, I still ran into some difficulties when adopting a typology even this simple. Do I classify richly painted earthenware pipe tops found in the Market Street assemblage as “expensive” or as “inexpensive.” How about plain stoneware? In the end I decided to intuitively classify all stoneware, and earthenware with extensive decoration as “expensive.” While I can not claim that this typology mirrors emic categories, it roughly corresponds to the categorizations that other archaeologists have used (Wylie and Higgins 1987)[See figure 6 for examples]. Using this typology, the collection broke down as follows:”

Feature 00	03 inexpensive	02 expensive	02 unknown (porcelanious stoneware)
Feature 01	01 inexpensive	01 expensive	
Feature 02	02 inexpensive	00 expensive	
Feature 03	03 inexpensive	01 expensive	
Feature 07	04 inexpensive	04 expensive	
Feature 13	10 inexpensive	13 expensive	
Feature 17	01 inexpensive	00 expensive	
Feature 18	08 inexpensive	09 expensive	01 unknown (porcelanious stoneware)
Feature 18b	08 inexpensive	03 expensive	
Feature 20	06 inexpensive	07 expensive	
Feature 23	00 inexpensive	00 expensive	01 unknown*
Feature 28	02 inexpensive	00 expensive	
Feature 33	01 inexpensive	01 expensive	

Total = 95

* The fragment of feature 23 is catalogued as an opium pipe, but I believe it to be of indeterminate function

Spatial Context of Features:

During my research, I mapped the Market Street feature locations on a Sanborn Fire Insurance map of the Market Street Chinatown. I found that the features represent areas associated with a wide range of social contexts, ranging from what are likely residential areas to what are likely commercial contexts (see Laffey 1994: 10-18 for a complete description of the feature contexts). Although the map only represents the community at a particular point in time, and the architectural features as well as the building uses changed – often quite dramatically and quickly (Laffey 1994), the broad range of geographical contexts in which the pipe tops were found on the site implies that the pipe tops were discarded in all areas of the site.

Conclusions:

When I began this project I had assumed that opium pipe tops would be clustered around a single feature representing an opium “den” or some other house of ill repute, but the distribution of the pipe tops indicates a different story. Historical discussions of opium consumption present conflicting descriptions of where opium was consumed. Stirling claims that opium was primarily consumed in “brothels or clubs” (Stirling 1913: 9) while Ma claims that it was purchased primarily in the backs of general stores for consumption in those stores (Ma 2000: 44). Wylie & Higgings argue that opium was consumed in different locations corresponding to different social contexts including recreational smoking, work related smoking, social (in residences) smoking, and non-Chinese smoking (Wylie and Higgins 1987: 365). While it is true that patterns of disposal do not necessarily directly correlate with patterns of use, the variable contexts in which the pipe tops were found suggests a pattern of use most congruous with the idea that opium was consumed in different contexts. I suggest that opium products consumed at

the Market Street Chinatown were not consumed exclusively, or even primarily in concentrated locales and “dens” but were consumed over wider spatial and social contexts.

When I divided my typology into “inexpensive” and “expensive” pipe bowls I was using a classificatory scheme developed by Wyle and Higgins. In the absence of historical documentation to the contrary I will assume, though not without unease, that their rough classification actually has some correlation to the emic value of the pipe tops. While there are undoubtedly other features of the pipe tops that would increase their value – such as age and length of use (Stirling 1913: 11), classification by form in the manner of Wylie and Higgins is the most readily apparent.

There is no substantive difference between the features with a majority of inexpensive pipe tops and the features with a majority of expensive pipe tops, and features containing both types in relatively equal quantities are a solid majority. This typological heterogeneity could lead to a number of different conclusions. It is possible that individuals who smoked opium used the same pipe top for smoking in different social contexts. This could also indicate that individuals owned their own pipes, rather than renting them from a “den” as Courtwright suggests (2001: 72). This viewpoint is also supported by historical evidence that suggests that prepared opium and opium pipe paraphernalia were sold in Chinese general stores (Wylie and Higgins 1987: 360).

The heterogeneity of form may also indicate that pipe tops were imported from China infrequently or in small batches. Wylie and Higgins suggest that “there is no evidence that opium pipe bowls were manufactured in the United States... the observed variations [in pipe tops] are the result of different factory or regional techniques in China” (Wylie and Higgins 1987: 346). If the pipe tops increased in value with age it is likely that they were not disposed of carelessly, and

if the tops were frequently imported, or imported in large batches, supply would soon severely outstrip demand.

Future Research Potential

There are a number of directions in which one could take this research project. Wylie and Higgins developed a ceramic index where they compared the ratio of Opium pipe top fragments to the entire ceramic assemblage of a site to determine the “relative level of opium use” at the site (Wylie and Higgins 1987). Allen also used this analysis in her study of the pipe tops from the Woolen Mills site (Allen 2002). While this kind of comparison would prove challenging to theorize it would be interesting to try and determine “relative use” at multiple sites, including the Market Street site, and see if there are different patterns of opium use at different types of sites; perhaps shedding light onto questions relating to why opium was used, and how opium fit into the day-to-day social lives of its users.

Another path of research that could help to elucidate the uses and meanings of these pipes would be a more thorough translation of the Chinese characters incised and painted on the pipes. The object that originally sparked my interest in opium pipe tops was a red pipe top. This pipe top (catalog number 85-31/18-2) was translated by a visitor during the lab open house. It reads on top: “Fragrance flowing like cloud, not smoke nor fog” and on the side are symbols representing longevity, prosperity, and blessings [see figure 7]. A large part of what makes the pipe so compelling is its text. A number of other pipes have marks and characters on them, and the translation may bring out meanings that may not be decipherable without the text.

The conclusions I have reached about the pipe tops from the Market Street Chinatown are both tentative and ambiguous. The purpose of my research has not been to discover the final

truth about opium smoking in the past so much as to expose the complexity of opium smoking; a topic that the popular press often presents in an essentialized manner. I hope that in this regard the paper is both historically illustrative and analytically functional.

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