

Chinese Opium Pipe (*Yānqiāng*, 烟枪)

Bamboo, jade and gilt-brass repoussé · Late Qing dynasty / early Republic · c. 1890–1920



Full view. Length and weight to be measured. The pipe is in original uncleaned condition with the patina of period use.

Object	Chinese opium pipe, smoker's grade
Type	Horizontal pipe (<i>yānqiāng</i>) with saddle-mounted damper
Period	Late Qing dynasty / early Republic, c. 1890–1920
Origin	China (likely southern provinces)
Materials	Bamboo shaft; jade (likely nephrite) mouthpiece; gilt copper-alloy fittings with applied silver / silvering; metal damper
Decoration	Repoussé dragons, bats, clouds; lotus surround on damper; leiwen and Greek-key (<i>huíwén</i>) borders; auspicious characters incl. 福 (<i>fú</i> , fortune)
Condition	Original undisturbed surface; expected handling wear; opium tar residue (<i>yāngāo</i>) present at airway and inside stem
Provenance	Western private collection
Attribution	S.D.H. — May 2026

Description

A Chinese opium pipe of classical horizontal form. The bamboo shaft is fitted at one end with a domed jade mouthpiece and at the other with a gilt-brass terminal, each retained in its decorated mount. A central metal saddle band marks the joint between the two halves of the stem. Approximately one-third from the foot, a perpendicular saddle carries the metal damper (*yāndǒu*) on its short pedestal — the smoking surface over which the opium pellet was placed and heated by lamp.

All metal fittings are a copper alloy worked in repoussé and chased, originally fully gilded. Silver or silver-washed accents survive on the high relief of the damper and the central saddle band, where the cooler white tone contrasts with the warm yellow gilding of the surrounding ground — a deliberate two-tone effect characteristic of better-grade Chinese pipe fittings of the period.

Decorative programme



The damper top (illustrated left) shows a stylised lotus surround in high repoussé radiating from the central airway. Around the rim, four auspicious medallions enclose archaic-style characters. The character 福 (*fú*, fortune) is clearly legible at lower right; a second character of the same family appears on the saddle knob. The iconographic vocabulary is the standard auspicious package — fortune, longevity, dragons, bats (*fú*, homophone for fortune) and cloud scrolls — executed competently throughout.



Central saddle band: *leiwen* scrollwork between Greek-key (*huíwén*) borders, with traces of silvering on the relief.



Mouthpiece: pale jade with greenish veining, hand-smoothed from extended period use.

The long stem fittings carry low-repoussé five-clawed dragons amid clouds with bats interspersed. Borders of stippled punching frame the principal cartouches. The central saddle band (illustrated above left) is the most finely worked area, with crisp *leiwen* «thunder pattern» scrollwork between Greek-key borders — a textbook Qing decorative grammar that ties this pipe firmly to the late nineteenth-century mainstream of Chinese metalwork.

Authentication and evidence of period use



Several features confirm this pipe as a genuine smoker's instrument rather than a decorative or marriage piece:

- **Yāngāo halo at the airway.** A dark, slightly resinous deposit concentric to the central pinhole on the damper top — opium tar baked onto the metal by repeated heating against the lamp flame. This specific use-pattern cannot be convincingly reproduced and is the single most reliable authenticity marker on a Chinese opium pipe.
- **Stem residue (yānyóu).** Darkening visible inside the metal collar at the saddle joint, where condensed smoke residue migrated down the stem from the damper. Such internal deposits accumulate only over extended period smoking.
- **Use-pattern wear on high points.** Bright copper-alloy showing through the gilding precisely where fingers gripped the pipe — at the saddle pedestal and around the bowl mount. This is honest handling wear, distinct from artificial distressing.
- **Polished jade mouthpiece.** The edges of the jade end-piece are softened and slightly polished from years of contact with lips and teeth; no chips, but the characteristic hand-worn finish of a piece that saw real service.
- **Coherent overall ageing.** Patina, residue and wear all locate themselves on the same functional axis — bowl, grip, mouthpiece — rather than appearing uniformly across the surface as artificial patination would.

Taken together, these features place the pipe firmly in the smoker's grade and confirm a working life within the period of legal opium consumption in China — i.e. before the 1906 imperial edict and subsequent suppression campaigns that effectively ended widespread household smoking.

Dating and grade

The construction (bamboo shaft, jade mouthpiece, gilt-brass repoussé fittings with silvered accents, central saddle, metal damper), the decorative grammar (leiwen, Greek-key borders, five-clawed dragons, bats and clouds, auspicious characters in archaic style) and the general level of finish are all consistent with mainstream production for the prosperous urban smoker, datable on stylistic grounds to **c. 1890-1920**. A late-Qing date (i.e. before 1911) is more probable than early Republic on the basis of the gilding quality and the formal decorative programme; however, the Republic-period trade continued these forms into the 1920s for export and for remaining domestic users, and a precise division within this thirty-year window is not normally possible without a maker's mark.

Within the typology of surviving Chinese opium pipes, this example sits in the **mid-to-upper grade**. The jade mouthpiece, the silvered accents, the multiple decorated bands and the quality of the repoussé place it well above the basic utilitarian pipes mass-produced for ordinary smokers. It is not at the very top tier — there is no cloisonné enamel, no full silver fittings, no exotic hardwood (zitan, huanghuali) stem and no carved ivory — but the piece was clearly made for a comfortably-off client.

Conservation

The pipe is in original undisturbed condition and should remain so. Two specific points:

- **Do not clean the bowl interior or the residue rings.** The yāngāo halo is exactly the evidence that authenticates the piece, and is itself part of what advanced collectors are paying for. Removal would significantly reduce both authenticity and value.
- **Do not polish the brass.** The dark/bright contrast on the repoussé is the original gilding-and-patina relationship. A polish would flatten the visual depth of the relief and pull value down noticeably. A soft dry brush and microfibre cloth are sufficient. The jade end-piece may be wiped with a barely-damp cloth; no detergent.
- **Bamboo joint stability.** Check the bamboo shaft for shrinkage cracks or repairs at both metal collars (these are the classic failure points). Storage in stable humidity (40–55 % RH) is advisable; rapid drying may open the bamboo grain.