



Blue-and-white porcelain on Shangchuan Island: Chinese-Portuguese trade during the Ming dynasty

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In 2016, the Guangdong Provincial Research Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology conducted a series of archaeological excavations and surveys on Shangchuan Island. The island (fig. 1), measuring 156.7 square kilometers, is one of the largest islands in the Pearl River Delta. It lies on the southern side of Guanghai Bay, about 9 kilometers off the south coast of Guangdong Province. Shangchuan Island is rich in natural harbors and has served as an important navigation mark for the maritime route since the Song dynasty. Cultural remains on the island can be traced as far back as the pre-Qin period. Our excavation carried out in 2016 was centered on Dazhou Bay; it unearthed a large number of blue-and-white porcelain pieces, the majority of which are export porcelain related to Portuguese trading activities along China's southeastern coast during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 CE).

These pottery sherds are fragments of bowls or plates. Features of the glaze and the paste, as well as the production technique, indicate these ceramics are products of Jingdezhen. Some of the sherds are inscribed with Chinese characters, including *Da*

Ming Nian Zao 大明年製 [Produced during the years of the Great Ming] and *Jia Jing Nian Zhi* 嘉靖年製 [Made during the Jiajing reign], helping to date these remains to the 16th century. Most sherds are decorated with traditional Chinese patterns, such as flowers, clouds, and phoenix. Intriguingly, one piece of blue-and-white porcelain is painted with the Order of Christ Cross (fig. 2), the emblem of the historical Portuguese Order of Christ, thus testifying to the Portuguese and Catholic presence on the island. The discovery suggests that Shangchuan Island served as a transitional trading post for the Chinese-Portuguese trade before the Portuguese took Macao as their major settlement in 1557. After controlling the Malacca Strait, the Portuguese sailed through Southeast Asia to China with the help of the monsoon wind, seeking to establish connections with the Ming court. The Portuguese delegation paid their first official visit to China in 1517, followed by increasing trading and construction activities along the coast.

The blue-and-white porcelains were retrieved from a site near a chapel attached to St. Francis Xavier's cemetery. St. Francis Xavier, a Catholic missionary known for his extensive

travels in Asia, arrived at Shangchuan Island in 1552, but died soon later in the same year. After St. Francis Xavier's visit, Shangchuan island not only acted as a Chinese-Portuguese trading stronghold, but also became a bridge for the religious and cultural exchanges. The large quantity of recovered blue-and-white porcelain, and the Christ Cross found on the sherds, is an embodiment of the trading and religious network connecting the East and the West. In 1639, the Jesuits in Macau built a tomb for the saint to mark the original burial site after the body was taken to Goa, the then capital of Portuguese India. From 1701 to 1864, Catholic activities on Shangchuan Island were largely restricted or even banned, and priests were expelled. After 1864, French Catholicism arrived on the island and continued St. Francis

Xavier's mission.¹ The current chapel was sponsored by Bishop Guillemín between 1867 and 1869. Another Catholic Church in the Sunday Village south of St. Francis Xavier's chapel and a hilltop commercial monument showcase the later wave of Catholic presence.

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Notes

- 1 Davies, S. 2016. 'Achille-Antoine Hermitte's Surviving Building', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 56:92-110.

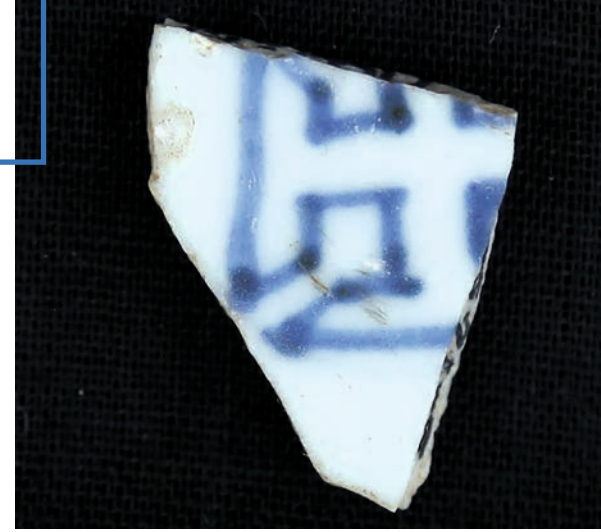


Fig.1 (above): Shangchuan Island, with the chapel attached to St. Francis Xavier's tomb on the left side. Courtesy of Guangdong Provincial Research Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology. Fig. 2 (left): Porcelain sherd decorated with Christ Cross, excavated from Shangchuan Island, Guangdong Province. Courtesy of Guangdong Provincial Research Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology.

Transnational exchange of metallic commodities during the Era of the Canton Trade

HUANG Chao

During the decades preceding the Qing Empire's forced opening to the West in 1842, Canton (Guangzhou) was the only port open for foreign trade. The Sino-Western relations had mainly evolved around trades through Canton from 1700 to 1842, a period known as the 'Era of the Canton Trade'. Scholarship of the Canton Trade focuses mainly on the trade of tea, porcelain, and silk, yet the commercial exchange of precious and semi-precious metallic items has been largely ignored. During the 18th and 19th centuries, large quantities of manufactured goods made of silver, gold, *tutenag*, *paktong*, lead, tin, as well as the raw materials, were exported from Canton to Southeast Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Based on archival records, including journals and logbooks, and archaeological discoveries from shipwrecks, this essay examines the overlooked metallic items that embodied the commercial vitality and momentum of the transnational trade.

In 1684, the Qing court lifted the ban on maritime trade, reinitiating commercial exchanges with the outside world. Canton, located at the southeast tip of China's coastal line, gradually grew into one of the most important port cities of the 18th and 19th centuries, an era that witnessed the emergence of the transnational trading networks. The flourishing maritime trade left a rich body of materials that offers scholars the opportunity to look into every aspect of



Fig. 1: A pair of candlesticks in the fluted pillar style, made of Chinese *paktong* but probably manufactured in Britain, ca. the late 18th century. Courtesy of HUANG Chao.

research into what was then termed 'Chinese export silver'.¹ Nevertheless, metallic commodities other than silver have yet to be studied systematically.

When conducting my post-doctoral project 'Trading Metals in Canton', in collaboration with Professor Paul A. Van Dyke, a renowned expert on the Canton Trade, I started to pay attention to the trade of gold with Spanish silver coins. Gold ingots were recovered from a number of shipwrecks, including the 'Nanking Cargo' in Amsterdam. These ingots are impressed with marks, such as *yuanji* 元記 that denotes the maker's name, and numerals such as *shiliang* 十兩 that stands for weight and value.

Besides gold and silver, objects made of *tutenag* and *paktong* also constitute a significant portion of export metallic commodities. *Tutenag* is now widely accepted as zinc, thanks to the study by Alfred Bonin.² The 18th-century shipwrecks of the English East India Company uncovered *tutenag*

items that were recorded as ballasts in the Company's journals and logs. Laboratory tests show that the composition of these *tutenag* items is comparatively pure zinc. *Paktong*, or 'white copper', a kind of copper-nickel or copper-nickel-zinc alloy, is usually made into candlesticks (fig.1). Not only were the *paktong* products exported to Europe, but the technique of manufacturing *paktong* items was also transmitted to the West, as demonstrated by some 18th century lab notebooks on *paktong* discovered in England and Sweden. Lead, tin, and iron were usually regarded as ballast cargoes or kentledge that were used to improve the ship's stability while sailing at sea. Commodities made of these metals were much smaller in scale. Pure copper was often imported from Japan to Canton by the European traders. Metallic commodities, though not a common topic of research, did play a significant role in the exchanges between China and the West. I hope this short essay can stimulate more interest in the transnational exchange of metallic commodities.

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Notes

- 1 Forbes, H. et al. 1975. *Chinese Export Silver: 1785 to 1885. Massachusetts: Museum of the American China Trade.*
- 2 Bonnin, A. 1924. *Tutenag & Paktong, with Notes on Other Alloys in Domestic Use during the Eighteenth Century.* Oxford University Press.