

Reexploring the Silk Roads: Ancient Interactions and New Collaboration

The ancient Silk Roads have been a topic of intense scholarly debate in Chinese academia in recent decades. The study of Silk Roads has been further boosted by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by the Chinese government in 2013. Chinese archaeologists were encouraged to conduct joint excavations in other BRI countries with the aim of exploring the connections between ancient China and the outside world. Many more exhibitions in Chinese museums started to display cultural relics loaned from foreign institutions and to highlight ancient interactions through both overland and sea routes. The current research on the ancient Silk Roads benefits from these new international collaborations and has accordingly achieved a more global perspective.

Within this background, the five scholars in this edition, either archaeologists or curators, bring insights into the finds from sites along the Silk Roads, examining them as material evidence of ancient Sino-foreign interactions.

Liangren Zhang and Ali A. Vahdati introduce the discoveries, including mud-brick dwellings and imitations of Chinese blue-and-white ware yielded by the Tepe Naderi project, a collaborative excavation led by archaeologists from China and Iran.

Based on first-hand material, Yu Ding examines the chronology and scale of Chinese Longquan celadon exported to Kenya from the 13th to 15th centuries, as well as the impetus behind the trade in Longquan ware.

Yue Wang investigates the formation and spread of Kushan art through cultural exchanges along the Silk Roads, emphasizing the styles and carving techniques of various statues and objects.

Finally, focusing on the transmission of glass objects and craftsmanship, Chunlei Qin analyzes the development of glass artistry and trade between China and other ancient civilizations.

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The Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai is currently working on a BRI-related research project, which includes examining some of the archaeological initiatives discussed in this issue as well as the creation of a comprehensive database in collaboration with researchers from the University of Virginia.



Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai

The Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai serves as the hub within the NYU Global Network University system to promote the study of Asian interactions and comparisons, both historical and contemporary. The overall objective of the Center is to provide global societies with information about the contexts of the reemerging connections between the various parts of Asia through research and teaching. Collaborating with institutions across the world, the Center seeks to play a bridging role between existing Asian studies knowledge silos. It will take the lead in drawing connections and comparisons between the existing fields of Asian studies, and stimulating new ways of understanding Asia in a globalized world.

Asia Research Center at Fudan University

Founded in March 2002, the Asia Research Center at Fudan University (ARC-FDU) is one of the achievements of the cooperation of Fudan and the Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies (KFAS). Since its formation, the center has made extensive efforts to promote Asian studies, including hosting conferences and supporting research projects. ARC-FDU keeps close connections with Asia Research Centers in mainland China and a multitude of institutes abroad.

The Tepe Naderi Project

Liangren Zhang and Ali A. Vahdati

Tepe Naderi is located in Northern Khorasan Province, on a section of a major route from Central Iran to Central Asia. It is an imposing site, the second largest tepe (mound) in the upper Atrak valley, and is very rich in history. In the late 19th century, King Nasir al-din Shah (1831-1896) of the Qajar Dynasty came to visit the old citadel of Shirvan (modern Tepe Naderi) during his pilgrimage to Mashhad. According to E'temād-al-Saltana, who accompanied the Shah on his second royal tour of Khorasan, the tepe had a castle on

the top and a fortified wall, with a large moat (5-7m wide) around it. The fortified wall had two entrance gates and 40 towers along its perimeter, but only one tower is partially left standing today; the castle on the top has totally vanished. The dates of the tepe and the wall, however, remain a mystery.

The field project at Tepe Naderi was initiated in 2015, when Nanjing University and the Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism of Iran signed a Memorandum of Understanding. The general background to this project is China's "One Belt One Road" Initiative, of which Iran is an important partner. In response to this initiative, Chinese financial investment in Iran grew steadily. Scholarly exchanges in the academic and educational spheres are an integral part of this initiative, but initially no progress was made with respect to the archaeology of Iran. The field project at Tepe Naderi was therefore launched to fill this intellectual vacancy, with much aid from seasoned American scholars, including Prof. Daniel T. Potts of the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World.



Fig. 1: Mud-brick walls of the Bronze Age at Tepe Naderi. (Photo by Liangren Zhang, 2018)



Fig. 2: Ground penetrating radar survey at Tepe Naderi. (Photo by Ziqi Guo, 2018)

The concept of the Silk Road is too familiar to readers to require any explanation. What is important is that it has been a dynamic road network connecting East Asia, West Asia, South Asia, Russia, and Europe, and that Iran has played a particularly significant role in its history. This is no coincidence because Iran is located right at the crux of the road network; in addition, the peoples of Iran have been very active in spreading goods, technologies, and religions across the Eurasian landmass. In particular, contact between China and Iran has been very close, as is eloquently borne out by the *Sino-Iranica* of Berthold Laufer and *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand* of Edward Shafter.

This project raises a number of research questions. One regards the origin of the

tepe, a very common form of settlement in Iran and the Near East, Central Asia, and South Asia in general. The interesting thing about the tepe is that ancient people added layers of mud-brick dwellings upon one another's ruins, such that the tepe kept growing for hundreds or thousands of years [Fig. 1]. However, doing so meant that they had to level the ruins to make the ground for the floors and walls of new dwellings. In China, ancient peoples sometimes did this as well, but only a few times, so that a site might have, for example, five or six layers of occupation lasting 200-300 years. Why did ancient peoples go to the trouble of building their dwellings upon earlier ruins rather than on fresh ground? One hypothesis is that they did so to avoid floods. In much of Iran, rainfall is rather meager and the

vegetation is thin, but when rain does occur, it can rapidly lead to flooding. In 2016, we witnessed a flood in Northern Khorasan province, when a 15-minute rainstorm turned the foot of a mountain into an ocean of torrent, endangering dwellings standing right upon the ground. To test the flooding hypothesis, we opened a long trench, Trench 1, to the south of the tepe. It is 30m long and 2m wide so as to arch over the tepe and the outside area, enabling us to investigate the early history of the tepe and the interaction between flooding and human occupation.

Excavation was resumed in 2018, and the trench was extended up on to Tepe Naderi, but due to the outbreak of COVID-19, the excavation planned for 2020 was canceled. The project is planned to be a long-term one, and we hope to resume the excavation as soon as possible. As a result of the two seasons of fieldwork in 2016 and 2018 [Fig. 2], we have established a sequence for the earliest strata and identified a number of features. The earliest ones discovered to date are from the late Chalcolithic/early Bronze Age (5128±30 cal BP). One is a sturdy mud-brick wall, which may have served as the perimeter of the tepe, the whole of which is datable to the Bronze Age. Upon the alluvial deposit that has accumulated on the original surface of the tepe, however, several features of the Islamic period (291-0 cal BP, 2 Sigma, 95.4% probability) have been found. In one large pit a good number of examples of blue-and-white stonepaste ware from the Qajar Dynasty (1789-1925) were found [Fig. 3]. The blue-and-white porcelain of the Ming and Qing dynasties was so popular in the Islamic world that it inspired the production of imitations using locally available sand, clay, and glass. This phenomenon, which has long been treated in Western scholarship, has caught little attention from Chinese scholars. The unexpected discovery of blue-and-white stonepaste wares provides a welcome opportunity to revive the long-forgotten history of the vibrant trade between China and Iran.

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Longquan Celadon Found in Kenya

Yu Ding

Ceramics are forever being excavated in important sites throughout Eastern Africa, proving the existence of connections and exchanges between this region and ancient China. Longquan celadon, which is the best celadon among ceramics of China, was mainly produced in Longquan, Zhejiang province. Longquan celadon and blue-and-white ware are the most common categories of Chinese ceramics found at these sites. Western archaeologists are continually conducting chronological research at sites based on Chinese ceramics, for which they already have a nearly complete chronological system. Thus, information about Chinese ceramics can be found in most archaeological reports of East African sites. Western researchers rarely pay attention to this information, but it can be used for a more profound analysis of Longquan ware.

In the 1980s, the Chinese researchers Ma Wenkuan and Meng Fanren introduced Chinese ceramics found in Africa, as shown in archaeological reports published in English. Subsequently, archaeologists from Peking University conducted surveys of Chinese ceramics in Kenya from 2010 to 2013, in which I, too, took part. Some research results of the survey have been published. Here I would like to conduct a detailed supplementary analysis of Longquan celadon with the data from two other sites in Kenya, Shanga and Malindi.

The Shanga site is located on the southwest coast of Pate Island, Lamu archipelago. From 1980 to 1988, Mark Horton from Cambridge University excavated there for six seasons, which has provided us with abundant materials. He carried out a statistical study of the different categories of remains, including Chinese ceramics. In Trench 1 and Trenches 6-10, 389 shards of Chinese ceramics were found, including Yue ware, Longquan ware, blue-and-white ware, white porcelain and Changsha ware. The hoard included 230 Longquan shards, or 59% of the Chinese ceramics found in the hoard. In Shanga, the earliest Longquan ware was excavated from the stratum dated 1000 to 1050. From the Late Yuan Dynasty to the early Ming Dynasty, which equal to early 14th century to the beginning of 15th century, 220 shards of Longquan were excavated, or 56% of the Chinese ceramics found at the site. These finds indicate that Longquan is the most important category of imports among Chinese ceramics in Shanga.

Horton made good use of Chinese ceramics to determine the ages of their different contexts. However, when carrying out the survey in Shanga, we found a number of Longquan shards produced during the Southern Song Dynasty (early 12th century to late 13th century). So, although the shards were excavated from a later period, they may have been produced and imported at an earlier time, possibly from the Southern Song to the Ming Dynasty.

Malindi has a similar pronunciation to the Chinese characters "Malin" (麻林) or "Malindi" (麻林地), which appear in the historical records of the Ming Dynasty. A number of researchers regard Malindi as the port where Cheng Ho (郑和), the famous fleet admiral and explorer during early China's early Ming Dynasty, had arrived. Having excavated there, we found 566 shards of Chinese ceramics, including 232 Longquan, or 40% of Chinese ceramics. The percentage of blue-and-white is in fact less than Longquan, at 32%. Interestingly in Malindi, no Longquan ware was produced in the Southern Song Dynasty; most of it being produced in the Yuan Dynasty.

Considering the results of Prof. Qin Dashu's research and the new data from Shanga and Malindi, we can conclude that the Yuan to early Ming Dynasty was when Chinese

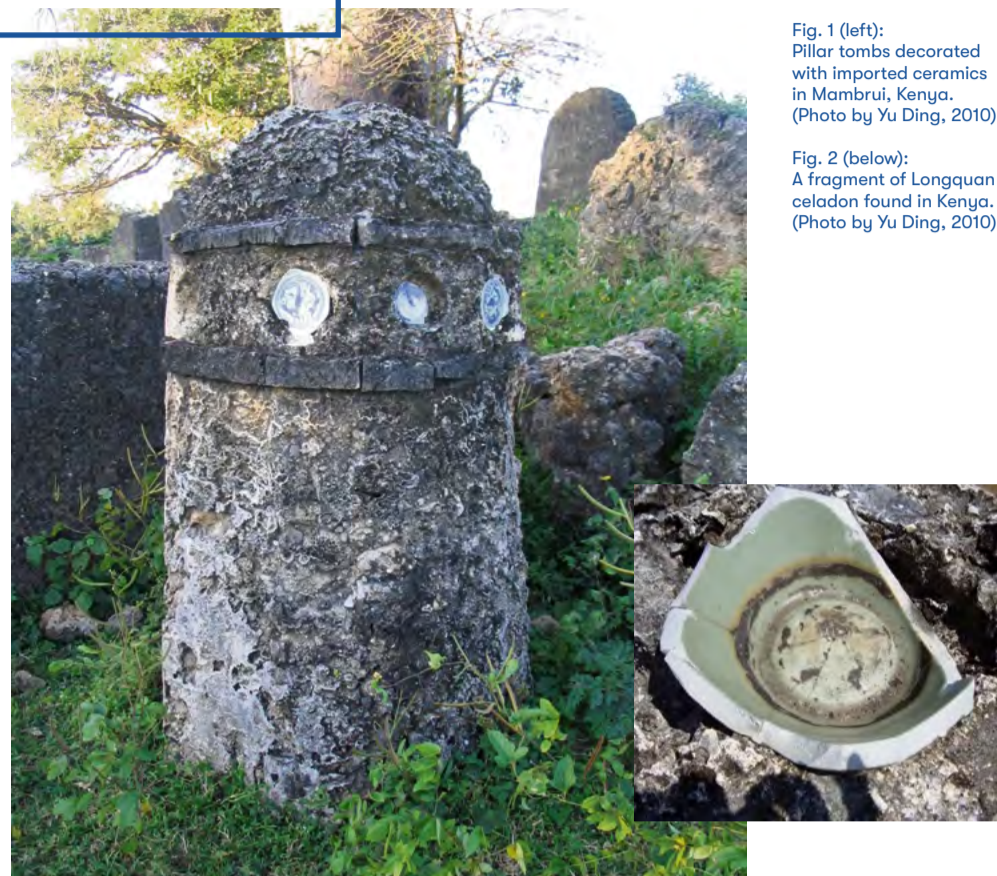


Fig. 1 (left): Pillar tombs decorated with imported ceramics in Mambri, Kenya. (Photo by Yu Ding, 2010)

Fig. 2 (below): A fragment of Longquan celadon found in Kenya. (Photo by Yu Ding, 2010)

ceramic imports peaked in East Africa. During that time, the most important category among Chinese ceramics was celadon ware. Why did Longquan become so important from the 13th to 15th centuries? At that time, China had other famous ceramics, so why was Longquan so much more popular?

For commodities, there are three key aspects affecting their destiny, namely production, circulation, and marketing. Here I will analyze the materials found in East Africa based on these three aspects.

Obviously, there are strong production backgrounds in the 13th to 15th centuries. The situation of production in China formed the material basis of ceramic exports. Production of celadon in Longquan developed quickly from the late Northern Song Dynasty. From the Southern Song Dynasty (ca. early 12th century to late 13th century), the quality of Longquan celadon improved; and from the Southern Song to the Early Ming Dynasty (ca. early 12th century to early 15th century), its production flourished. The technology and scale of its production reached a peak in the Yuan Dynasty (ca. late 13th century to late 14th century). In the early Ming Period (ca. late 14th century to early 15th century), some of the kilns in Longquan supplied ceramics for the imperial court, giving them the highest position among all kilns in China. During this time, a lot of famous kilns underwent processes of change, so the jade-like Longquan products occupied both the domestic and international markets. We can conclude that Longquan celadon became an international brand at that time.

Policy and the safety of travel routes are both aspects of circulation. The governments of the Southern Song and Yuan had a policy of encouraging exports to earn money by selling commodities abroad. Some scholars think that the income from this international trade was an important part of their finance.

From the international perspective, the establishment of the Mongol Empire strengthened the connection between East and West within Eurasia. Especially when Kublai Khan (1216-1294) wanted to win the support of Hulagu Khan (1218-1265), he and his eastern empire communicated with Western Asia more frequently, which also made communication and trade easier. At that time, Muslims from the Middle East were active around the Indian Ocean and they could take advantage of these favorable conditions. Kublai Khan was also trying to expand his empire by sea, and ports on Sumatra also wanted to come close to the Mongols in the hope of setting up special cooperation with them and monopolizing the trade with China. That meant that the routes in Southeast Asia were comparatively safe.

From the perspective of the market, the situation of sites of consumption can also affect the ceramics trade. An example is Shanga, a site that existed from the 8th to 15th centuries. After its abandonment, no Chinese ceramics at all are to be found. The sites at Gedi, Mambri, and Malindi Old Town are three of the most important in the Malindi area. Their periods of prosperity are different, and the amount of Longquan wares seems to have a direct relationship with their developments.

In fact, among the remains found in sites in East Africa, Chinese ceramics are few. However, some of the details about Longquan celadon are interesting. We found that important mosques and pillar tombs are always at the center of the site. It can frequently be seen that the stone mosques and tombs are decorated with ceramics, both Chinese and Islamic. For instance, in Mambri a broken tomb pillar is decorated by Chinese ceramics, with blue and white porcelain around the head of the pillar, and Longquan celadon on the top [Fig. 1]. Stone buildings, mosques, and stone tombs decorated by Chinese ceramics can be associated with the upper classes. This indicates that, although Chinese ceramics are few, they were used by high-class people in Swahili society and were regarded with esteem.

Another question concerns Cheng Ho, who is the most famous explorer of China in early 15th century, led seven well-known voyages to west Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean between 1405 and 1433. In the survey, we found some special Longquan wares, which had been produced in the imperial kiln in Early Ming, whose production was strictly controlled by the government. They were only produced for three purposes: for use by the emperor, as a reward for his ministers, or as a kind of gift in diplomacy. This ruled out the imperial porcelain in East Africa being imported by private trade. The only voyage we know of is Cheng Ho's voyage, as is confirmed by the period of the porcelain's production.

Longquan celadon is the most important kind of Chinese ceramics found in East Africa, and its import peaked from the 13th to 15th centuries. The circumstances of its trade were affected by production, policy, the international environment, and the sites in East Africa. Longquan celadon had a close relationship with the upper classes in East Africa and provides key evidence of Cheng Ho's voyage.

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Fig. 3: Fragments of blue-and-white stonepaste ware of the Islamic period found at Tepe Naderi. (Photo by Ali A. Vahdati, 2018)