

Tracing artefact trajectories—following Chinese export porcelain

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Introduction

Grant McCracken has argued that ‘Consumer goods have a significance that goes beyond their utilitarian character and commercial value’ and that ‘this significance consists largely in their ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning’ (McCracken, 1988: 71). Furthermore, Arjun Appadurai has suggested that the meanings of objects ‘are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories’ (Appadurai, 1986: 5). This paper attempts to follow the trajectories of certain artefacts in order to look at some of the processes by which consumer goods were created, transported, bought, used and disposed of.

Ceramics in general, and Chinese export porcelain in particular, have long been recognised as playing an important role not only for utilitarian purposes but also as a means to display socio-economic status (or class), to demonstrate ‘good taste’ and to allow people to negotiate and construct their place in society (see, for example, Deetz, 1977: 46–61; Otto, 1977: 91–118; Curtis, 1988: 20–31). This paper examines the consumption of a particular type of material culture—Chinese export porcelain by focussing on part of the cargo of the merchant vessel *Sydney Cove* which was wrecked on a voyage to Port Jackson in 1797. However, in order to follow the processes of consumption it is necessary to trace the trajectories of Chinese export porcelain from the sites of production through trade, transport, selection, purchase, use and disposal to its excavation from archaeological sites.

The trade in Chinese export porcelain

The vast majority of the underglaze blue painted porcelain exported to the West was made at Jingdezhen (Ching-tê Chên) in Jiangxi (Kiangsi) province in factories producing wares for the Imperial, domestic (Chinese) and the export markets. Arlene Palmer has suggested that after 1757, when foreign trade was restricted to Canton, the export market in Chinese export underglaze blue porcelain was ‘almost exclusively supplied by the potteries at Jingdezhen’ (Palmer, 1976: 11). However, blue painted wares were also made at places other than Jingdezhen including the Minnan districts of Fujian province (see Ho, 1988). The decoration which appears on these so-called ‘folk’, ‘provincial’ or ‘Kitchen Ch’ing’ wares appears to be simple and indistinct designs painted in pale blue or grey blue underglaze (see Willets & Poh, 1981). Consequently, it is usually easily distinguished from the underglaze blue wares made at Jingdezhen.

The porcelain ware destined for export from Jingdezhen was transported to Canton by one of two routes. The first was down the Yangtse-kiang River to Nanjing (Nanking) where it was transhipped into junks for the sea voyage to Canton: this particular route gave rise to the naming of particular border designs as ‘Nanking’ in the mistaken belief that these porcelains had actually been made at Nanking. The alternate route was up the Kan river through Nanchang, then overland via the Meiling Pass and down river to Canton, which was considerably shorter but in some respects more difficult (see Medley, 1976). At Canton, the blue hand painted export porcelain was sold to foreign merchants and to the representatives of the various East India companies (see Keay, 1991).

The importance of the role played by British merchants resident in India (the so-called Country trade) in the Chinese export porcelain trade during the last decades of the eighteenth century has been seriously underappreciated. For example, in 1792 twenty Indian (or Country Trade) ships carried 30 000 *Taels* worth of Chinese export porcelain to India (and then reshipped much of it to other places) while only four American ships exported just 700 *Taels* worth (Hyde, 1964: 27).

The Country trade was of particular importance in supplying the needs and wants of the early Australian colonies. Between the arrival of the first British convicts and colonists in 1788 and the Age of Macquarie (1810), there were a total of 30 arrivals from ports in India (Madras, Bombay and Calcutta); the majority of them were Country trade vessels. The first, in 1792, was not a Country trader but a merchant vessel, the *Atlantic*, which

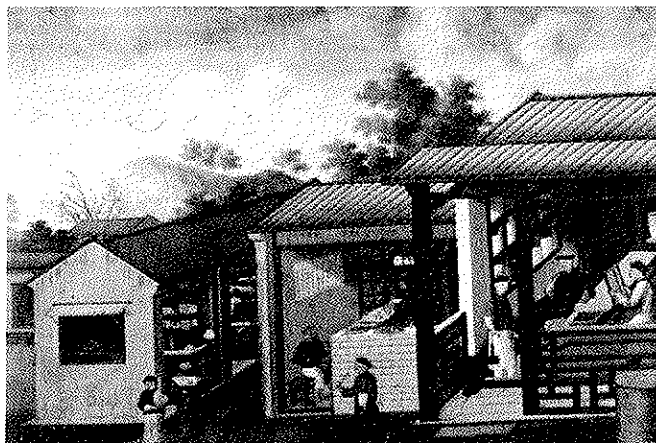


Figure 1. Chinese export porcelain being sold in Canton during the second half of the eighteenth century (photograph courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

was hired by Governor Phillip at Port Jackson to make the voyage to India and return with cargo. This voyage demonstrated to the British merchants in India that there was a market in the Port Jackson colony; so, Country trade ships began to arrive in 1793, with the *Shah Hormuzear*, continuing well into the 1820s.

The Sydney Cove cargo

In recent years, the archaeological excavation of the *Sydney Cove* wreck site has revealed the remains of a shipment of Chinese export porcelain (Strachan, 1986: 62–74; Nash, 1991: 45; Staniforth, 1995: 159–63). In total, about 250 kg of hand-painted Chinese export porcelain was excavated consisting of 160 kg of underglaze blue and 90 kg of polychrome overglaze in the so-called *famille rose* decorative style.

There is very little historical information which may help to indicate the quantity, quality or even the source of this part of the cargo—the earliest newspaper, the *Sydney Gazette*, was first published in 1803, some six years after the vessel sank. Consequently, the available documentary evidence is restricted to a brief mention in Captain Hamilton's protest which states that three cases of 'Chinaware' were salvaged from the wreck and successfully transferred to Sydney. In Sydney, when part of the cargo was sold, David Collins wrote that a single cup and saucer sold for twenty-two shillings (Strachan, 1986: 74).

Archaeologists are always interested in the possible function or use of an object and this is a subject which can result in endless argument. The first point that needs to be made is that there appear to be three functional groups represented in the underglaze blue Chinese export porcelain ware part of the cargo of the *Sydney Cove*—tea ware (tea cups and saucers), dinner ware (plates and hot water plates) and toiletry ware (chamber pots, washing water bottles and bowls).



Figure 2. Chinese export porcelain from the wreck of the *Sydney Cove* (photograph courtesy of the Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston).

Toiletry wares

Within these functional groups there are examples where the form unambiguously reveals function (at least, to most twentieth century Westerners) such as the chamber pot. In some cases, however, the form may have a slightly less obvious function such as a globular-bodied vessel with a long slender neck which has been variously described in the literature as a flask, bottle, vase, ewer, pitcher or gugglet/goglet.

Comparative evidence from similar period Chinese export porcelain and other evidence suggests that these pieces came as part of a toiletry set such as the matching pair, consisting of a water bottle and a washing bowl, which is reputed to have belonged to George Washington and is now held in the Lewis collection at the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution (Detweiler, 1982: 161). This particular pair has been dated to approximately 1775–85 and Detweiler suggests that these may be an example of the '6 Wash hand Gugglets and Basons' which George Washington ordered in 1785 (Detweiler, 1982: 209). Other examples include the gugglet and basin from the *Diana* (1817) collection (Christie's, 1995) and an eighteenth-century Dutch example made of brass held in the Koopmans de Wet House in Cape Town.

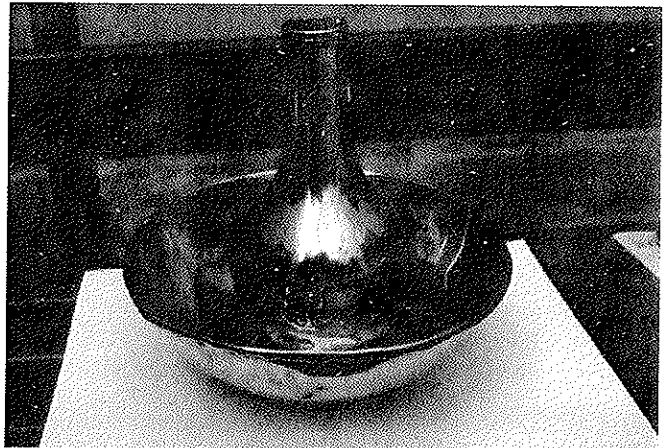


Figure 3. Brass gugglet and basin held in the Koopmans de Wet house, Cape Town, South Africa (photograph by Mark Staniforth)

Dinner wares

At least 182 (or more than fifteen dozen) dinner plates were raised during the excavation; this figure is based on the weight of fragments alone and almost certainly represents an underestimation of the total number of plates carried. Unfortunately, not one plate was complete and intact although some were found broken but still stacked *in situ* and so were able to be largely reassembled after excavation.

In some respects, the importance of the Chinese export porcelain part of the *Sydney Cove* cargo lies as much in what was not present as what was there. The point about these plates is that they do not appear to have formed a part of a larger 'dinner set' or 'dinner service'—in fact there appears to have been no other material in the cargo which matches these plates. This is despite the fact that dinner services in Chinese export porcelain were quite clearly available much earlier as a set from the wreck of the *Geldermalsen* (1752) demonstrates (Christie's, 1986).

Furthermore, the way in which these pieces were stacked with the remains of straw in and around them suggests that these plates were transported not in cases but as a roll. Consequently, the plates may have been sold individually or in groups (or sets) of plates such as half dozens or dozens but they were not a part of a dinner set or dinner service.

In addition to the ordinary plates, there were also 48 octagonal hot water plates (also called warming plates or chafing dishes) raised during the excavation. Mudge (1986: 149) illustrates a very similar hot water dish which is (probably incorrectly) dated *c.* 1740–1760. This particular type of hot water plate has a long history, being seen in the form of pewter hot water plates dating from earlier centuries. As a form, it was introduced to the Chinese during the eighteenth century and was commonly reproduced in underglaze blue, polychrome overglaze and other decorative styles particularly during the nineteenth century. Long-established British cultural attitudes about the necessity for keeping food hot can be discerned in the form of these hot water plates.

Tea wares

Tea was first introduced into Europe from China in the early seventeenth century. Tea drinking became a widely practised social ritual during the next two centuries in Great Britain and the British colonies such as America and Australia. Integrated research on tea drinking in America during the eighteenth century has demonstrated the links between more elaborate tea sets, increasingly ritualised behaviour and notions of social status (see Roth, 1988: 439–62; Emmerson, 1992: 1–42). Anne Yentch, for example, has suggested that Chinese export porcelain tea wares added 'touches of Chinese elegance' to 'sociable dining and drinking at the governor's mansion' in Annapolis, Maryland during the first half of the eighteenth century (Yentsch, 1994: 133). Generally, the incidence of porcelain tea wares has been interpreted by archaeologists as having status implications (usually associated with higher status) and as indicative of everything from something as simple as the presence of women on sites to more complex notions about the ritualization of family meals and increasing gentility (see, for example, Wall, 1994: 122–25).

Both the teapot and tea bowl were of Chinese origin but were progressively altered for, and by, Western usage; the addition of handles to the tea bowl and the locating

depression on the saucer to create the recognisably modern teacup and saucer together with the concept of matching sets were two of the changes which occurred over time, often in response to changes in European fashion. The Chinese had made cups with handles for centuries but preferred the handleless variety for tea drinking (see Hobson, 1976: 277). At the end of the eighteenth century tea cups (with handles) were about twice as expensive as the traditional tea bowl as well as being both wasteful of space in their packaging and more easily broken.

As far as the tea ware in the *Sydney Cove* collection is concerned there were only tea bowls (cups) and saucer-dishes (saucers) of the traditional (Chinese) form—small tea bowls without handles and saucers without the locating indentation for the tea bowl. However, it should be noted that most of the tea bowls and saucer-dishes did come as a matching pair. During the excavation no teapots nor any of the associated items such as sugar bowls (Fr. *sucriers*), milk jugs or cups with handles which went to make up a 'tea-set' were located.

Taphonomic processes need to be considered as contemporary salvage was one issue which contributed to the way in which the wreck site of the *Sydney Cove* was formed. What do we know about the three cases of Chinaware which were salvaged at the time and transported to Sydney after the wreck event—generally, what was in those cases and specifically, were there any teawares? The only evidence which we have is in the form of two broken handles located on Preservation Island—one is a single handle about the right size for a cup handle and the other is part of a crossed (or strap) handle about the right size for a teapot handle. These may have been from contemporary salvage operations—broken and discarded at the time although it is also possible that these were personal items which belonged to the master, officers or passengers. This reminds us that, although we have a significant proportion of the Chinese export porcelain cargo present in the *Sydney Cove* collection, we do not have all of it and that other forms about which we know little or nothing may well have been present in the cargo.

The sale of Chinese export porcelain in early Sydney

In 1803, mention of the arrival of the *Castle of Good Hope* from Calcutta, belonging to the House of Campbell and the largest ship to arrive in the colony to that date, appeared in the very first edition of the *Sydney Gazette* (5 March 1803: 1–3). Detailed evidence about the importation of ceramics in general and Chinaware in particular is somewhat more difficult to locate in the newspaper. One of the greatest difficulties is knowing what the early nineteenth century residents of Sydney actually meant by 'China' or even the seemingly unambiguous 'China ware'—the usual assumption is that it refers to ceramics from China and specifically to Chinese export porcelain (see Corcoran, 1993: 35). However, it is necessary to consider evidence such as that provided by

an English newspaper of 1760 which advertised 'a good assortment of Foreign China and a great variety of useful English China of the newest improvement' (*The Leeds Intelligencer*, 28 Oct. 1760 quoted in Emmerson, 1992: 28). This suggests that, as early as the mid-eighteenth century, the term 'China' was not necessarily restricted to ceramics which came from China.

Bearing in mind the potential problems associated with emic meaning, a comprehensive examination of the *Sydney Gazette* for the years 1803 to 1810 is currently being undertaken for evidence about the importation and/or sale of 'China'. This research has come up the following results about what was being sold, how it was being sold and who was selling it:

- * evidence for the sale of second-hand 'China' comes from an advertisement for a sale by private contract of the household furnishings from a house which included:

'A quantity of China' (*Sydney Gazette* [SG] 10 April 1803: 4);

another advertisement for the household furniture of a dwelling house included the comment that it was

'...well furnished with China etc' (SG 5 Feb. 1804: 4);

and the sale of the property of Captain William Kent on his departure from the colony included:

'...one China spice box, a China work box' (SG 7 April 1805: 1).

- * evidence that 'China' could still arrive in Port Jackson from London comes from an advertisement for the sale of the 'capital investment' brought by the ship *Cato* which included:

'China...in sets' (SG 17 April 1803: 3);

'China...of every description' (SG 17 April 1803: 4);

'China plates and dishes, Ditto Tureens and Sauce-boats' (SG 15 May 1803: 4).

- * In 1803 Simeon Lord advertised for sale at his 'long-established' shop:

'...an extensive assortment of China' (SG 24 April 1803: 4);

and Lord appears to have purchased part of the cargo of the *Cato* in order to resell it at auction as he lists the following in a subsequent advertisement:

'China plates, dishes, tureens, &c' (SG 22 May 1803: 1).

- * J. Driver operating from a house in Chapel Row advertised a variety of ceramics including:

'China in tea sets, very cheap

Ditto in odd table pieces' (SG 21 Aug. 1803: 2).

- * Ann Grant advertised for sale at her house at the centre of Pitt's Row:

'Large handsome blue and white Water and other jugs. Some elegant Table China' (SG 14 Aug. 1803: 1).

- * Sergeant Packer, also operating from a house in Pitt's Row, advertised for sale:

'A set of blue China dishes and plates' (SG 25 March 1804: 3).

Chinese export porcelain from archaeological sites in Sydney

The current phase of this research is to examine the Chinese export porcelain from terrestrial archaeological sites as it does occur in small (and sometimes large) quantities on a number of sites in early Sydney (see Corcoran, 1993). For example, there is a small quantity of Chinese export porcelain in the assemblages from the 1983 and 1990/91 excavations at the First Government House site—home of the early Governors.

The vast majority of this material consists of sherds of plates, however, there are also fragments of tea wares, pieces of bowl and sherds from what appear to be tureen stands or meat platters which were all found in the early phases of occupation. In addition there are fragments of toiletry ware sets identical to the *Sydney Cove* examples; classified in the artefact catalogue as an 'Oriental porcelain covered bowl' was a piece of Chinese export porcelain chamber pot and described as an 'Oriental porcelain footed bowl' was a group of fragments which once formed a gugglet.

More recently there has been a considerable amount of Chinese export porcelain excavated from Cumberland Street in the Rocks. Among the fragments of plates, bowls, teawares and tureens are pieces of identical chamber-pots and gugglets which came from the securely dated pre-1815 context of a well on the property of George Cribb who was an emancipated convict and butcher (Karskens, 1994).

Having established that the *Sydney Cove* (certainly) and other Country trade vessels (probably) were supplying toiletry sets, also that sherds of very similar individual items which made up toiletry sets have turned up on sites including First Government House and Cumberland Street, what does this say about attitudes to cleanliness and personal hygiene in early Sydney? Ordinarily the wash sets consisting of a jug, bowl and chamber-pot have been associated with the Victorian era when they became extremely common. It is interesting that such sets should have been available at the end of the eighteenth century and their consignment to Port Jackson may reflect British merchants' ideas about washing and living in hot climates. More generally objects associated with the development of personal appearance and hygiene (such as tooth-brushes and hairbrushes) have been interpreted both as supporting structures of domination and social differentiation as well as symptomatic of the increased importance placed on outward appearance in modern society (see Shackel, 1993: 143, 152–57).

Grace Karskens has argued that the residents of the Rocks were 'very materially minded people' and the

evidence provided by the variety, types and quality of Chinese export porcelain from sites like First Government House and Cumberland Street supports this argument (Karskens, 1994: 1). Furthermore, this evidence suggests that, from a very early date, emancipated convicts, such as George Cribb, had gathered sufficient economic capacity (or wealth) to be able to afford to purchase not only individual Chinese export porcelain plates but in some cases tea sets and dinner wares in addition to plates and even toiletry sets.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to trace the trajectories of some Chinese export porcelain artefacts from their place of production through the processes of transport, consumption and disposal to their archaeological excavation. This approach has used artworks, archival documents and newspapers employing both quantitative and qualitative historical and archaeological methodology as well as comparative artefact analysis of material from museum collections and archaeological assemblages. It has suggested that it was possible for people in the past to attach different meanings to artefacts and for archaeologists to read artefacts in different ways.

The point is that it is important to go beyond a simple description of the objects that are excavated from an archaeological site. The words which are used in some (and perhaps many) artefact catalogue descriptions can sometimes do more to hide or obscure the meaning of an object in its original historical and cultural context. The detailed study of material culture including comparison with similar objects in other collections is a key feature of understanding and interpreting the past. This point has been made before, of course, for example by Mary Beaudry when she suggested that the categories used to describe Chesapeake ceramics were too general to allow comparison between artefacts (Beaudry, 1988: 43–50).

The level of description which appears in some artefact catalogues will only permit a comparison at the most simplistic level of flatware versus holloware—which in effect means nothing. Consequently, it has been necessary to individually examine each sherd and to develop a more complete description of both form and decoration before being able to use the data. The results demonstrate that it is possible to distinguish between dinner wares, tea wares and toiletry wares with their separate and distinct associated cultural meanings.

The archaeology of the *Sydney Cove* is an example of an archaeology of the event—the wreck was an important historical event in terms of the early settlement history of Australia but the wreck site also represents an opportunity to incorporate the archaeology of the event into larger issues and themes such as consumption and colonisation as well as reflecting on cultural attitudes associated with dining, tea drinking and personal hygiene. The study of the cargoes of shipwrecks like the *Sydney Cove* provides us with opportunities to look in detail at cargoes which did

not make it to their destination. By extension to the many other cargoes which did arrive in the Australian colonies at the time and by careful comparison with what has been found on terrestrial archaeological sites, and what is held in museum collections, it may be possible to gain a better appreciation of the ways in which cultural attitudes were established in the early Australian colonies, communicated, maintained and mediated through the material culture imported.

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