

**WHAT'S IN THE POT?
AN EMIC STUDY OF CHINESE BROWN GLAZED STONEWARE**

Jeannie K. Yang and Virginia R. Hellmann
Anthropological Studies Center
Sonoma State University
Rohnert Park, CA 94928

ABSTRACT

Chinese brown glazed stoneware is one of the most common artifact types encountered on Overseas Chinese archaeological sites, yet most reports only provide descriptions of their forms. Little ethnoarchaeological research has been done to determine the actual functions of the various vessels. Using information from oral interviews with older Chinese Americans, this paper will examine the use and re-use of the kinds of Chinese brown glazed stoneware uncovered from the Sacramento HI56 block in 1994. A synthesis of the form and function of these utilitarian wares not only aids the archaeologist in identification, but also offers insight into Chinese immigrants' daily lives in Gold Rush California.

INTRODUCTION

Chinese brown glazed stoneware, also known as utilitarian brown ware, is one of the most common artifact forms found on Overseas Chinese archaeological sites. Although everyone describes them in the site reports, very few people seem to know exactly what went into these vessels. Using data from oral interviews with Chinese elders, this paper will illustrate the use and re-use of the Chinese brown glazed stoneware found from the Sacramento HI56 project, and give us insight into Chinese immigrants' food culture in Gold Rush California.

During the excavation in Sacramento in the winter of 1994, we unearthed a large quantity of these brown ware sherds. A search into the literature made us realize that information on these utilitarian vessels is quite scarce. Most of the references can be traced back to Paul Chace's essay, "Overseas Chinese Ceramics," in *The Changing Faces of Main Street*, a report completed in the mid-seventies (Chace 1976). Another frequently cited source is John Olsen's "A Study of Chinese Ceramics Excavated in Tucson" (Olsen 1978).

Not too much attention is paid to these containers because they are quite rough, and not as aesthetically pleasing as compared to the more well-known blue-on-white and celadon porcelain artifacts. But they are important, because these

jars can tell you what the Chinese were eating after they moved to the U.S. We decided that it was time for another investigation into Chinese brown glazed stoneware. Yang interviewed Chinese elders to find out what they know of these vessels, while Hellmann crossmended the stoneware sherds to determine the composition of our collection (see Table 1). Odd vessel types that had not been documented in the past were set aside in the hopes that more information would be obtained from Chinese consultants.

Because the majority of the earliest Chinese immigrants in the U.S. came from the province of Canton, I made sure my interview subjects had all lived in that particular region at one time or another. Most of the elders are in their sixties or seventies, and all speak fluent Cantonese, one of the local dialects in Canton.

So what did they tell me? Well, I found out that these stoneware vessels were all containers of food and were produced locally in Canton, with those made in Shek Wan being the most famous (Laird 1918; Lee 1995). They are very hard to date, because the form of the pots remained pretty much the same for roughly 200 years or more (Morrow 1995). These pots come in various sizes and shapes. The color of the exterior glaze varies as well, from an iridescent brown to almost black, while the interior glaze is typically just a thin, light brown.

TABLE 1. CHINESE BROWN GLAZED STONWARE FROM THE SACRAMENTO HI56 PROJECT

Type	Minimum Number of Vessels
Spouted Jar	10
Liquor Bottle	31
Wide-Mouthed Jar	42
Globular Jar	27
Straight-Sided Jar	16
Barrel Jar	12
Pan	4
<u>PREVIOUSLY UNDOCUMENTED</u>	
Rectangular Vessel	1
Recessed-Rim Jar	1
Lug-Handled Jar	1
Straight-Sided Jar	1

According to one of my sources, the vessels were made by hundreds of small potters in Canton, which would explain the thousands of minute differences in the pots of a given form (Morrow 1995). Some of the pots have incised marks on their side or base, but because many pottery workers were illiterate, the characters are often illegible. After being produced in pottery kilns, they would be shipped to food processing factories to be filled with food items, then transported to the stores in various towns. You could buy them almost anywhere about sixty to seventy years ago, but they started disappearing from the markets within the last decade, when interior designers decided these pots actually looked good in people's living rooms (Lee 1995). In a visit to San Francisco's Chinatown in the spring of 1995, I was only able to locate three of the seven major types, all of which came with food products already inside, just like they would have in the nineteenth-century.

During the interviews, I was informed that, until after WWII, Chinese people were generally very poor. Typical Chinese farmers did not get a lot of meat in their diet, mostly because they could not afford to kill a chicken or a pig unless there was a special occasion. Salty items that could add some flavor to a bland diet, such as pickled broccoli stems or preserved tofu, comprised a large component of their meals (Lee and Lee 1995; Soo 1995).

As for re-using these stoneware containers, any hollow vessel would be re-used. The common household did not have time to care about what held their food. Instead, what they really cared about was whether there was going to be any food at all. One of my sources, Mr. Philip Choy, laughed when I asked what could have gone into these pots after their original contents had been consumed. He said, "These are general food containers. You archaeologists are always looking for one particular function, but these Chinese containers weren't used that way. They would be used for anything, and there was no gospel involved" (Choy 1995).

Another elder told me the same thing. She said that there were no fixed rules on these vessels (Poon and Poon 1995). In other words, there was not a Chinese brown glazed stoneware cop out there, checking into every household to make sure they were putting the "right" things into the right pots. So in terms of re-use, it was really up to the individual.

Almost all of the emic names are based on the containers' form rather than function. For example, in Chinese the spouted jar would be translated as "stoneware pot." This further demonstrates that these containers do not have just one particular use.

WHAT'S IN THE POT?

Without any further ado, I will now show you the types we found in Sacramento. For each vessel, I will tell you the most common product that came in it, followed by what my sources told me about its re-use.

Spouted Jar

Spouted jars, or *nga hú*, are frequently called a soy pot in archaeological literature, because they were known to contain soy sauce (Figure 1). This name is misleading, however, because it implies that the vessel only held soy sauce. From the interviews, I learned that the spouted jars also contained other food items such as liquor, black vinegar, and peanut oil. In rural areas they have been used as teapots, although that is apparently quite rare (Jou 1995; Lee and Lee 1995; Poon and Poon 1995).

Liquor Bottle

Our next vessel is the liquor bottle, or *tsáo tsun* (Figure 2). They have also been called wine bottles in the past. The problem with this name is that the word *tsáo* in Chinese can mean wine, liquor, or spirits, but is invariably translated as "wine" by the Chinese (Sprague 1987). This translation is misleading, because in Western culture the term "wine" specifically refers to drinks produced from fermented fruits, where as to the Chinese, *tsáo* really refers to both fermented and distilled alcoholic beverages.

Rick Sprague made a good case arguing that these were more likely liquor than wine bottles. He noted that Chinese *wine* was very ordinary in taste and could easily have been duplicated in California by the early immigrants. Chinese *liquor*, on the other hand, was quite distinctive in its flavor and would have been very difficult to make in the U.S., because often even the basic grain was not available. So there really would not have been any point in transporting Chinese *wine* all the way across the Pacific when there was probably a much greater market for Chinese *liquor* (Sprague 1987).

Two common types of Chinese liquor were and still are sold in these bottles. They are called *Mm Ga Pei (Ng Ga Py)* and *Mui Guai Lo (Mei Guei Lo)*, which are around 100 proof, and are used for cooking as well as drinking. The liquor bottles are not known to be re-used for anything other than to be refilled with the liquor that came in them (Lee and Lee 1995; Poon and Poon 1995).

Wide-Mouthed Jar

Our third type of brown ware is the wide-mouthed jar, or *fút hów ngá peng* (Figure 3). There is a wide variety of shapes and sizes within this category. In the past, they have been called shouldered jars. They are very similar to Mason jars in Western culture, because both were mass-produced for food storage, but could also be re-used for other purposes (Olsen 1978:32). These jars originally contained preserved tofu. They also held sweet bean paste, black, brown, and white beans, pickled turnips, cabbage, and shrimp paste. In households they could be used to store various condiments as well (Jou 1995; Lee 1995; Lee and Lee 1995; Poon and Poon 1995).

Globular Jar

The next type is the globular jar, or *ching* (Figure 4). I was told that their original content was hard liquor, but apparently oil may also have been sold in these jars. Stores and taverns used the bigger ones for shipping purposes, while the medium and small ones were used mostly in households. They could be used to store soy sauce as well. In terms of re-use, people might have stored items such as pickled carrots, scallions, salted cabbage, melons, cucumbers, ginger, and salty duck eggs (Lee 1995; Poon and Poon 1995; Soo 1995).

Straight-Sided Jar

The fifth major category is the straight-sided jar, or *jiung* (Figure 5). The small ones were used by some Chinese doctors to store medicinal ointment. In addition to storing preserved tofu, these jars also could have contained maltose, which is a sweet, sticky substance used in Cantonese cooking. One Chinese elder told me that they can be used to hold Chinese medicinal herbs or to steam food items as well (Jou 1995; Lee 1995; Poon and Poon 1995).

Barrel Jar

The barrel jar, or *ngá gong*, was basically a huge straight-sided jar (Figure 6). One of my sources is the daughter of a sugar factory owner. She said that she could remember hundreds of these barrel jars in her dad's factory, where sheet sugar, roughly the size of a Hershey's candy bar, would be packed upright in the jars so they would not move around during transport. My sources tell me they have used the barrel jars to store rice, other grains, sticky rice powder, and whole soy beans. Before tap water, these jars were also left outside the house to catch rain drops for later use. The bigger sized ones apparently were

sometimes used to ship the bones of the dead back to China. In Cantonese custom, the body was exhumed after ten years, and with the bones arranged in a certain way in the jar, you would re-bury the whole thing (Jou 1995; Lee 1995; Lee and Lee 1995; Poon and Poon 1995; Yang 1995).

Pan

Before I go onto the next category, I want to mention that all of the types described above could have been found in the kitchens of both the farmer and the merchant class, because you would buy these containers from the store with food already inside, and it did not matter what your economic background is.

This next one, however, was only used by the poor. It is called the pan, or *tsoi but*, but was not used to cook food in (Figure 7). Instead, it was a serving dish. In China, the pan was used by beggars or Buddhist monks to collect food or money. Farmers and servants could have used these too, but the merchant class definitely would not. At the Chew Kee Store in Fiddletown, California, we saw examples of the pan being used as lids for wide-mouthed jars. When I asked my consultants, they said that these pans probably could have been used that way too, because people really were not *that* particular about the functions. The common folks had very limited resources, so anything they could find, they would use (Jou 1995; Lee 1995; Lee and Lee 1995; Poon and Poon 1995).

Now we will go into the odd types from Sacramento that have not been reported elsewhere (Hellmann and Yang 1997). Unfortunately none of the elders has seen these either, so it is unclear what went into these pots.

Rectangular Vessel

First is the rectangular vessel (Figure 8). This has a rectangular shape with a circular opening at the top. We do not know exactly how tall it stands because it is incomplete. The sherds are very thick and sturdy compared to most of the other brown glazed stoneware types.

Recessed-Rim Jar

Next is the recessed-rim jar, which is globular in body, but has a seat for a lid (Figure 9). It is a much finer-grained stoneware, and has a much thinner body compared to that of the globular jar. This vessel is eight inches in height.

Lug-Handled Jar

Here we have a lug-handled jar, which stands about 4 1/2 inches tall, and may have two or more lugs (Figure 10). It may have looked like a spouted jar with lugs originally, like the one found archaeologically in Riverside, California, in the mid-1980s (Brott 1987:239).

Square Straight-Sided Jar

Our last odd item is a square straight-sided jar, which has a square base with a square lip for a lid, similar to the straight-sided jars described earlier (Figure 11). It stands about four inches tall, and its contents are very likely to be the same as that of its circular counterpart. I want to point out that there is an impressed mark on its base, and the characters are *sanji*, or "three mark." These characters are printed right-side left, and currently we do not have an explanation for this mirror-imaging effect.

CONCLUSION

Although we cannot be certain that these pots were used in exactly the same way by early Overseas Chinese immigrants, it is safe to assume they served very similar purposes 150 years ago, mainly because Chinese foodways have not changed that much. Nowadays you just get more oil and meat when you go to Chinese restaurants, and the preserved dishes are usually not served unless you feel like you want to get a taste of the olden days.

To conclude, we can say that, despite the foreign environment that surrounded them, the Chinese who lived in Sacramento during the Gold-Rush Period were able to retain some of their native foodways. Chinese merchants, knowing their countrymen's tastes, imported familiar items into the U.S., which found a ready market in Old Sacramento. Resources were few, so Chinese brown glazed stoneware became your everyday Tupperware. We hope this paper will standardize the terminology of this commonly found artifact form, and shed some light on the everyday food consumption of the early Chinese immigrants. Without an emic study, you will never know what's in the pot.

NOTES

Figures 1, 2, 3, 5, and 7 are from *The Changing Faces of Main Street* (Chace 1976), while Figures 4 and 6 are from *The Chinese Laundry on Second Street: Papers on*

Archeology at the Woodland Opera House Site (Felton, Lortie, and Schulz 1984),

We would like to thank Dr. Julia Costello and Jeffrey Tuttle for inviting us to examine their extensive collection of Chinese brown glazed stoneware in Mokelumne Hill. Thanks also to Dr. Priscilla Wegars, Trelle Morrow, Melissa Farncomb, and Dr. Paul Chace, who shared their previous work and data on this subject. Special thanks to Dr. Adrian Praetzellis and Mary Praetzellis, who are never too busy to answer our questions or give us

input. Thanks to Grace Ziesing, Field Director of the Sacramento HI56 project, and Sunshine Psota, the Lab Director, without whose work this research would not have been possible. Michael Stoyka III's efforts in completing the illustrations under time constraint are greatly appreciated. Lastly, we are indebted to Faye Chang, Jean Chen, Philip Choy, Shen-Shang Jou, Hai and Kam Fung Lee, Kin-Fai Lee, Marie and Harold Poon, Annie Soo, Siu-Jie Wong, and Jay and Rosa Yang, for without their assistance, we would still be in the dark as to "what's in the pot."

REFERENCES CITED

- Brott, Clark W.
1987 Utilitarian Stoneware from the Wong Ho Leun Site: A Pictorial Essay. In *Wong Ho Leun: An American Chinatown*, pp. 233-249. Great Basin Foundation, San Diego, California.
- Chace, Paul G.
1976 Overseas Chinese Ceramics. In *The Changing Faces of Main Street*, edited by Roberta S. Greenwood, pp. 509-530. Great Basin Foundation, San Diego, California.
- Choy, Philip
1995 Past President of the Chinese Historical Society of America. Interview by Jeannie Yang, 31 October 1995, San Francisco.
- Felton, David L., Frank Lortie, and Peter D. Schulz
1984 The Chinese Laundry on Second Street: Archeological Investigations at the Woodland Opera House Site. In *The Chinese Laundry on Second Street: Papers on Archeology at the Woodland Opera House Site*, pp. 1-109. Department of Parks and Recreation, Sacramento, California.
- Hellmann, Virginia R. and Jeannie K. Yang
1997 Previously Undocumented Chinese Artifacts. In *Historical Archaeology of an Overseas Chinese Community in Sacramento, California. Volume 1: Archaeological Excavations*, edited by Mary Praetzellis and Adrian Praetzellis, pp. 155-202. Anthropological Studies Center, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.
- Jou, Shen-Shang
1995 Visitor to the Chinese Historical Society of America. Interview by Jeannie Yang, 31 October 1995, San Francisco.
- Laird, Clinton N.
1918 The Potteries at Shek Waan, Near Canton, China. *The Journal of Industrial and Engineering Chemistry* 10(7):568-571.
- Lee, Hai and Kam Fung Lee
1995 Residents of San Mateo, California. Interview by Jeannie Yang, 28 October 1995, San Mateo, California.
- Lee, Kin-Fai
1995 Resident of Belmont, California. Letter to Jeannie Yang, 14 October 1995.
- Morrow, Trelle, A.
1995 Resident of Prince George, British Columbia, Canada. Letter to Jeannie Yang, 30 October 1995.
- Olsen, John W.
1978 A Study of Chinese Ceramics Excavated in Tucson. *Kiva* 44(1):1-50.
- Poon, Marie and Harold Poon
1995 Residents of Hillsborough, California. Interview by Jeannie Yang, 4 November 1995, Hillsborough, California.
- Soo, Annie
1995 Board Member of the Chinese Historical Society of America. Interview by Jeannie Yang, 31 October 1995, San Francisco.
- Sprague, Rick
1987 Insert to the Asian Comparative Collection *Newsletter* 4(2).
- Wong, Siu-Jie
1996 Resident of San Francisco, California. Interview by Jeannie Yang, 28 September 1996, San Francisco, California.

Yang, Jay
1995 Resident of Burlingame, California.
Interview by Jeannie Yang, 5 March 1995,
Burlingame, California.



Figure 1. Spouted Jar 瓦壺



Figure 2. Liquor Bottle 酒罇

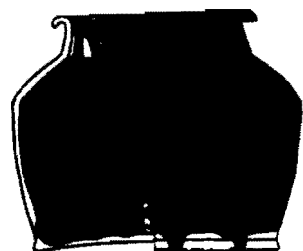


Figure 3. Wide-Mouthed Jar 闊口瓦瓶

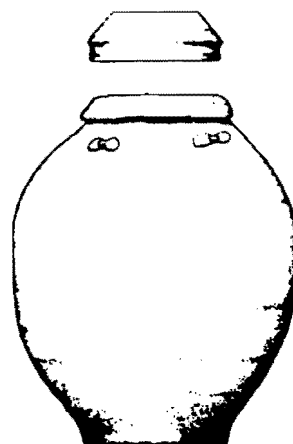


Figure 4. Globular Jar 罍

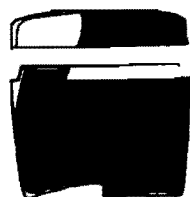


Figure 5. Straight-Sided Jar 甕

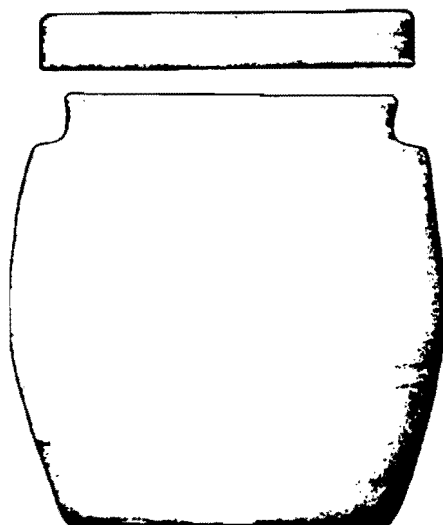


Figure 6. Barrel Jar 瓦缸



Figure 7. Pan 菜鉢

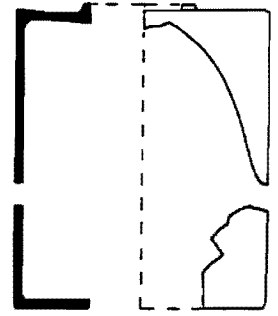


Figure 8. Rectangular Vessel

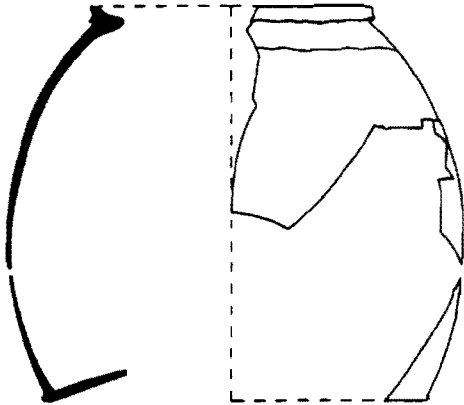


Figure 9. Recessed-Rim Jar

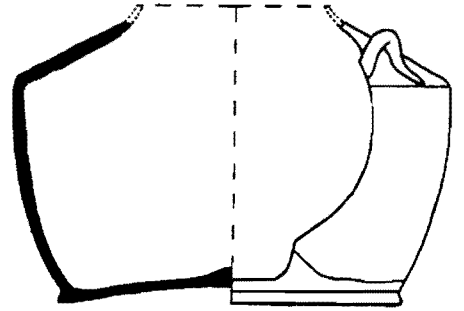


Figure 10. Lug-Handled Jar

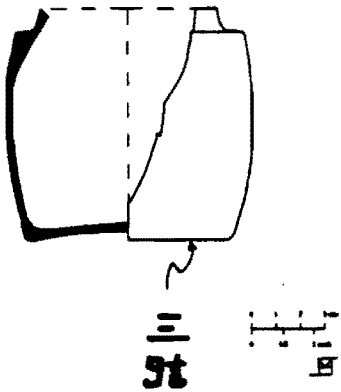


Figure 11. Square Straight-Sided Jar