

A MARK OF MEANING: ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF PECK MARKED VESSELS FROM THE 19TH CENTURY MARKET STREET CHINATOWN

GINA MICHAELS

Ceramic bowls and plates with Chinese characters pecked into their surfaces have been documented on almost every overseas 19th- and early 20th-century Chinese archaeological site in California. For the most part, these vessels have been explained simply as bearing marks of ownership, and further analysis has been uncommon. Given the socio-political atmosphere surrounding Chinese immigration and labor during this time period as well as the cultural relevance of this marking practice, it is my belief that this explanation is incomplete. Through analysis of archaeological materials from the Market Street Chinatown it is my goal to explore the possibility that Chinese immigrants were using and hybridizing the familiar Chinese cultural practice of marking vessels to aid in creating an environment within the Chinatown that was both more comfortable and more livable.

IDENTIFICATION

My first step in analyzing the materials from the 85-31 assemblage was to inspect the entire ceramic collection to identify all vessels with peck marks. In total there are sixteen peck marked vessels in the collection, all of which I analyzed in my study (Table 1). The majority of the pecked vessels have a large amount of interpretive value as they have clear marks and are from areas of the 85-31 portion of this site with some provenience information. There are however, also a few pieces that are broken along their mark and were consequently not fully translated. There were additionally other pieces that were recovered from the surface collection and were not of significant help in the analysis of the spatial distribution of these artifacts across the 85-31 site.

TRANSLATION

Of the sixteen marked vessels in this assemblage, Young Xie and Scott Wilson¹ were able to translate twelve of them. There is also at least one vessel in the collection that is marked with a symbol that does not appear to be a Chinese character. I am yet to find any literature or interpretations that talk in depth about these sorts of peck marks, although I believe that this vessel could either bear an incomplete mark, a mark that was made by an illiterate individual, or a mark that was purposely made to represent something other than a Chinese character. Although this vessel and the others that were not translated were not useful in naming individuals or families, they aided significantly in the spatial analysis performed on this project. The pieces seem to break down into three categories of markings: four are individual names (or nicknames), three are family names, and five are wishes or blessings. It seems that the majority of marked vessels are either family names or blessings. This is an important finding because at other overseas Chinese sites, the diversity in marking practices does not appear to be present. Only one peck marked vessel was found at the site of the Los Angeles Chinatown, this was translated as "Jade," and thought most likely to be an individual's nickname (Greenwood 1996:84). Another example is Dr. Adrian Praetzellis who has excavated a number of Chinese overseas sites and believes that the peck marks that he has seen have all been wishes and blessings (Praetzellis 2003). The Market Street Chinatown 85-31 assemblage also seems to have a much larger number of marked vessels than is generally recorded at other sites where peck marked vessels have been found. Other overseas Chinese sites have typically reported having one or two peck marked vessels (Archeo-tec 2003, Greenwood 1996:84).

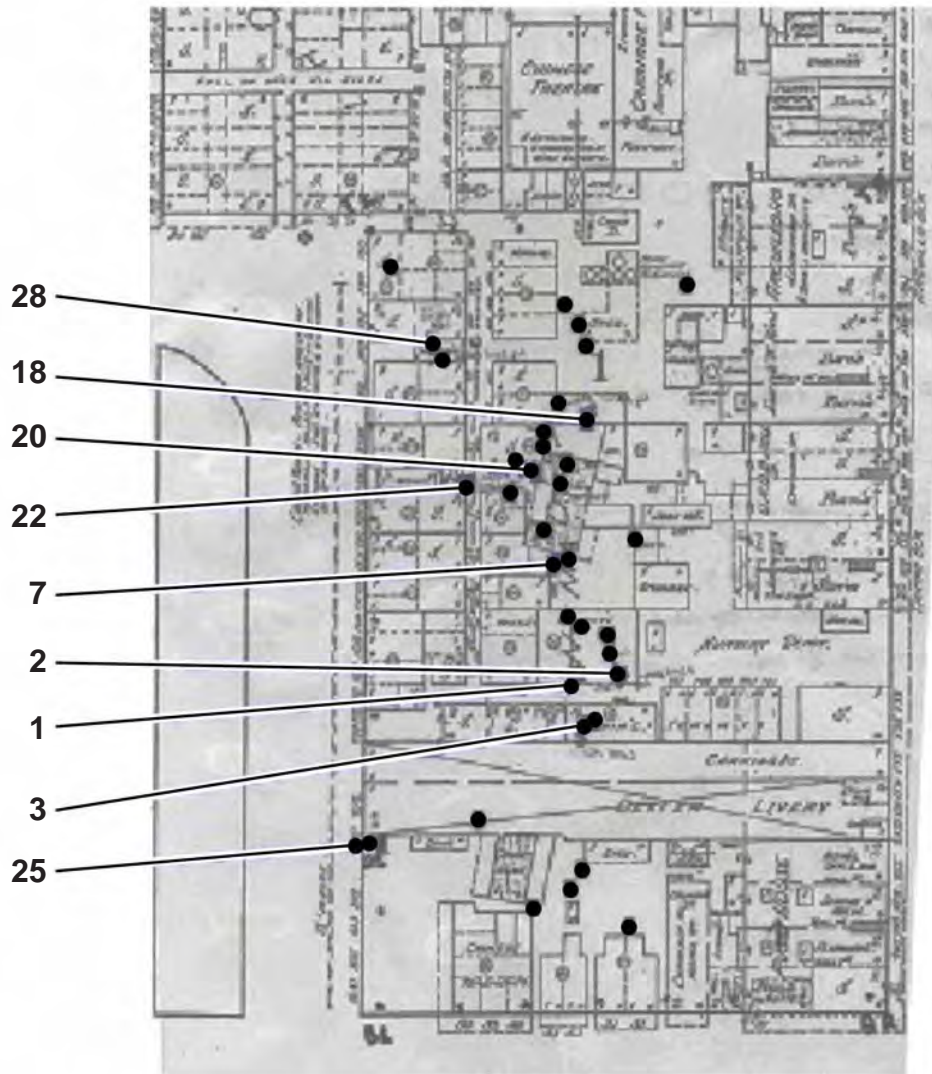


Figure 1: Overlay of archaeological feature map on Sanborn map (adapted from Sanborn-Perris n.d.).

Numbers represent archaeological features containing pecked vessels. Black dots represent all archaeological features from 85-31.

Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1997:164-165). In contrast, sixteen vessels were found in the 85-31 assembly, which covers roughly only half of the area of the Market Street Chinatown site.

SPATIAL AND CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The next phase of my project focused on reconstructing the spatial layout of the Market Street Chinatown. As far as I know there are no good maps of this site. The records that have been kept along with this collection included two maps, one a Sanborn insurance map from the late 19th century (Sanborn-Perris Map Company n.d.) and the other a map of the excavated features (ARS 1985) from this site that was drawn in relation to temporary construction pilings and does not indicate where the features were located once the pilings were removed. The one stable factor between these two maps was the boundary of the area

of the Chinatown. I was able to scale the map of the excavated features from this site so that it fit within the known boundary of the Chinatown shown on the Sanborn map. I then superimposed the features onto the historic map locations to estimate where these vessels would have originally been deposited. The features seemed to appropriately fall into backyards, alleyways and the outsides of building, so while this contextual information was not recorded during excavation, I believe that it is usable. Linking the marked vessels with their recorded feature numbers I was able to see where each of the vessels with provenience information had been deposited on the 85-31 area. I believe that we can in some cases link features to a particular buildings or groups of buildings. With that information we can infer that individuals who pecked characters into these vessels and discarded them in these disposal areas might also have spent time in the buildings associated with these trash features (Figure 1). From this analysis it became clear

that peck marked vessels had been deposited in refuse features associated with buildings throughout the Chinatown.

With the use of these superimposed maps I then analyzed all of the locations where these vessels were excavated and observed trends in the types of marks that appeared on vessels in certain parts of the Chinatown. From the data that I have analyzed, the majority of vessels marked with nicknames or family names appear to be located in portions of the Chinatown identified as tenement houses, whereas the majority of the vessels that have been marked with blessings or wishes are associated with buildings identified as stores. This may imply that differences in cultural practices were related to different living situations.

OTHER INTERPRETATIONS

Other archaeologists and collectors looking at these sorts of peck marked vessels have interpreted them in a variety of ways. Dr. Adrian Praetzellis professor of anthropology and director of the Anthropological Studies Center at Sonoma State University stated that while it does not seem unlikely that these peck marks were made to express ownership, he had never heard of a name being pecked into a vessel. He had instead previously assumed that these sorts of markings were always characters representing luck and blessings (Pretzellis 2003).

Dr. Susan Walter professor of anthropology at St. Mary's College of California informed me that she bought a set of peck marked tea bowls from a Chinese antiques dealer and was told at the time that items of this sort were kept in public tea houses, and were used by the owner of the vessel when they visited the tea house. She compared this practice to the way that American men during the 19th century would keep their personal shaving mugs at a barbershop (Walter 2003).

Jean Shao², a reporter for the Sing Tao Daily, a Chinese language newspaper in Milpitas, California, stated that the practice of pecking symbols of good luck and blessings onto porcelain plates and bowls is very common in China. However, she was uncertain as to why someone would choose to put his or her personal name on a vessel (Shao 2003).

Bill Roop of Archaeological Research Services stated that the British whiteware plates with three diamonds pecked into their surfaces were loaner dishes that were used by individuals in a restaurant or

Catalog #	Vessel Form	Pattern	Character Translation
85-31/BH-1	plate	four flowers	none
85-31/0-4	plate	whiteware	sir, military rank"
85-31/0-175	plate	four flowers	"Zhang" (family name)
85-31/0-188	hollowware	four flowers	"half, partly"
85-31/0-335	bowl	four flowers	none
85-31/1-1	plate	four flowers	"Mahn" (family name)
85-31/2-1	plate	four flowers	"drunk"
85-31/3-1	plate	whiteware	"sir, military rank"
85-31/7-2	plate	four flowers	"sign"
85-31/18-20	plate	four flowers	"peace, harmony"
85-31/18-395	bowl	bamboo	"rising"
85-31/20-22	plate	four flowers	"together"
85-31/22-1	hollowware	four flowers	none
85-31/25-8	bowl	celadon	"dad?"
85-31/20-255	plate	four flowers	none
85-31/28-2	bowl	four flowers	"Kong"

Table 1: List of peck marked vessels in Lot 85-31 of the Market Street Chinatown. Vessels were translated by Scott Wilson and Young Xie. Unless otherwise noted, bamboo, celadon, and four seasons are Chinese porcelains and whiteware is British earthenware.

boarding house who did not own their own tableware. He believes that the three diamonds signify an individual of merchant standing and these marks used to insure that they would be returned to the owner at the end of a meal (Roop 2002).

While there is a fairly consistent interpretation that the peck marks in these vessels surfaces were marks of ownership, there appears to be a diversity of opinions in the archaeological community regarding what type of vessels generally bear these marks. Dr. Rebecca Allen of Past Forward, Inc. stated that she has most often encountered these types of marks on less expensive bamboo style ceramics (Allen 2003). Dr. Roberta Greenwood of Greenwood and Associates Inc. in Santa Monica California, believes that Chinese peck marks often appear on reused British white wares (Greenwood 2003). San Diego County archaeologist Ron May stated that he has seen peck marks primarily on celadon wares and that the peck marks are not actually writing, but instead stylized marks designed by their creators (May 2003). These interpretations provide a helpful background from which to look at the data from the Market Street Chinatown collection; however, none of these interpretations alone explain the breadth and diversity of the Market Street assemblage.

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE MARKET STREET CHINATOWN ASSEMBLAGE

The majority of archaeologists who have interpreted the purpose and significance of peck marked vessels on overseas Chinese sites have looked at much smaller assemblages of pecked vessels. Perhaps this combined with the lack of availability of published materials on this topic has made it extremely difficult to name any one explanation for the existence of these vessels. While all of these interpretations could apply to some vessels in this collection, none of the interpretations are sufficient to account for the entire assemblage. It does appear that ownership is a good blanket explanation for the purpose of these marks, but ownership seems to have been employed through them in several different ways. It is possible that artifacts numbers 85-31/3-1 and 85-31/0-4 (both whiteware plates pecked with the three diamonds, translated as "sir" and interpreted by Bill Roop as a loaner plate) expressed the ownership of a restaurant or business that offered these plates to be used by customers for one meal at a time. This seems like a plausible interpretation, as 85-31/3-1 came from an archeological feature located near a known restaurant. The ownership of artifacts 85-31/1-1 (translated as a family name "Mahn"), and 85-31/2-1 (translated as "drunk") could be interpreted as ownership of vessels by single people living in the close quarters of a tenement building and staking claim over items of personal property. 85-31/20-22 (translated as "together") and 85-31/ 18-20 (translated as peace or harmony) were both recovered in an area associated primarily with family-owned stores, these could be representations of cultural ownership and the desire that extended families might have had to hold onto cultural practices that originated in China.

The creation of a peck mark on a porcelain bowl or plate is not a quick and easy task. Porcelain is an extremely hard, rigid material, and to etch a character through the glaze and into the paste of a vessel one would have needed to apply a hard object with enough force to chip away at its surface, but not so much as to crack the whole vessel. There seems to be something of an art to creating clean legible characters. The Market Street Chinatown collection has a range from very faint and illegible to distinct and easily translatable marks. To make such a mark would not have been a quick endeavor, I believe that each mark would have taken a great deal of time and care. As it was most likely not a casual thoughtless action, specific intention may be attributed to these marks.

Peck marking plates and bowls with symbols of good luck is currently a common practice in China

(Shao 2003). Although more research is needed, it seems possible that the practice may have been just as widespread in the 19th century and that this marking practice could have been a tradition that some of the immigrants to the Market Street Chinatown may have brought with them from China. Holding onto familiar customs and ways of life may have provided a sense of identity for people in an unfamiliar and often hostile environment.

While the marking of porcelain bowls and plates with signs of luck may have been a fairly common practice, it is also possible that the practice of peck marking vessels became a hybridized art form in the Chinatowns of California. Social environments created by the crowded living quarters in tenement houses and the rush of hurried patrons through the doors of a restaurant may have created an environment where personal properties in the Market Street Chinatown felt less secure than they had been in personal homes in China or even in the family run stores just on the other side of the Chinatown. In discussion with Jean Shao, she indicated that in present-day China individuals would not mark their bowls and plates with personal names (Shao 2003). Could the pecked names from the Market Street Chinatown be a result of a marking practice that may have come about as a means of taking an already familiar cultural practice and using in a new way to meet the needs of a foreign environment, thus identifying and insuring a degree of security over one's personal property? These hybrid vessels, marked with names rather than blessings, were found in and around the tenement houses and the restaurant, but were largely absent from the features found around family run stores. This may indicate that the social environment around the tenement houses and restaurant was different enough from the environment that people were accustomed to that a traditional material culture practice was altered to fit the new needs of an unfamiliar environment.

CONCLUSIONS

It is my opinion from looking at the data from the 85-31 assemblage that the peck marks found on these vessels are marks of ownership, but that ownership had a fairly flexible definition and meant different things to different individuals across this area. Judging by the broad range of interpretations of these peck marked vessels given by other archaeologists studying overseas Chinese sites, I believe that it is possible that ownership of these vessels could have taken on a variety of significances in different Chinatowns in both different regions and at various points in time, and that this variance may be the result of a hybridization of

traditional cultural practices being used by individuals in unfamiliar environments.

FURTHER STUDY

I believe that this study has demonstrated the interpretive potential of the analysis of peck marked ceramic vessels on overseas Chinese sites, which have received little study in the past. My analysis, however, generates more questions than it solves. I believe in furthering this study it would also be very useful to process the ceramics from the other half of the San José Market Street Chinatown, site 86-36. I believe, to do any sort of study based on spatial analysis, it would be extremely important to have a good idea of what is represented throughout the site. It would also be of great interest to do a historical study of Chinese literacy rates in this time period, both in China and in immigrant Chinatown communities, in order to observe what subgroup within these communities would have been capable of making the marks and reading that are found on these vessels. An additional study that could yield information of great interpretive value is the comparison of the types of peck marked vessels found on early Chinatowns versus those that were established later, noting whether the numbers of marked vessels, or the types of messages found on these vessels tended to change over time.

SUMMARY

Material culture is chosen and used in particular ways based upon the users' understanding of their environment, but the material culture itself also helps to create and influence that worldview. For Chinese immigrants in the San José Market Street Chinatown in the mid to late 19th century the atmosphere of this new environment must at times have been frightening and filled with misunderstandings, bigotry and hate crimes. The Chinatown may have become something of a safe haven where the physical environment could be molded to fill the emotional want for comfort and familiarity that was lacking in the outside environment. I believe that this comfort was in part created through the use of familiar cultural practices, one of them being the peck marking of tableware. This common Chinese practice may also have been hybridized to better fit the needs of this unfamiliar environment, and in doing so made the environment a little more familiar.

Through my research I have only begun to explore some of the questions that can be asked through the use of peck marked vessels on overseas Chinese sites.

It is my opinion that this analysis continues to be very much a work in progress. However, even in the initial stages of this exploration it has become clear that these vessels contain a great amount of research potential that has been largely overlooked in the past.

Endnotes

- 1 - Young Xie is a recent Chinese immigrant whom I met at an open house held by the Market Street Chinatown archaeological laboratory on February 8, 2003. Scott Wilson is a Stanford graduate student who is fluent in Chinese. Both graciously volunteered to work on translations of vessels from this assemblage.
- 2 - Jean Shao visited the Market Street Chinatown assemblage during the open house held February 8, 2003.

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