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A Mark of Meaning
Archaeological Interpretations of Peck Marked Vessels from a 19th Century Chinatown

In the archaeological assemblage of artifacts recovered from the 19th century Market Street Chinatown in San Jose, California, there are several ceramic vessels that have been given individual markings. Some of these marks are clearly distinguishable as Chinese characters and others are symbols of a more ambiguous nature. Each has been hand pecked into the surface of a plate or bowl. Presumably, the original owners of these vessels made these marks. The majority of the marked vessels that were recovered from this particular site are Asian porcelains, but also represented are marked porcelaneous stonewares and British white wares.

The excavation of this site was conducted almost twenty years ago and when our analysis began, the artifacts represented were cataloged and curated to varying degrees. There had been no report published on the excavation of this site and records regarding field procedures, feature locations and provenience information were only partially available, or completely nonexistent. Given the state of the field records when this project began, we were not at all sure what sorts of questions could be asked of this collection. I believed that reconstructing a map of the Chinatown and the excavated features would aid significantly in the analysis of these peck marked vessels, but was not sure that it would be a feasible pursuit.

In my effort to gain information about vessels that have been given peck marks I conducted extensive library research, only to learn that very little is published regarding this marking practice. What is written about these marks is that they generally exist, can be translated, and are assumed to be marks of ownership (Greenwood, 147-150, Praetzellis and Pretzellis, 163-164). To extend this explanation, I posted a message on a historical archaeology Internet listserv asking if anyone could suggest any literature on this topic or had information on interpreting these vessels. The response that I got from the historical archaeology community was incredibly helpful and led to some individual correspondences that aided my research even further. Although I remain unaware of any published literature on interpreting these artifacts, it seems that almost every archaeologist who has worked on overseas Chinese sites is aware of these sorts of marked vessels. There are several small mentions of the existence of Chinese peck marks buried deep within archaeological reports, and historical archaeologists have made numerous interpretations on the significance of this marking practice which I intend to elaborate later in this paper.

One of the things that originally drew me to the study of these particular vessels was the hope that this form of material culture would allow me to isolate and name individual people and families that lived within the Chinatown. It is my belief that attaching names and identities to real people in history could potentially allow for greater community interest and engagement with the artifacts from this collection. Some of the research questions that these materials inspired me to ask were: Are these symbols marks of ownership by individuals or groups of people? Is it possible to link them to people living with their immediate families or in a boarding house setting? Is it possible that they

were they not ownership marks at all, but instead blessings, good luck symbols, or graffiti? What can we say about the spatial distribution of these pieces across this site? And is it possible to say anything about the socio-economic levels of the people who were marking and using these particular vessels as compared to the other residents using unmarked vessels in the Market Street Chinatown.

My first step in analyzing these materials was to segregate the peck marked vessels from the rest of the collection. The majority of the pecked vessels have a large amount of interpretive value as they have clear marks and are from areas 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 also 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. In total there are fifteen peck marked vessels that I analyzed in my study.

Of the fifteen vessels in this collection, Young Xie and Scott Wilson were able to translate ten of them. There is also at least one vessel in the collection that is marked with a symbol that is obviously not a Chinese character. I am yet to find any literature or interpretations that talks in depth about these sorts of peck marks, although I believe that this vessel could either bear an incomplete mark 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. It appears that the translated peck marked vessels in this collection can be interpreted in a few different ways. The pieces seem to break down into three categories of markings: individual names (or

nicknames), family names, and wishes or blessings. It appears that the ten vessels that have been translated say roughly: “Zhang” (a family name), “Mahn” (a family name), “drunk”(a nickname), “Kong” (a family name, the same as Confucius), “sign” (almost always accompanied by another character, as in good sign), “rising”, “official ranking” (two vessels have this mark), “together”, and “harmony”. An eleventh vessel in this collection has marks that could possibly be the beginning strokes for the character “dad”. It seems that the majority of marked vessels are either family names or blessings. In comparing this collection to other overseas Chinese sites, a break down like this does not always seem to be the case. In Roberta Greenwood’s book Down By The Station, Los Angeles Chinatown 1880-1933, only one peck marked vessel was found on the site, and was translated as “Jade,” thought most likely to be an individual’s nickname (Greenwood, 84.). The Market Street Chinatown site 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, Greenwood, 84. Praetzellis and Praetzellis, 164-165), contrasting with this site which covers roughly only half of the Market Street Chinatown where fifteen of these vessels were recovered.

The next phase of my project focused on reconstructing the spatial layout of the Market Street Chinatown. I was able to use an historic insurance map of the Chinatown to get a close approximation of the boundaries of the area. I then used Photoshop to scale this map as well as a map of the excavated features from this site and superimpose the features onto the locations where these vessels would have originally been deposited. 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 site. I believe that from this we can link waste deposits to a particular building. 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 (fig. 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. It seems that from the data that I have observed, the majority of vessels marked with nicknames or family names appear to be located in portions of the site 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.

In an attempt to gain an understanding of the socio-economic positions of the people making and using these marked vessels, I compared the marked vessels to the rest of the ceramic tablewares that came out of this site. I calculated the percentage of vessels in the site that were marked. I then calculated the percentage of each type of ceramic ware (four seasons, celadon and bamboo and white ware) in both the general collection of tableware and the collection of marked tableware, to estimate whether the people making these marks may have been choosing vessels that were more or less expensive than those that were unmarked. This might indicate that marked vessels were in some way different from the ceramics used on a daily basis by the general population. Although the ceramic collection is not yet fully cataloged, it appears that the only

ceramic pattern that shows up in significantly larger numbers in the marked collection than the general collection is four seasons. Celadon, bamboo, and white ware ceramics appear in both the pecked and general collections in relatively equal proportions (fig. 2). Four seasons is one of the more expensive Chinese porcelain types and its presence in disproportionately high numbers within the pecked vessel collection could indicate that individuals were choosing to mark characters on more expensive dishes. It will be interesting to observe if this pattern still holds true once the remainder of the unpecked ceramics have been cataloged.

I also wanted to quantify the collection of peck marked vessels and compare that to the general collection of tableware ceramics. In comparing averages for each of these categories of ceramics, I used the weight of the artifacts, a count of the minimum number of individual artifacts, and the number of recovered fragments to gain a more accurate picture of what was represented in this assemblage than any of these categories would individually provide (fig.3). The only category of peck marked vessel that appeared to be significantly different from the general tableware collection was the weight of the vessels. The peck marked vessels in this collection weigh more on average than other vessels from the ceramic assemblage. I believe that this is explained in that a fairly large fragment of a vessel must be present for an archaeologist to identify a peck mark on its surface, consequently very small sherds that may have come from peck marked vessels were probably recorded as unmarked. The average weight of the peck marked vessels may have in this manner been inflated. I believe that the data tells us that the vessels that individuals chose to mark were not significantly different in size from the other ceramics that were being used throughout the Chinatown.

Other archaeologists and collectors looking at these sorts of peck marked vessels have interpreted them in a variety of ways. Doctor Adrian Praetzellis of 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).

Archaeologist Susan Walter claims that she bought a set of peck marked tea bowl 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 would keep their personal shaving mugs at a barbershop (Walter, 2003).

Jean Shao, a Chinese newspaper reporter in California claimed that the practice of pecking symbols of good luck and blessings onto porcelain plates and bowls is very common in China. She however, was confused 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 white ware plates with three diamonds pecked into their surfaces were loaner dishes that were used by individuals in a restaurant or boarding house who did not own their own tableware. He claims 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, 2003).

While there is a fairly consistent interpretation that the peck marks in these vessels surfaces were marks of ownership. There appears to be a good number of

contradictions in the archaeological community regarding what type of vessels generally bear these marks. Doctor Rebecca Allen stated that she has most often encountered these types of marks on less expensive bamboo style ceramics (Allen, 2003). Doctor Roberta Greenwood claims that Chinese peck marks often appear on reused British white wares (Greenwood, 2003). Archaeologist Ron May claims 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).

While these interpretations are all very interesting and provide a helpful background with which to look at the data from the Market Street Chinatown collection, I do not believe that any one of these interpretations alone can be adequately applied to this artifact group. The majority of archaeologists making claims about the purpose and significance of peck marked vessels on overseas Chinese sites have looked at much smaller assemblages of pecked vessels. While all of these interpretations could apply to this collection, none of them seem to apply exclusively. It does appear that ownership is a good blanket classification 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 white ware 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 was an archeological feature located nearby 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 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) both located in an area associated primarily with stores could be representations of cultural ownership and the desire that extended families might have had to hold onto cultural practices that were commonly used in China.

It is my opinion from looking at the data from this site 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 site. 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. Within the Market Street Chinatown site I believe that it is possible to link individuals who pecked their names or other symbols on the surfaces of these vessels to specific refuse features on this site and from those trash deposits associate them with nearby buildings where these people may have spent some of their time. From this data I can also conclude that the peck marked assemblage on this site appears to be a more expensive collection of ceramics than is found in the general ceramic collection. As a result, I believe that individuals who pecked marks onto their plates and bowls may have, on this site, had more expendable income than others who did not.

Although this study brought about some very interesting results, they must be considered hermeneutic rather than scientific. Even though the sample size of this assemblage was much larger than the sample of peck marked vessels that have been

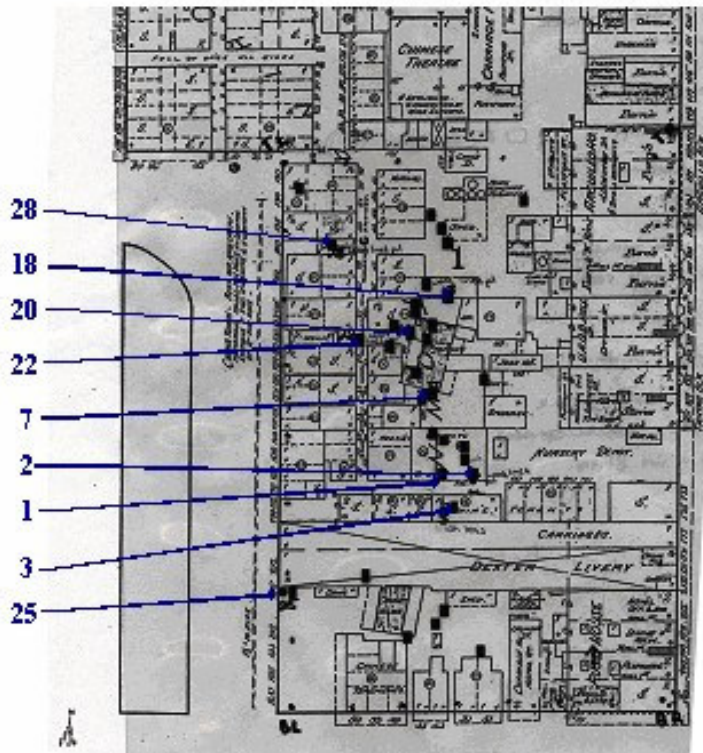
studied on other Chinatown sites, it was still a quite small assemblage and any correlations found through this study are not statistically significant. Additionally, several of these vessels came from the surface collection and made the sample size of this collection even smaller. A further limitation of this study is that humans are mobile, and so it is possible that vessels may not have been disposed of in the area where they were used and consequently, may not give very good information about the living location of individuals on the site. Another restraint of this study has been a lack of contextual data. As I have not had the opportunity to work with this collection from the beginning of excavation, the map work that I have done is a reconstructed approximation of where features were likely located within this archaeological site. Not actual precise site locations. Additionally, the nature of the peck mark itself is rather limiting to this study. As the majority of ceramic pieces that are recovered archaeologically are heavily fragmented, it is quite likely that many marked vessels have been recorded as unmarked because fragments other than the marked bases were recovered, the result of this could be an under representation of marked vessels in the collection. Additionally, as seen in figure 3, in order for a vessel to be recorded as marked, a large enough fragment must be recovered to identify the peck mark, and this could have resulted in an inflated average vessel weight of the peck marked vessel collection.

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, creates more questions than it solves. In furthering this research, I would like to complete the cataloging of ceramics on this site and conduct further comparisons between the peck marked vessels and the rest of the

general ceramic collection. I think it would also be very useful to process the ceramics from the other half of this 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. 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 have changed over time.

Through this paper, 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. I will be extending my research on this topic and working this paper along with theoretical interpretations into my master's thesis. It is my opinion that this paper continues to be very much a work in progress. However, even in this unfinished state, it has become clear that these vessels contain a great amount of research potential that has been largely overlooked in the past.

Market Street Chinatown



Numbers on this map represent feature numbers on the site.

Figure 1.

Ware Types Compared

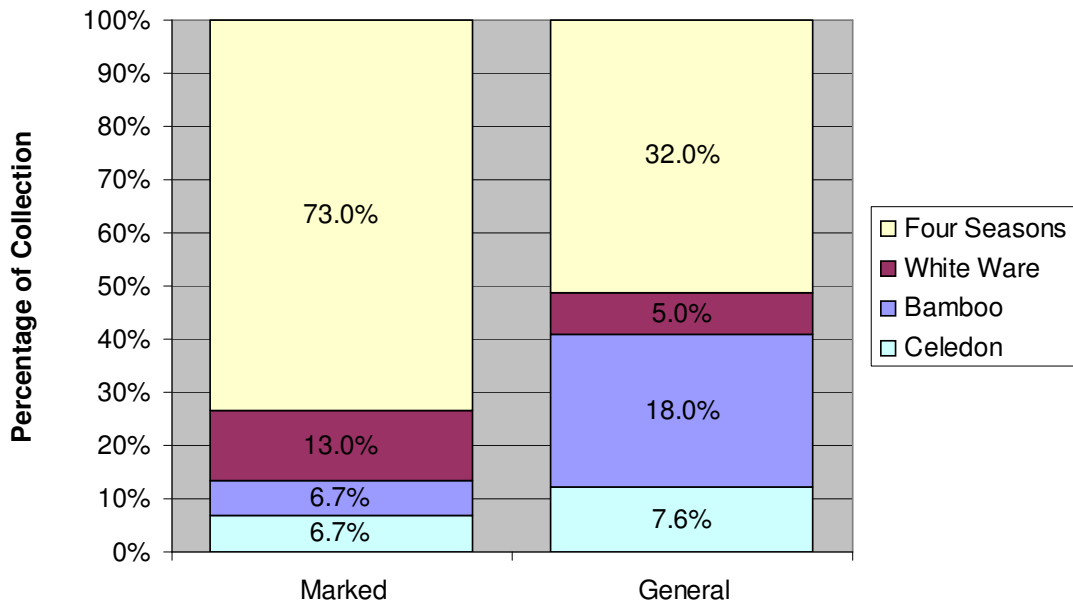


Fig. 2

Marked Vessel and General Collection Comparison

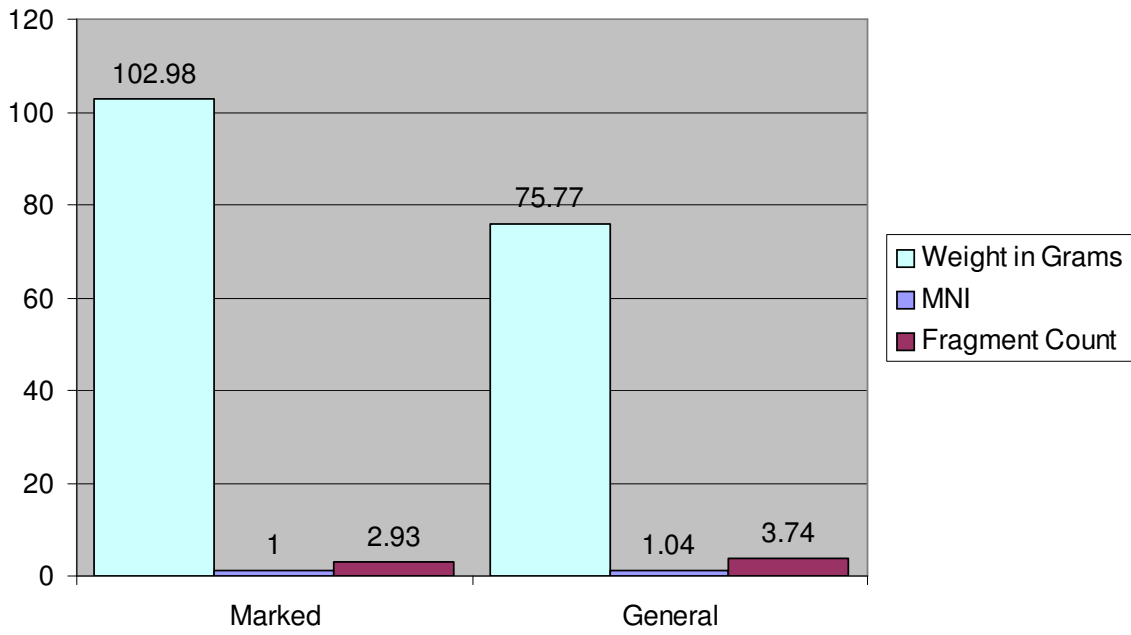


Fig. 3



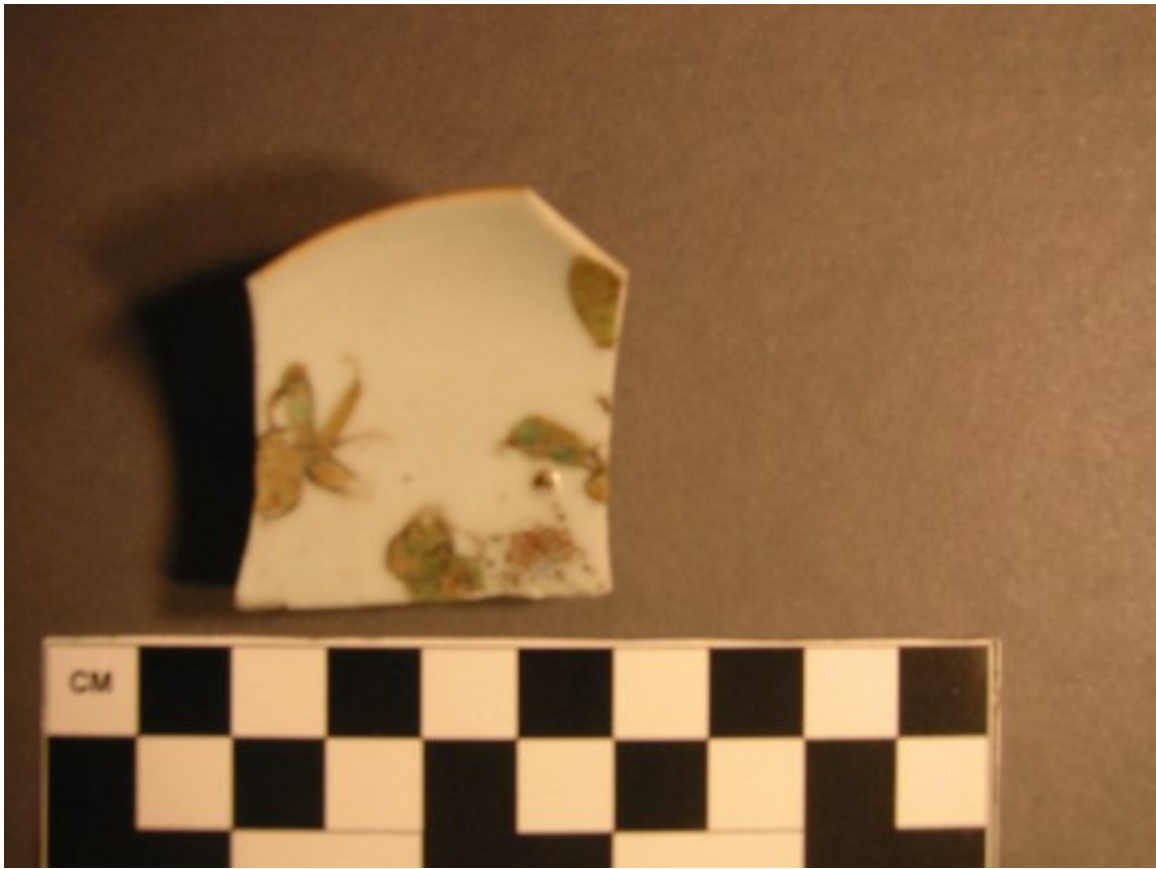
Four seasons plate pecked with “Zhang”(a family name).



White ware plate pecked with "Sir" (a military rank).



Four seasons plate pecked with “peace or harmony”.



Four seasons plate with no translation.

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