

# Stoneware in the Market Street

## Chinatown

### A Comparative Analysis

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## **Introduction**

I chose to study some of the stoneware in the Market Street collection. I did a comparative study of two features from different parts of town, one domestic and one commercial. I analyzed the different kinds of stoneware found in each site, as well as the proportion of industrial stoneware in each site. It was my objective to use the information I gained from my stoneware analysis to say something definitive about consumer practices at the Market Street Chinatown through my comparative study. I expected to find more Chinese brown glazed stoneware of the type I was examining in the commercial site, believing that the domestic site would contain a lower ratio of stoneware in preference to more decorative small-scale storage units; however, I did not find what I expected. The visible presence of stoneware in the commercial and domestic sites alike both surprised me and instilled in me a deeper respect and appreciation for this often overlooked and even dismissed artifact category. The relationship between consumer practices and the shell of the consumable is an intimate one, and in-depth analysis of stoneware as the medium of consumption is essential to the understanding of these practices. I will show how the analysis of the types of stoneware vessels found across the two features may tell us where residents obtained their foodstuffs, how they obtained them, and who they relied upon to provide them for the community. I will then discuss my findings and their implications for future research.

## **Background**

Stoneware fragments from storage vessels are present in great abundance amongst the artifacts excavated from the Market Street Chinatown. The stoneware is primarily of Asian manufacture, and jars are the most common kind of stoneware. Implicated is mass

importation of food and other goods from overseas large quantities. Thus far no study has been made of the stoneware in specific areas of town and how they contrast, if at all. To date, only one paper has been written about the stoneware excavated at the Market Street site. Stoneware is often overlooked as an object of study because of its dull appearance and utilitarian nature, where porcelains and other more romantic artifacts are better researched. In comparison to the beautiful glazed porcelains and fascinating little celadon bowls present in overseas Chinese communities, stoneware vessels are at an aesthetic disadvantage that has probably contributed to their neglect. In researching for my project, while I found that information on porcelains and decorative stoneware was ubiquitous, information on industrial use Chinese stoneware was extremely hard to come by. I consider this neglect of stoneware unfortunate, because it reflects an oversight of the intimate relationship that necessarily exists between the stoneware vessels and the day to day life of the community. The ubiquitous stoneware storage vessels were designed for the purpose of storing edible consumer goods to ship to overseas communities, and for this reason stoneware is intimately connected with dietary and consumer habits of the residents of the Market Street Chinatown. By analyzing what kinds of stoneware was found at each feature, I planned to address trade and storage practices of the Market Street residents.

So far only one paper has been written about the stoneware in the Market Street collection, by a student in previous CASA 103 lab class, Cameron Matthews. His paper was an analysis of stoneware found in one particular feature. I decided to look at two features from different parts of town and do a comparative analysis of stoneware found in them.

Stoneware vessel types ranged from the very large to the relatively dainty.

Following is a list of vessel types found in the Market Street site:

- **Large Globular Jars:** Globe-like in body, these jars have a rolled lip opening and may or may not have lugs around the shoulder. The original content of many globular jars was hard liquor or oil, but they were also used to store soy sauce, pickled carrots, scallions, salted cabbage, melons, cucumbers, ginger, pickled duck eggs, water chestnuts, lotus root, and Chinese olives.
- **Barrel Jar:** These jars are enormous straight-sided jars. Many of them were originally designed to pack 'sheet sugar' for transport, but were reused to store rice, other grains, sticky rice powder, and whole soy beans, as well as the commodities housed by globular jars listed above. They were also occasionally used as rain barrels and containers to store the bones of the dead when they were shipped back to China for burial.
- **Straight-Sided Jars:** These are cylindrical in shape and usually have a thinner body than the other shapes. They come in various sizes and usually have an associated lid.
- **Shouldered Jar:** This jar shape also comes in a variety of sizes. Typically these jars have a squat body with a wide, lipped rim. These jars are also known as wide-mouthed jars. The smaller forms of the shouldered jar were used to ship medicine, candy, or seasoning spices, with slightly larger versions often filled with preserved vegetables.
- **Spouted Jar:** A round, squat jar with a small, lipped opening on the top and a spout high on the shoulder. These are also known as soy or soya pots, but were

also used to store such liquids as liquor, vinegar, peanut oil, molasses, tea, Hoisin sauce, oyster sauce, rapeseed oil, and sesame seed oil.

- Other miscellaneous stoneware items found at the features I examined include two American-made wheel-thrown liquor (probably beer) bottles.

## **Methods**

In choosing two features to compare, I had to be careful to ensure that they were analogous features in different parts of town. I couldn't, for example, compare a pig-roasting pit with a privy, the nature of their usages are too different for justifiable comparison, such as is the case with apples and oranges. In the end I chose two features notated as wood-lined trash pits of roughly similar size. Using the Sanborn map I located somewhere I could reasonably designate a domestic part of town, where the map claimed tenements were located, and chose a feature outside the tenement boundaries on what was once the corner of the building (a feature inside a building would indicate use prior to the Market Street period that had been built over). The other feature I chose was from a region I designated the "commercial strip" because the Sanborn map, in agreement with Bryn Williams, had labeled hotels and stores there. Both were wood-lined pits, and upon looking each feature up in the ARS catalogue, I found that each feature contained stoneware. I felt they were comparable and began my analysis of 85-31 feature 2, the "domestic" feature, and 85-31 feature 22, the "commercial feature.

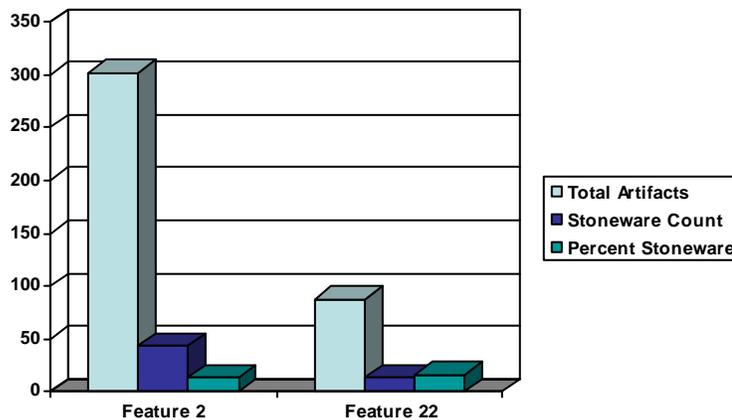
My next step in analysis was to ascertain the number of stoneware artifacts relative to the total number of artifacts in each feature, in order to obtain a figure expressing the frequency of stoneware in each feature. After this was done, I created three categories of stoneware types: large, small, and lids, and determined the frequencies

with which they appeared in each feature. The reason I did this was to get an idea of the proportion of overseas transport stoneware to private multiple-use stoneware. It is this aspect of the analysis that was to give me more insight into overseas importation practices across the two features.

The only complete vessel I found was a delicate, thin-walled small globular jar (its base measured 5cm across), probably used for cosmetics or medicine. The rest of the artifacts were in fragments, and only seldom was I able to piece together a few of them to get an idea of what the entire vessel must once have looked like. As a result of the fragmentary nature of the material, much of my inference is based upon material type, thickness and weight of the fragments, and the projected diameter of the occasional rim or base sherd—in other words, the usual methods of archaeological interpretation.

## Data

In collecting my data, I handled each stoneware artifact that had been found for features 2 and 22. First I used the ARS catalogue system to determine that almost all recorded stoneware artifacts from both features had been catalogued. I tried to find those few artifacts which had not been catalogued in the storage room, but could not find them.

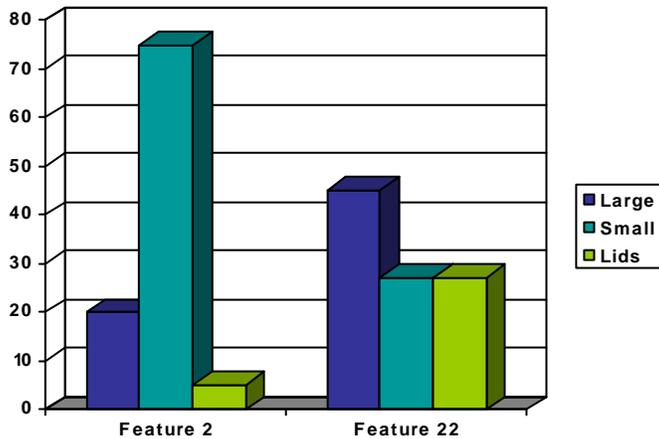


They consisted of three stoneware fragments and spouts from feature 2.

Feature 2 is a considerably larger feature than feature 22, containing 302 total

artifacts to the 88 total artifacts contained by feature 22, so direct quantitative comparison was not possible between these two features. I used ratio analysis instead, dividing the number of stoneware artifacts by the number of total artifacts for each site and coming up with the percentage of stoneware in each site. As the graph shows, feature 2 and feature 22 contained approximately the same ratio of stoneware, at 13% and 14% each respectively. The sample size of feature 22 was not large enough to warrant the conclusion that the 1% difference is significant, so for my purposes I was forced to make the conclusion that the proportion of stoneware storage vessels in each site was about the same.

My next step was to analyze the types of stoneware in each feature and calculate their rational frequency. To do this, I divided the stoneware into two categories, which I call “small” and “large”. These regrettably basic categories are rough, but I will qualify them a little. By “small” I mean a vessel that is thin-walled and relatively light, and vessels that are closer to a medium size are included in this category. By “large” I mean the thicker, heavier, industrial barrel vessels of varying diameter. I cannot include diameter in my “large” and “small” parameters because most of the pieces I handled did not have rim or base shards from which to extrapolate diameter. Also, some of the largest globular vessels had bases and rims that measured less than eight centimeters across and ballooned out to a much greater width in the middle, whose measurement is impossible to determine from the fragments that remain. I include spouted jars in the “small” category. Many of the fragments I encountered, particularly among the large stoneware sample in feature 2, were rather insignificant and gave scant clue as to their original context. For these reasons these figures must be taken as approximate. However



the finding is nonetheless significant: as the graph shows, in feature 2 (the “domestic” feature), I found 20% large, 75% small, and 5% lids. Feature 22 (the “commercial” feature) contained 45% large,

27% small, and 27% lids.

In my handling of the stoneware I discovered a certain amount of slashed MNV counts. Fragments that were obviously of different manufacture type, or a different material, or a different glaze, were in many cases lumped together as one vessel. This is symptomatic of the lack of concern for stoneware that surrounds any collection containing brighter subjects. I was able to expand the stoneware count from what ARS had listed it as, and in one particular instance even found part of a maker’s mark on the underside of a base fragment in a bag containing three other distinct vessels but



catalogued as one vessel. The maker’s mark, very rare in these industrial style Asian stonewares, was identified by Bryn Williams as the Chinese character *yuán*, which means “spring” or “source.” This is probably an indicator of the original contents of the vessel, but as to what those contents were the rest of the maker’s mark

would be required in order to deduce properly.

## **Interpretation**

Looking at the proportion of stoneware to total artifacts found at each feature, we see that it is about the same across the two features. This tells us that stoneware vessels were used to store foodstuffs at both the commercial and the domestic feature. This suggests that stoneware was very much a part of life in the Market Street Chinatown, and reinforces more strongly the importance of closer analysis of stoneware. This result is not what I expected to find when I began this project, and so the similarity of the stoneware ratios across the two features is notable. This finding is open to a variety of interpretations, and compels us to move on to the analysis of types of stoneware found across the two features.

At the domestic feature, feature 2, the type of stoneware with the highest frequency of remains is small vessels. At the commercial feature, feature 22, large vessels are the most common. Keeping in mind that these categories are extremely approximate, this is nonetheless a marked difference between the two features. Given the larger sample size of feature 2, it is striking that so few large vessel remains were found there while a much higher ratio were found at feature 22 with a much smaller sample size. This suggests that feature 22 had a reason for using more large industrial vessels whose function was to store food. There are several possibilities for what this reason could be: feature 22 could have housed the refuse of nearby restaurants, hotels, or otherwise classified communal eateries that required foodstuffs in bulk. It is possible that these wares, imported from overseas, were sold in smaller lots to private individuals living in the tenements in other parts of town. This finding coupled with the relatively high proportion of small to medium stoneware vessels found in the domestic site

reinforces this possibility. These smaller vessels are just the type that might have been used to store smaller quantities of foodstuffs for private homes.

The fact that these vessels are small does not mean, however, that they were not imported from overseas. On the contrary, the fact that they are Asian stoneware vessels manufactured overseas means they must have been imported to the Market Street site. Exactly who imported them, whether it was the restaurateur or the grocer, or the private Chinatown resident, is therefore unclear from this evidence alone. It is fairly safe to say however that there is a difference in the types of stoneware found at each site, and that the higher prevalence of large industrial stoneware at the commercial site is provocative.

The fact that so many lids were found at the commercial feature, whose total artifact count is so small (eleven stoneware artifacts in total) is suggestive because lids such as the ones I handled were designed for covering storage jars used in shipping goods over long distances, in conjunction with the lugs found on some of the larger industrial vessels, in addition to facilitating static storage. Feature 22's high ratio of lids contrasts strikingly with the proportion of lids found at the domestic site, whose total artifact count was over three times that of the commercial site. Nonetheless, fewer lids were found in feature 2 than at feature 22. A higher ratio of shipping quality lids suggests that there may have been more import activity at feature 22 than at feature 2.

## **Conclusion**

My comparative analysis is the first step in what should one day be a site-wide analysis of stoneware fragments. A feature-by-feature analysis of stoneware would be invaluable as a source of information about what foods and liquids Chinatown residents imported from overseas privately, what they relied on the grocers and restaurateurs to

import, and the kinds of foods they ate and did not eat. Stoneware analysis is also an indicator of what kinds of foods they adopted in America by examination of non-Asian stoneware vessels. I studied one feature believed to be near a tenement, and one feature I believe was in the commercial part of town, but analysis of stoneware in the context of what part of town it was excavated from on a site-wide level would give a more three-dimensional picture of consumer and importation practices in the Market Street site.

In addition to being a potential high-yield source of information about daily life in Market Street, the stoneware collection is also a case-in-point example of the dangers of using aesthetic qualities to gauge importance in an archaeological collection. A collection of artifacts is essentially a collection of things. As in so many other situations, the pretty things will more often than not get most of the attention, while the stoneware vessels of this world are cast aside with indifference, the maker's marks on their obscure underbellies disregarded by the archaeologist in pursuit of a more perfect beauty.

The stoneware in the Market Street collection is an untapped resource for anthropologists seeking to understand more about life in the Market Street Chinatown. More research must be done on stoneware across the site, and no doubt this will eventually be tackled by future investigators who are not deterred by the stoneware's homely appearance. Market Street's second life is still young, and there are many areas that await further study. I look forward to reading about further research into this Chinatown's enigmatic and alluring stoneware collection, one which I hope may now be looked upon with a little more circumspection. The very functionality of the stoneware, with their Spartan looks and unromantic associations, serve to make them one of Market Street's best kept secrets.

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