

# The Ming porcelains from the 1576 Manila galleon *San Felipe*: trade patterns and chronology

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The story of our discovery of the Manila galleon *San Felipe* wreckage on a beach in Baja California is probably familiar to many of you. We have come a long way from a box of porcelain sherds to the image of our ghost ship lying off the beach with a storm building in the background -- the storm that will destroy her and scatter her remains for 11 km. The ship came to rest in the offshore sands because too few crewmen remained alive to control her, so she drifted before the wind toward the beach and ran aground. Her remaining crewmen died, and the ship lay offshore for at least a year before the storm destroyed her. All this we know from our archaeological work and the sixteenth-century documents about the ship's history.

The *San Felipe*'s story has become too complex to tell in a short space, so I would like to concentrate on one part of it: the cargo, and particularly what the porcelains from the cargo tell us about the ship and the trade she was engaged in. Most of the porcelains came from Jingdezhen, the inland city where most of China's best porcelains were made. From there, they were sent to the coast, where small quantities of locally produced porcelains were available to add to the cargos. Chinese merchants then shipped the porcelains in Chinese ships to many overseas markets, including the new one of Spanish Manila. From Manila, the cargos were shipped to Acapulco in the annual Manila galleons. At Acapulco, the porcelains were sold and shipped on to Peru, Panama, Guatemala, Mexico City, and some, eventually, to Europe by way of Vera Cruz.

One story that we hoped the porcelains would be able to tell us was the approximate date of the ship. During years of study of dated cargos, Asian art scholar Clarence Shangraw and I had been able to create a chronology of a key type of Chinese trade porcelain: Kraak-ware plates, named after a Portuguese ship type -- the carrack -- that carried such wares to Europe. A chart showed the sequence of development of these plates from about 1565 to 1645. By charting the discoveries of these plates in dated cargos, Shangraw and I had created a chronology chart, showing that the simple designs were early, then came the more and more complex designs, and finally came the degraded forms. The questions were, where did the Baja California cargo fit into the chronology, and how closely could we date it?

Charts showed the plate designs from cargos of 1643, 1613, 1600 (a transitional cargo, with simple designs still in use, but complex ones predominating), 1595 (having simple designs plus one somewhat more complex one) and 1579 (with only simple designs).

Where would the Baja California galleon cargo fit into the pattern? It was earlier than any of the other known cargos. Since the trade began in 1572, and the 1572 galleons returned to Manila because of storm damage, and the 1573 galleons arrived safely in Acapulco, the Baja California cargo could not be earlier than 1574. Since we knew what the 1579 cargo looked like, and it came from a 1578 galleon, the Baja California cargo could not be later than 1577. So our missing galleon had to date between 1574 and 1577. A scholar of the Manila galleon trade said that there was only one missing-without-trace galleon between 1574 and 1577: the *San Felipe* of 1576. She is the

earliest eastbound Manila galleon wreck.

The wreck site has revealed many types of artifacts. There is lead sheathing, which had been used to protect the underwater hull from shipworms, barnacles, and seaweed. We found large blocks of Philippine beeswax, used for candles and lubrication in Mexico. This trade existed because there are no native wax-making bees in the Americas. Perhaps the most spectacular find was an incredibly fragile cloisonné plate rim fragment. The enamels are intact on the upper surface, but missing on the lower. It is the only example of cloisonné ever found in a shipwreck. Many fragments of Oriental stoneware storage jars have been found. These jars were the ordinary storage containers for water, food, and valuable goods. They have not yet been studied intensively. Fairly large dishes come from provincial sites near the Chinese seacoast. They are called Zhangzhou (pronounced jhang jo) wares. The location of the kiln that made these dishes has been found fairly recently. Our sherds probably are the earliest fully dated examples of Zhangzhou wares.

The most intense studies of artifacts from our work have been carried out on porcelains from Jindezhen, the main Chinese porcelain center, and from sites close to Jingdezhen. Because there are 1,183 sherds of 98 different types, these porcelains are giving us much information about Chinese trade at the start of the Wanli reign. The little cups are interesting because they do not fit into the Spanish way of life. They must have had novelty value in the early years of the trade, but practically disappear from later Spanish cargos. We have found seven designs on the large tea cups and three on the small rice-wine cups.

One of the most common forms of porcelains is the rice bowl with flared rim. There are an astonishing 24 designs on these bowls, including dragons, curling dragons in circles, phoenixes, and flames and trigrams, which are Chinese symbols for the points of the compass. What the Spaniards must have thought of the calligraphy bowls is not recorded, but they do not appear in later cargos. The ladies' bowls did not make much sense until I saw one in a shop in Amsterdam which had boys between the ladies. A check of our specimens showed fragments of boys next to the ladies. They represent the Chinese gentleman's idea of domestic happiness: ladies and boys. Then we found a boy on our next expedition.

There are many types of bowls with flowers and foliage. This group is notable because four of them were painted by the same craftsman. These floral bowls appealed to a wide variety of customers throughout southeast Asia.

Unexpectedly, there is a second type of utility bowl: the soup bowl. These bowls are similar to the rice bowls but have straight rims and double lines below the rim. Their designs are similar to some of the rice bowl designs. This type does not appear in later cargos.

The type with the largest number of examples in the cargo is the phoenix plate. We have 317 of them, or 27% of the cargo. The phoenix is a symbol of the empress of China, so it would have been welcome in overseas Chinese homes. What the Spaniards would have seen in them is debatable. Why are there so many? We can only speculate that the Chinese merchants were dumping overstocked porcelains on their new customers, who did not have much choice of goods.

Another very Chinese form is the plate with a gentleman's purse in the middle, with ribbons and bead or pearl strings with Buddhist symbols as pendants. This fairly expensive plate form did not appear in later cargos.

A totally unexpected type of porcelain ware is overglaze enamel ware, usually sold to affluent Japanese customers. About one-tenth of the *San Felipe's* porcelains are overglaze wares. The chemicals in the sand where they lay for more than four centuries destroyed much of the color, but sometimes parts of the color survive. One plate still has about one-third of its original color, although it is faded. We can recover the missing designs by holding the sherds to strong light to see the "ghost" lines, and penciling in the missing colored areas. Then we reconstruct the designs,

and sometimes the colors, on paper.

Another overglaze-color plate uses designs that we also find on some of the bowls. The most colorful design had the red discs shown on the complete bowl from a private collection, not from an archaeological site. The discs would have had glue painted on them and gold leaf applied to the glue: rather garish to most modern tastes. Other overglaze types were much more subdued. The color is almost intact on a melon vine with its small animal, perhaps a squirrel. On the other hand, a lively dragon is a complete reconstruction from the ghost lines on the sherd.

Another porcelain type usually associated with the Chinese trade with Japan is the fishpond bowl with fishnet background. Chinese patterns on porcelain usually are symmetrical, with design elements arranged in a balanced fashion, so a small dish with the pattern running asymmetrically up and onto the inside of the rim is another type designed for the Japanese market. The quality of the painting on a dish a mere 10 cm in diameter is notable.

The most important piece of porcelain for dating purposes was our second find on the first day of the first expedition. It is the world's earliest known fully dated and fully developed piece of the Chinese trade ware known as Kraak porcelain. It has the cavetto, that is the hollow of the sides, divided by eight double lines on the outside and by molding. The interior has an octagonal frame, which also emphasizes the separate designs on the cavetto. This sherd and a matching sherd from the side provide four distinct clues to its date in the mid-1570s. We do not know what kind of horse-goat animal it shows, or why it carries that banner. There are flames above, and waves below.

One of two intact porcelains is a phoenix bowl, another fine type usually sent to overseas Chinese. How it survived shipwreck and the storm that threw it onto the beach we do not know.

Finely painted landscape bowls depict a Taoist paradise. They, like the phoenix bowls and the Kraak bowl, would have been cabinet pieces. They were not made for use but as decorative wares. They could remind a Chinese merchant of the land he hoped to retire to back in China after he had made his fortune in Manila or some other far-off place. Notable are a flag denoting a temple or wine shop, a thatched viewing pavilion, and dramatic landscape elements -- all on a bowl a mere 10 cm in diameter and 7 cm high. The interior has a miniature version of the scene on the exterior of this bowl type.

There are very few fine-ware plates, but they are important for the history of Chinese porcelain exports. One is particularly well painted, with its geese, cricket, water plants, and particularly the crested bird. However, it was not fully fired, leaving it a bit gray. Was this an example of selling imperfect products to foreigners? Other sherds of this ware are well-fired.

Another cabinet piece designed for Chinese taste is a bowl with its formal landscape, the garden of the Queen Mother of the Western Paradise. In it, a monkey is leaping into the air to distract the gods, while his friend is creeping up the peach tree to steal the peaches of immortality, which are guarded by jade wind chimes.

Our work involves not just cataloging and studying the porcelains, but drawing the shapes and designs so they can be easily studied by others. Ninety-eight porcelain types and sub-types have been identified, of which only five cannot yet be reconstructed. Each has a story, which is now available in our new monograph.

Summing up, this was a "sampler" cargo. It was so early in the Manila galleon trade that the Chinese merchants had not yet had time to find out what their new customers wanted, so they sent porcelains that would normally have been sent to all their widespread Asian customers.

But we cannot end with scholarly studies. We must end with the image of an exuberant little monkey. We continue to carry such exuberance into our work on the Manila galleon *San Felipe*.