Things on the move

Material culture and connectivity in ancient China

Fan ZHANG

Objects move, sometimes across cultural boundaries. They travel as tributes, commodities, and military booties. In this issue's 'China Connections', we explore how things perform as active agents, linking China and its outside world from the Bronze Age to the premodern era. Writing about the transcultural biography of things, essays in this section invite readers to reconsider the connectivity of the ancient world via various routes, including but not limited to the Silk Road. Coming from different disciplinary backgrounds, contributors to this issue demonstrate the potential of material culture studies as an interdisciplinary field that integrates art history, history, and archaeology.

Following chronological order, five essays outline a broad picture of transcultural exchange in the premodern Eurasian continent through the lens of objects. Each essay highlights a particular artifact; these objects are the witnesses, products, and agents of the cross-cultural interaction happening at varied levels and in diverse forms, such as trade, tribute, and pilgrimage. By tracing the movement of things, we interrogate the routes and networks that meshed together cultures in different parts of Eurasia. A diachronic survey shows that while the early transcultural connections were mainly made via the land routes, later history saw the growing significance of the maritime network. Attention is also paid to the local response to foreign imports by studying how objects from afar were adopted and adapted in the local contexts.

Objects are the embodiment of social relations, and the objects moving across borders are the testimony of social relations at a transcultural scale. Artifacts featured in the following essays were produced during different time periods, in various locations, and from a wide range of materials, such as glass, stone, porcelain, bronze, and other precious and semi-precious metals. What links them together is their role as a cultural mediator. We hope that, from the perspective of things, our readers can embrace the connectivity of the ancient world, which is no less intricate than that of our current era of globalization.

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Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai

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Asia Research Center at Fudan University

Founded in March 2002, the Asia Research Center at Fudan University (ARC-FDU) is one of the achievements of the cooperation of Fudan and the Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies (KFAS). Since in formation, the center has made extensive efforts to promote Asian studies, including hosting conferences and supporting research projects. ARC-FDU keeps close connections with Asia Research Centers in mainland China and a multitude of institutes abroad.

Interregional transmissions of bronze mirrors with geometric decorations in early China

Yanlong GUO

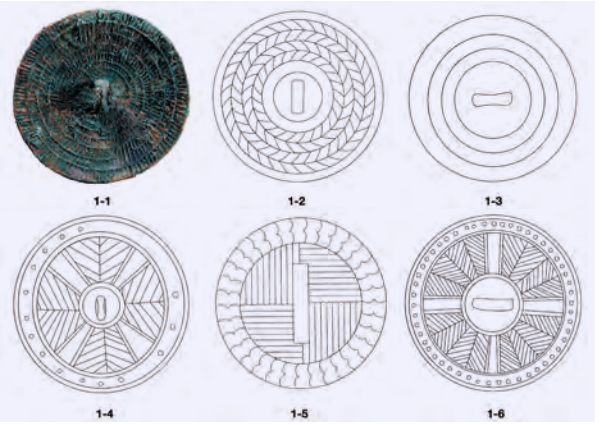
The bronze mirror has long been viewed as a quintessentially ´Chinese´ object. However, the earliest mirrors discovered in the Central Plain are likely to have been imported exotica. This article draws attention to the geometric mirrors retrieved from Anyang, the last capital of the Shang dynasty. It argues that the style of the Anyang mirrors originated from the northwest borderland. Recent archaeological discoveries from the Inner Asian frontier further suggest that the early mirrors with geometric designs were embedded in the network of cross-cultural circulations between the Central Plain and its northern and western neighbors during the late second millennium BCE.

Later literary sources, such as the seventh-century fiction *Record of an Ancient Mirror* [*Gujing ji* 古鏡記], often ascribed the invention of the Chinese mirror to the legendary Yellow Emperor in antiquity. However, actual mirrors made of bronze did not emerge in the Central Plain until the Late Shang period during the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE. So far, only six mirrors (fig.1) have been unearthed from three tombs at the Late Shang capital Anyang, from which more than two thousand bronze vessels have been unearthed. Fu Hao, the female general and consort of King Wu Ding (c. r. 1324-1266 BCE), owned four of the six mirrors. The fifth mirror belonged to a low-ranking elite (Dasikongcun Tomb 25), while the last piece was associated with a burial of six human victims (Xibeigang Tomb 1005) accompanying the royal cemetery. Because of their scarcity and random social distribution, these mirrors were hardly status markers, but personal exotic items occasionally acquired from the outer world.

These six Anyang mirrors are decorated with simple and somewhat crude thread relief, in stark contrast to the ornate, multi-layered zoomorphic décor on contemporary bronze vessels. The mirror décor can be classified into two subgroups: one is comprised of concentric rings, sometimes filled with short lines; the other is divided into quadrants filled with parallel lines. Producing a small, circular disc with thread relief would require only two halved molds, much more straightforward than the sophisticated piece-mold casting technique already mastered by the Shang casters. The stylistic and technical distinctions between the Anyang mirrors and their contemporary bronze vessels suggest that the former were imported from elsewhere.

As archaeological excavations in recent decades reveal, the two subtypes of geometric mirrors that predate the Anyang specimens already emerged in northwest China, including the two mirrors with radial triangles uncovered from the sites of the Late Neolithic Qijia Culture (2300-1700 BCE) in eastern Qinghai (Guinan; fig.2-1) and western Gansu (Linxia) as well as the three antecedents with radiating lines arranged in concentric rings found in Hami, eastern Xinjiang, dated from the nineteenth to the thirteenth centuries BCE (fig.2-2). The early evidence indicates the origin of the geometric mirror style in the northwestern periphery of present-day China.[1]

Rather than a direct long-distance movement across an area of several thousand kilometers, the transmission of geometric mirrors from the Inner Asian frontier to Anyang was likely an indirect process (fig.3). Several mirrors with radiating lines arranged in concentric circles, including three chance finds in Qinghai and Gansu and one specimen scientifically excavated from western Shaanxi, indicate the western route. Meanwhile, the steppe route seems equally possible. Archaeologists have reported at least four chance finds of analogous mirrors in the Ordos region of Inner Mongolia. The geometric mirror style traveled further east through southern Liaoning and northern Hebei before finally reaching the Shang territory. The most noticeable are the two mirrors (figs. 2-3, 2-4) recently unearthed from a Late Shang tomb (Houqianyi Tomb 4) in Luanxian, Hebei,[2] whose owner, a local male elite, had direct access to bronze objects from both the Shang and the northern frontier. The geometric mirrors were embedded in the network of cross-cultural circulations between the Central Plain and its northern and western neighbors during the late second millennium BCE, even though they remained occasional and failed to stimulate Shang artisans to cast their own mirrors.



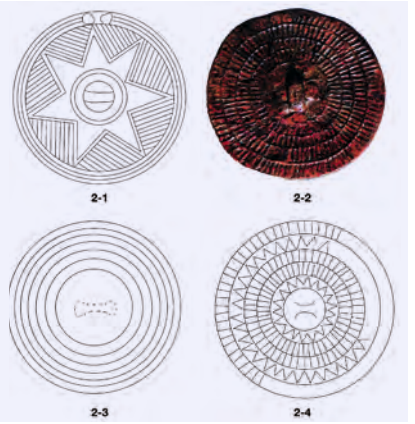
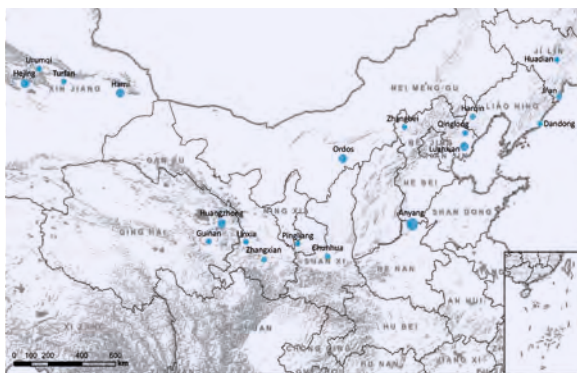


Fig. 1(above left) 1-1, 1-2, 1-4, 1-6: Mirrors from Yinxu tomb 5, Anyang, Henan, ca. 13th-12th centuries BCE. After Li Jaang. 2011. 'Long-Distance Interactions as Reflected in the Earliest Chinese Bronze Mirrors', in von Falkenhausen, L. & Brashier K. E. (eds) *The Lloyd Cotsen Study Collection of Chinese Bronze Mirrors, Volume II, Studies.* Los Angeles: Cotsen Occasional Press, UCLA Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, pp.40-41.
Fig. 1-5: Mirror from Houjiazhuang tomb 1005, Anyang, ca. 13th-12th centuries BCE. After Kong Xiangxing & Liu Yiman. 1992. *Zhongguo gudai tongjing* 中國古代銅鏡. Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, p.14.
Fig. 1-3: Mirror from Dasikong tomb 25, Anyang, ca. 13th-12th centuries BCE. After Zhongguo shehuikexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo Anyang gongzuodui. 1989. '1986 nian Anyang Dasikongcun nandi de liangzuo Yinmu' 1986 年安陽大司空村南地的兩座殷墓, *Kaogu* 7:596. Tracings by Doris Yixuan Tang.

Fig. 2 (above right) 2-1: Mirror from Gamatai tomb 25, Guinan, Qinghai, 2300-1700 BCE. After Zhongguo qingtongqi quanji bianji weiyuanhui (ed.) 1998. *Zhongguo qingtongqi quanji:di juan* 16中國青銅器全集: 第16卷. Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, p.1. fig. 2-2: Mirror from Hami, Xinjiang, 19th-13th centuries BCE. After Hami bowuguan (ed.) 2013. *Hami wenwu jingcui* 哈密文物精粹. Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, p.89. fig. 2-3, 2-4: Mirrors from Houqianyi tomb 4, Luanxian, Hebei, 13th-11th centuries BCE. After *Houqianyi yizhi kaogu fajue baogao ji Jidong diqu kaoguxue wenhua yanjiu*, p.40. Tracings by Doris Yixuan Tang.

Fig. 3 (below): Geographic distribution of mirrors with geometric patterns in early China. Courtesy of Yanlong Guo.



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1 Some scholars have proposed that this type of mirror may have originated in Southern Siberia or Central Asia during the late third millennium BCE. For example, Juliano, A. 1985. 'Possible Origins of The Chinese Mirror', *Notes in the History of Art* 4.2/3:36-45. But none of the early mirrors found in the two regions exhibit the geometric patterns.

2 Zhang Wenrui and Zhai Liangfu. 2016. *Houqianyi yizhi kaogu fajue baogao ji Jidong diqu kaoguxue wenhua yanjiu* 後遷義遺址考古發掘報告及冀東地區考古學文化研究. Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, pp.175-177.

Tracing the exotica: Sasanian glassware in Inner Mongolia

Maliya AIHAITI

Fig.1: Glass bowl from the M1 Tomb (e), gilded necklet (f) and its inlaid glass sherds (a, b, c, d) from the M3 Tomb, Yihe-Nur Cemetery, Zhengxiangbai Banner, Xilingol League, Inner Mongolia, China. Fig.2: Glass bottle and its bulbous cap, Qilicun M20 Tomb, Datong, Shanxi, China. Fig.3: Glass ewer and glass bowl, Hwangnam Daechong Mausoleum, Gyeongju, Gyeongsangbuk-do, South Korea.

From 2010 to 2014, a group of burials dated to the late fifth and early sixth centuries were excavated at Yihe-Nur, Inner Mongolia. This excavation yielded a number of exotic objects, including a sapphire blue glass bowl from Tomb 1 and a gilded necklet inlaid with pieces of glass from Tomb 3. Our compositional analysis using a non-invasive XRF analyzer shows that these glass objects are Sassanian plant-ash glass. This new discovery, together with the findings of the Sasanian plant-ash glassware from Datong (China) and Gyeongju (South Korea) provided crucial evidence to map out the spread of Sasanian glass along the Silk Road during the early medieval period.

In 2010, five burials dating to the Northern Wei period (386-534 CE) were discovered at Yihe-Nur, Zhengxiangbai Banner, Xilingol League, Inner Mongolia.[1] Despite tomb robberies, the archaeological team managed to retrieve some magnificent burial goods, including a sapphire blue glass bowl and a gilded necklet inlaid with glass shards (fig.1) among other luxury items. In January 2017, we collaborated with the Xilingol Museum to conduct a compositional analysis of the excavated glass products using the non-invasive Thermal Scientific Niton XL3t GOLDD+XRF Analyzer. The three samples we analyzed were the sapphire blue glass bowl from M1 and two light blue glass shards on the necklet from M3. The test showed that the proportion of potassium oxide (K2O) ranges from 2.39-2.88% in the blue-glass bowl, and is about 2% in the light blue glass shards of the gilded necklet. According to the study by Robert H. Brill at the Corning Glass Museum, ancient glass that contains potassium oxide between 2% and 4% belongs to Sasanian plant-ash glass.[2] The three samples we tested all fall into this category.

Sasanian plant-ash glassware was also found in Pingcheng, the Northern Wei capital and modern-day city of Datong, Shanxi Province. The blue glass bottle with a bulbous cap (fig.2), excavated from Qilicun M20 Tomb, contains a proportion of 3.26% potassium oxide, suggesting it is Sasanian plant-ash glass.[3] In addition to archaeological findings from China, the Korean Peninsula unearthed Sasanian plant-ash glass as well. The glass bowl and ewer (fig.3) recovered from the fifth century Hwangnam Daechong Mausoleum located in the city of Gyeongju (Gyeongsangbuk-do, South Korea) have long been identified as either Roman glassware or local production due to stylistic features. But the recent compositional analysis by Korean scholars revealed that both the glass bowl and the ewer are Sasanian plant-ash glass, since they contain 3.9% K2O.[4]

The discoveries of Sasanian plant-ash glass in Northern China and Korea is likely related to commercial and diplomatic exchanges during the Northern Wei Dynasty. *Wei Shu*, the dynastic history of the Northern Wei, mentions that merchants from Yuezhi brought glassware and the technique of making glass to Pingcheng. In the middle of the 5th century, the Goguryeo kingdom sent envoys to the Northern Wei court for the first time followed by more frequent tributary missions. It is possible that Sassanian glassware discovered in China and Korea was brought by Central Asian merchants to the Northern Wei court at Pingcheng and then transmitted to Inner Mongolia and the Korean peninsula.

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Notes

1 Chen Yongzhi et al. 2016. 'The Results of the Excavation of the Yihe-Nur Cemetery in Zhengxiangbai Banner (2012-2014)', *The Silk Road* 14:42-57.
2 Brill, R.H. 2005. 'Chemical Analyses of Some Sasanian Glass form Iraq', in Whitehouse, D. (ed.) *Sasanian and Post-Sasanian Glass in The Corning Museum of Glass*. New York: The Corning Museum of Glass, Appendix 2, pp.65-96.
3 An Jiayao & Liu Junxi. 2015. 'Northern Wei Glassware in the Datong Region 大同地區的北魏玻璃器', in Yungang Research Institute (ed.) *Pingcheng Silu* 平城絲路. Qingdao: Qingdao chubanshe, pp.352-353.
4 Min Jeong Koh et al. 2012. 'Comparison in Characteristics of Chemical Composition of Glass Vessels Excavated from Neungsalli Temple in Buyeo, Korea, from Baekje Period', *Bulletin Korean Chemical Society* 33(12):4157, Table 2.

Making the sacred: relics and reliquaries in medieval China

YU Wei

Buddhist relics [*sārira*] are believed to be the physical remains of Buddha's body after his death [*Parinirvāṇa*] and cremation. Reliquaries, containers of relics, to a certain extent signify the existence of relics and act as the physical embodiment of relics that are hidden inside. The practice of venerating Buddhist relics has been commonly observed across Asia in history. This essay focuses on Buddhist reliquaries and practices of relic veneration in medieval China. Adopting a cross-disciplinary approach that combines art history, Buddhology, and history, my research hopes to shed more light on how reliquaries and relic veneration rituals were tied to the viewers, the political power, and the city space in medieval China.

Fig. 1: Stone reliquary, Lantian County, Shaanxi Province. After Taipei Lishi bowuguan bianji Weiyuanhui. 2010. *Shengshi huangchao mibao: Famensi digong yu dating wenwu tezhan* 盛世皇朝秘寶：法門寺地宮與大唐文物特展. Taipei: Taipei lishi bowuguan, p.198.

The practice of venerating Buddhist relics first appeared in India, and later spread to Central Asia, and then to China. Our current understanding of the relic veneration ritual, by and large, depends on the archaeological discovery of reliquaries. Relic containers found in India, mainly made of stone or crystal, usually consist of a round bowl and a cover with a knot. Their decoration is relatively simple, featuring several circles of rings around the body. Reliquaries from the Gandharan region are larger in number and more diversified in shape compared to the Indian reliquaries. One type of Gandharan reliquary that had a cylindrical body decorated with rings around the body later entered into China proper. But it did not take long before this style was replaced by the 'square-body and mansard roof-cover' form, which first appeared during the fifth century and was regarded as indigenous Chinese style. When Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty (r.581-604) distributed relics nationwide in the years 601 to 604, he also preferred the 'square-body and mansard roof-cover' as the standard form of reliquary. This form persisted into the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE) and was visible in the visual representation of relic distribution. The decoration of the reliquaries developed into a more complex scheme, such as the stone reliquary uncovered in Lantian County, Shaanxi Province (fig.1). While the form of the Lantian reliquary follows the Chinese tradition, its decoration speaks about connections with early Indian legends and Gandharan Buddhist art. Details of the images carved on four sides represent scenes not just from the Buddhist cannon, but also inspired by Buddhist encyclopedia.

The relic veneration ritual reveals the interaction between Central Asia and China as well. In the year 403, Monk Faxian observed a ritual ceremony of displaying relics when he visited the city of Hidda (醯羅城), in modern-day Afghanistan. He recorded that the king held a ceremony involving the display of Buddhist relics in a glass case, and the stupa that hosted the reliquary was opened regularly. The practice of exhibiting the relics on a regular base was also observable in Tang China, where relics were taken out from monasteries to be displayed every 30 years. On the Lantern Festival of 704, relics hosted at the Famen Temple were taken from the pagoda's underground palace to Tang's East Capital Luoyang. The Famen relics were juxtaposed with the Nine Tripods (*jiuding* 九鼎, the symbol of heavenly mandate) in the Bright Hall (*mingtang* 明堂, the symbolic supreme shrine). In this way, the Buddhist relics and reliquaries were staged and shown as a statement of the political power, which was comparable to the Nine Tripods. The ceremony of displaying relics at Tang's Western capital Chang'an engaged more with the general public. We can conclude that displaying the Buddhist relics was of paramount significance since it invoked religious enthusiasm among worshippers, built a close connection linking the sacred relics and the urban space, and created a visual tie between the religious power and the political supremacy.

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Blue-and-white porcelain on Shangchuan Island: Chinese-Portuguese trade during the Ming dynasty

XIAO Dashun

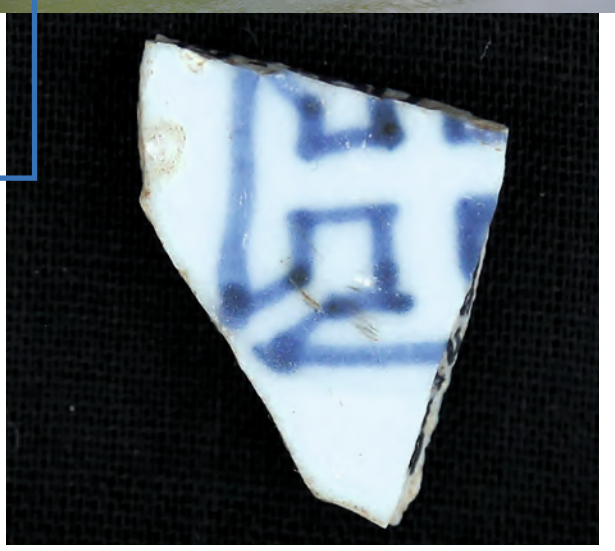

Fig.1 (above): Shangchuan Island, with the chapel attached to St. Francis Xavier' tomb on the left side. Courtesy of Guangdong Provincial Research Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology. Fig. 2 (left): Porcelain sherd decorated with Christ Cross, excavated from Shangchuan Island, Guangdong Province. Courtesy of Guangdong Provincial Research Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology.

In 2016, the Guangdong Provincial Research Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology conducted a series of archaeological excavations and surveys on Shangchuan Island. The island (fig. 1), measuring 156.7 square kilometers, is one of the largest islands in the Pearl River Delta. It lies on the southern side of Guanghai Bay, about 9 kilometers off the south coast of Guangdong Province. Shangchuan Island is rich in natural harbors and has served as an important navigation mark for the maritime route since the Song dynasty. Cultural remains on the island can be traced as far back as the pre-Qin period. Our excavation carried out in 2016 was centered on Dazhou Bay; it unearthed a large number of blue-and-white porcelain pieces, the majority of which are export porcelain related to Portuguese trading activities along China's southeastern coast during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 CE).

These pottery sherds are fragments of bowls or plates. Features of the glaze and the paste, as well as the production technique, indicate these ceramics are products of Jingdezhen. Some of the sherds are inscribed with Chinese characters, including *Da Ming Nian Zao* 大明年製 [Produced during the years of the Great Ming] and *Jia Jing Nian Zhi* 嘉靖年製 [Made during the Jiajing reign], helping to date these remains to the 16th century. Most sherds are decorated with traditional Chinese patterns, such as flowers, clouds, and phoenix. Intriguingly, one piece of blue-and-white porcelain is painted with the Order of Christ Cross (fig. 2), the emblem of the historical Portuguese Order of Christ, thus testifying to the Portuguese and Catholic presence on the island. The discovery suggests that Shangchuan Island served as a transitional trading post for the Chinese-Portuguese trade before the Portuguese took Macao as their major settlement in 1557. After controlling the Malacca Strait, the Portuguese sailed through Southeast Asia to China with the help of the monsoon wind, seeking to establish connections with the Ming court. The Portuguese delegation paid their first official visit to China in 1517, followed by increasing trading and construction activities along the coast.

The blue-and-white porcelains were retrieved from a site near a chapel attached to St. Francis Xavier's cemetery. St. Francis Xavier, a Catholic missionary known for his extensive travels in Asia, arrived at Shangchuan Island in 1552, but died soon later in the same year. After St. Francis Xavier's visit, Shanghchuan island not only acted as a Chinese-Portuguese trading stronghold, but also became a bridge for the religious and cultural exchanges. The large quantity of recovered blue-and-white porcelain, and the Christ Cross found on the sherds, is an embodiment of the trading and religious network connecting the East and the West. In 1639, the Jesuits in Macau built a tomb for the saint to mark the original burial site after the body was taken to Goa, the then capital of Portuguese India. From 1701 to 1864, Catholic activities on Shangchuan Island were largely restricted or even banned, and priests were expelled. After 1864, French Catholicism arrived on the island and continued St. Francis Xavier's mission.[1] The current chapel was sponsored by Bishop Guillemin between 1867 and 1869. Another Catholic Church in the Sunday Village south of St. Francis Xavier's chapel and a hilltop commercial monument showcase the later wave of Catholic presence.

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Notes

1 Davies, S. 2016. 'Achille-Antoine Hermitte's Surviving Building', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 56:92-110.

Transnational exchange of metallic commodities during the Era of the Canton Trade

HUANG Chao

Fig. 1: A pair of candlesticks in the fluted pillar style, made of Chinese paktong but probably manufactured in Britain, ca. the late 18th century. Courtesy of HUANG Chao.

During the decades preceding the Qing empire's forced opening to the West in 1842, Canton (Guangzhou) was the only port open for foreign trade. The Sino-Western relations had mainly evolved around trades through Canton from 1700 to 1842, a period known as the 'Era of the Canton Trade'. Scholarship of the Canton Trade focuses mainly on the trade of tea, porcelain, and silk, yet the commercial exchange of precious and semi-precious metallic items has been largely ignored. During the 18th and 19th centuries, large quantities of manufactured goods made of silver, gold, tutenag, paktong, lead, tin, as well as the raw materials, were exported from Canton to Southeast Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Based on archival records, including journals and logbooks, and archaeological discoveries from shipwrecks, this essay examines the overlooked metallic items that embodied the commercial vitality and momentum of the transnational trade.

In 1684, the Qing court lifted the ban on maritime trade, reinitiating commercial exchanges with the outside world. Canton, located at the southeast tip of China's coastal line, gradually grew into one of the most important port cities of the 18th and 19th centuries, an era that witnessed the emergence of the transnational trading networks. The flourishing maritime trade left a rich body of materials that offers scholars the opportunity to look into every aspect of the Canton Trade, ranging from studies on companies and merchants to that of trading routes. The trading commodities have long been the subject to extensive research. However, most studies are concentrated on tea, silk, and porcelain. Metallic objects are largely ignored. In the second half of the 20th century, H.A. Crosby Forbes and his colleagues raised the awareness of export metallic artifacts through their breakthrough research into what was then termed 'Chinese export silver'.[1] Nevertheless, metallic commodities other than silver have yet to be studied systematically.

When conducting my post-doctoral project 'Trading Metals in Canton', in collaboration with Professor Paul A. Van Dyke, a renowned expert on the Canton Trade, I started to pay attention to the trade of gold with Spanish silver coins. Gold ingots were recovered from a number of shipwrecks, including the 'Nanking Cargo' in Amsterdam. These ingots are impressed with marks, such as *yuanji* 元記 that denotes the maker's name, and numerals such as *shiliang* 十两 that stands for weight and value.

Besides gold and silver, objects made of tutenag and paktong also constitute a significant portion of export metallic commodities. Tutenag is now widely accepted as zinc, thanks to the study by Alfred Bonin.[2] The 18th-century shipwrecks of the English East India Company uncovered tutenag items that were recorded as ballasts in the Company's journals and logs. Laboratory tests show that the composition of these tutenag items is comparatively pure zinc. Paktong, or 'white copper', a kind of copper-nickel or copper-nickel-zinc alloy, is usually made into candlesticks (fig.1). Not only were the paktong products exported to Europe, but the technique of manufacturing paktong items was also transmitted to the West, as demonstrated by some 18th century lab notebooks on paktong discovered in England and Sweden. Lead, tin, and iron were usually regarded as ballast cargoes or kentledge that were used to improve the ship's stability while sailing at sea. Commodities made of these metals were much smaller in scale. Pure copper was often imported from Japan to Canton by the European traders. Metallic commodities, though not a common topic of research, did play a significant role in the exchanges between China and the West. I hope this short essay can stimulate more interest in the transnational exchange of metallic commodities.

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Notes

1 Forbes, H. et al. 1975. *Chinese Export Silver: 1785 to 1885.* Massachusetts: Museum of the American China Trade.
2 Bonnin, A. 1924. *Tutenag & Paktong, with Notes on Other Alloys in Domestic Use during the Eighteenth Century.* Oxford University Press.