

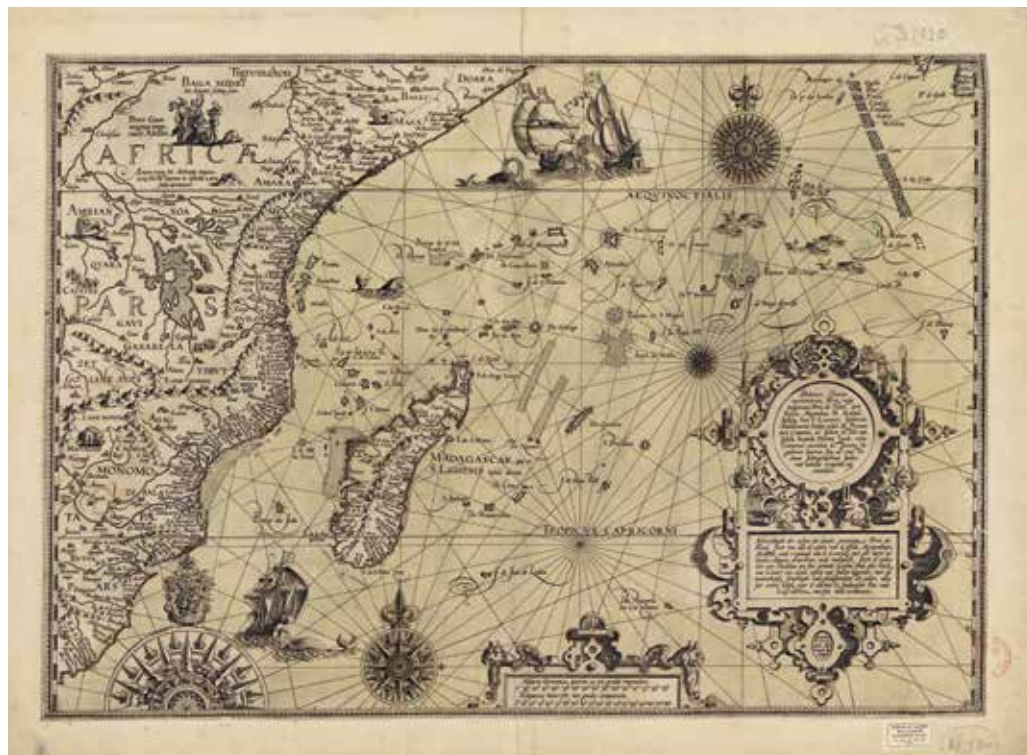
An Overlooked Story:

Chinese Porcelain and Ceramics from the East African Coast

By Caroline Carfantan

Many articles have been written about the love for and expansion of trading routes for Chinese ceramics. The fondness of rulers of the Near and Middle East for porcelain is well-documented as it was probably the most highly regarded import from China to these regions from the 9th to 15th centuries. As testimony to this craze, two of the largest collections of the oldest blue and white porcelain and ceramics outside China are currently housed in the Topkapi Sarayi Museum in Turkey and the Ardabil Shrine in Iran.

But the rich merchants and princes from the Near and the Middle East were not the only lovers of Chinese ceramics and porcelain. They were also held in high esteem in the Arab communities of East Africa, a region known as the Swahili Coast. This region was at the edge of a trans-ocean maritime realm that stretched from the Philippines and the Spice Islands to the eastern coast of the Indian Ocean. This 500-kilometre-long coastline includes the shores of Kenya, Tanzania and northern Mozambique, as well as the islands of Zanzibar, Pate, Comoros and northern Madagascar.



Map of the Swahili coast from *Navigatio ac itinerarium Johannis Hugonis Lisiotini*, engraved by Arnold Florentius van Langeren and published by Hagae Comitibus: apud A. Elsevirum, 1599. Courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Chinese ceramics and porcelain were the ideal maritime trade good. Their heavy weight and the fact that they were waterproof made them an excellent ballast, which stabilised vessels on the open seas. The earliest glazed wares uncovered by archaeologists were traded to East Africa from Islamic cities around the Persian Gulf. Later, Chinese ceramics and black glass beads as well as textiles, were bartered and exchanged for numerous high-value East African commodities. These included ivory, tortoise shell, ambergris, rock crystal, timber, iron, Zimbabwean copper and gold and also exotic birds, animals and slaves.

The lovers of the Tang Shipwreck gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum, may be interested in knowing that 20 Changsha shards from the ninth century were found at the archaeological site of Shanga. Shanga is an ancient port located southeast of Pate Island in the Lamu Archipelago on Kenya's east coast. Some historians believe it is the oldest Muslim settlement on the East African coast and south of the Sahara.

Chinese green wares from Longquan and Fujian, as well as 14th century blue and white porcelain from Jingdezhen, are further evidence of these commercial networks. In comparison to other ceramics found, the volume of Chinese shards and wares is comparatively low and there are no records to date on their transactional value. Even so, historians agree that the Chinese ceramics are of high quality and must have had a high value in the Swahili material culture. According to Bing Zhao, researcher at the French National Centre for Scientific Research: "The Chinese archaeological team working in Kenya has recorded large



Dish. Excavated from the Vohemar necropolis site, Madagascar. China Longquan kiln complex, late 14th century CE. Green glazed stoneware with stamped decoration. Photo by Bing Zhao, courtesy of the Natural History Museum of Nîmes, France

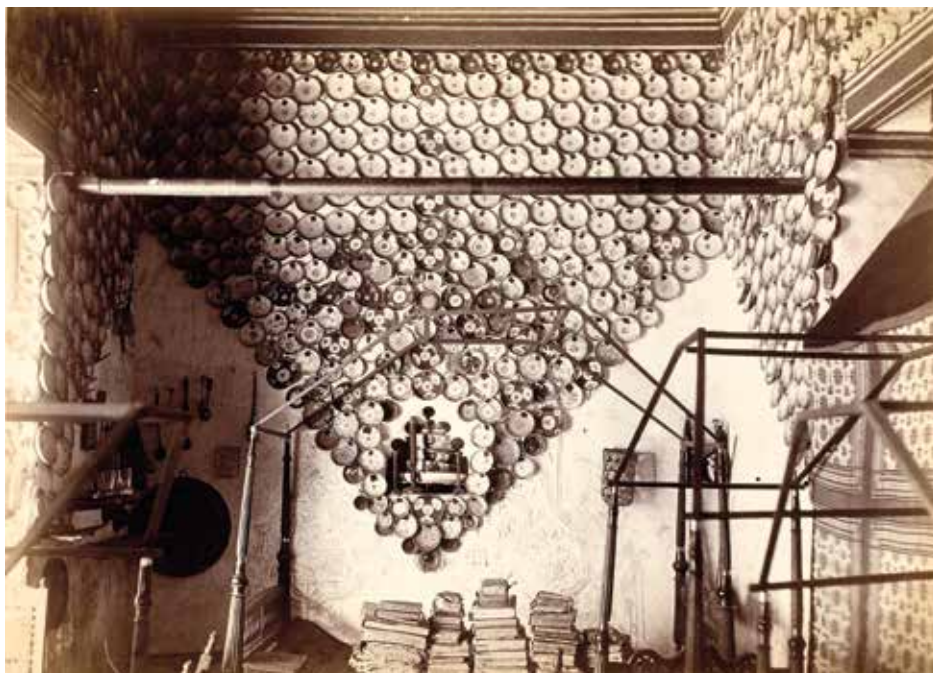
Longquan green-glazed stoneware dishes of a quality equal to those sent to the Chinese imperial court in the late 14th and early 15th centuries". Another proof of their value is in the fact that broken pieces were not discarded. Instead they were repaired; holes were created and wires were inserted. Apparently, they were kept for several generations.

As early as the 13th century, Chinese ceramics were used on the Swahili coast to decorate the façades of pillars or dome tombs. These two types of burial monuments are believed to have been reserved for elite families, probably those who controlled the maritime trade. Using ceramics in the tomb decoration added light to the tomb's plain white surface by reflecting sunlight. Their perceived value must have been high. The inherent value might have been linked specifically to the colour blue since blue dyes were unknown in East Africa until after the 16th century.

Today, blue and white porcelain plates from the 16th to 17th centuries can still be seen on the eight-metre-high Great Pillar of Mambui Cemetery in Kenya. However, this tomb is a rarity today as not many of these Chinese ceramics remain in the Swahili coastal areas. In the 19th century, as power moved from the local merchants and regents to European countries, thousands of bowls, plates and vases were bought from impoverished families or looted by Europeans. According to Sandy Prita Meier, Assistant Professor of African Art and Architectural History at New York University², "Chinese and Middle Eastern porcelain was the most desirable souvenir not only because of its great value in the European antiques market, but also because it was difficult to obtain. One could not buy porcelain in stores or markets, but instead had to find middlemen with connections to locals willing to sell it, or to people willing to desecrate graves."



Photograph of 16th-century Swahili tombs near Dar es Salaam, present-day Tanzania, 1880s, by Sir John Kirk courtesy of the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh



Photograph of the interior of an 18th century merchant mansion in Lamu Town, present-day Kenya, 1884, by Sir John Kirk, courtesy of the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh

The looting was even recorded by one of its perpetrators, Richard Burton, known in Europe as an explorer and adventurer. The notes in his diary reveal a different character, that of a looter of ancient Swahili tombs. He writes that the locals tried to prevent his actions and that he was fully aware that the sites had not been abandoned.

The Scottish naturalist Sir John Kirk, who travelled to Zanzibar alongside the explorer Dr David Livingstone, also recorded Chinese ceramics in the photographs he took of local scenes and people. His pictures provide insight and visual documentation of how porcelain was displayed in Swahili upper-class houses. In his photographs, one can see porcelain dishes directly attached to the wall in a large triangular shape, sometimes covering almost the entire wall of a room, highlighting the sheer mass of porcelain. It is not known when people started to hang and display Chinese porcelain dishes in this manner, using repetition and multiplication. For some, these hangings were a display of luxury, worldly sophistication and cultural refinement. To others, it was a display of power and wealth, and to others still, a symbol of the spiritual purity of elite Muslim families.

Another less prosaic interpretation comes from the oral records of Mombasa's older generation, as grandmothers describe the "magical powers" of these plates. When a dish cracked, it was more than a crack. That crack was warding off what Westerners would call the evil eye, a curse transmitted through a malicious glare, usually inspired by envy. A beautiful object such as a porcelain dish could offer protection by distracting the spiteful gaze and absorbing its negative intentions. So, when a displayed plate broke, it had fulfilled its duty of protecting the family and household by catching and neutralising someone's malevolent gaze.

Caroline Carfantan is an FOM guide who believes that objects are more than mere commodities; they are also fabulous storytellers of regional and international interactions and beliefs.

¹ Source: Zhao, B. (2012). Global Trade and Swahili Cosmopolitan Material Culture: Chinese-Style Ceramic Shards from Sanje ya Kati and Songo Mnara (Kilwa, Tanzania). *Journal of World History*, 23(1), 41–85.

² Meier, S. P. (2015). Chinese Porcelain and Muslim Port Cities: Mercantile Materiality in Coastal East Africa. *Art History*, 38(4), 702–717