

# Navigating the Compass Dish

By Jen Quinn Choo

A close inspection of one of several Zhangzhou export wares in the Asian Civilisations Museum's Trade Gallery, reveals a vibrant scene with bold turquoise and black illustrations portraying elements of maritime trade and the familiar icons of a ship, fish and mountains. In addition to these common motifs, we also find a medley of unique symbols that have been hidden in plain sight, most notably the central dial with a faint spray of iron-red inscriptions as well as an arrangement of cosmological constellations. Ordinary as this dish may seem, its composition of uncommon images reveals much more than meets the eye.

The first motif is a fish, which traditionally has represented harmony and prosperity, adorning surfaces of Chinese porcelain since the Tang dynasty. The characteristics of the fish depicted on this Zhangzhou dish, however, offer a different interpretation. The towering appearance of the monstrous sea creature's mouth behind the ship of dizzy mariners may allude to mariners' fears of giant ship-swallowing fish. Alternatively, it could also represent the notorious mythical creature known as a *makara*,<sup>1</sup> a mythical marine animal associated with the form of a crocodile, notorious for devouring defenceless seafarers.

The second noticeable characteristic is that the triple-masted ship is unlike common junks of the time, sporting a tapered bow and stern as well as an extension of sailormaned oars. A similar model at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum suggests that this ship is similar to that of a *Shāchuán* (沙船), which translates to 'sand boat'. The name informs us that the ship was used for coastal voyages, perhaps along the Southeast Asian peninsula or to nearby island nations, namely Japan or the Philippines. Another familiar icon is the three-peaked mountain, which alludes to the heroic legend of the Eight Immortals, depicting a paradise that offers a refuge of harmony, safety and abundance.

In the centre of the dish is a dial with inscribed characters illegible to the modern-day Chinese reader, yet they seem unmistakably familiar to what is known as 'Lesser Seal Script', an archaic style used by officials in the Chinese government. Upon closer inspection, the characters 天下一 (*tiān xià yī*), or 'all under heaven', reveal the aphorism of ultimate control or China's fundamental belief in its authority over land, sea and sky.<sup>2</sup>

Surrounding this centre dial is a ring of faint characters. Drawing a reference to the ancient Chinese technology of the *luó pán* (罗盘), or the magnetic compass created over 2,000 years ago, each character corresponds to one of the mansions of Chinese astronomy. Before the invention of the modern-day compass, such dishes were used as portable functioning navigation devices, activated by filling the dish with water



Dish with compass and ships. Zhangzhou, Fujian province China. Late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Diameter: 33.5 x 7.8cm, porcelain, overglaze iron-red, turquoise blue and black enamel. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore. #2011-00159.

and placing a needle made of the magnetic lodestone on the surface. It would be drawn toward the earth's north-south polar axis.

This aptly ties in with the feature of the constellations. Dating as far back as 5000 BCE, to the antecedents of the Chinese, traces of cosmography have been found on artefacts such as Neolithic pottery, often depicted as "lozenges containing concentric squares, crosses or diamonds."<sup>3</sup> The four specific constellations depicted by connected dots represent four of the lunar lodges or mansions, which reaffirms its use as an early compass dish.

Navigating the scenes of this seafaring dish unveils a composition of instrumental and functional icons embedded within what at first glance appeared as a very ordinary dish. If only we could uncover more of its mystery, where it was going and who its users were.

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<sup>1</sup> Darian, Steven. "The Other Face of the Makara." *Artibus Asiae* 38, no. 1 (1976): 29-36.

<sup>2</sup> Zhao, Tingyang. 2006. "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All-under-Heaven' (天下 Tian-Xia)." *Social Identities* 12 (1): 29-41. doi:10.1080/13504630600555559.

<sup>3</sup> Sullivan, Michael, *The Arts of China*, 6th ed., University of California Press, 1961, p. 17.