

## **Peck-Marked Vessels from the San José Market Street Chinatown: A Study of Distribution and Significance**

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*Ceramic bowls and plates with Chinese characters pecked into their surfaces are documented on almost every nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chinatown site in California. Typically, these vessels are said to bear marks of ownership, and further analysis has been uncommon. Given the socio-political atmosphere surrounding Chinese immigration and labor during this time period, as well as the cultural relevance of this marking practice, it is the author's belief that this explanation is incomplete. Through analysis of archaeological materials from the Market Street Chinatown in San José, California, this paper explores the possibility that Chinese immigrants were using and hybridizing the familiar Chinese cultural practice of marking vessels to aid in creating an environment within the Chinatown that was both more comfortable and more livable.*

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**KEY WORDS:** Chinatown; porcelain; peck marks; hybridization.

### **THE MARKET STREET CHINATOWN**

In an era of segregation and anti-Chinese violence, Chinatowns were safe havens providing a familiar cultural community as well as physical and emotional protection from outside aggressions (Young Yu, 1991, p. 21). By the late 1860s the majority of large communities in California had Chinatowns, many of them fortified with brick walls built around them to ensure extra protection for their residents (Barth, 1964, p. 122). San José, California, was no exception, and as early as 1866 San José's first Chinatown, The Market Street Chinatown (also sometimes referred to as the Plaza Street Chinatown), was established. It was

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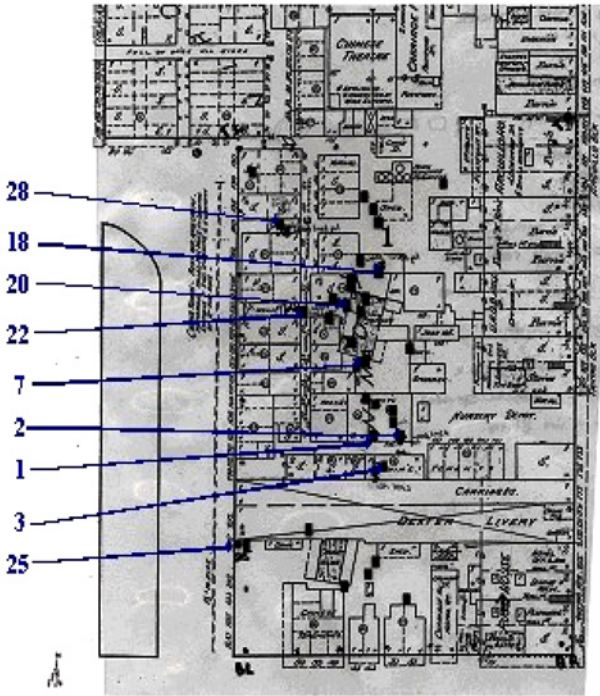
situated on San Fernando and Market Streets in the center of today's downtown San José (Allen *et al.*, 2002). In 1866, public records show that three Chinese individuals erected structures on the Southeast corner of Market and San Fernando Street. Between 1868 and 1870, the Market Street Chinatown grew rapidly and the city council recorded numerous petitions by Chinese and white landowners for permission to erect wooden structures on the property along San José Street. By June 1868, the Market Street Chinatown had grown to a sufficient size that several of the residents felt it necessary to petition the city for a special police officer to patrol the area. It is speculated that the buildings owned by white owners were being rapidly rented to the growing population of Chinese workers and families. By the end of 1869, the Market Street Chinatown spread from the corner of San Fernando and Market Street south along the eastern portion of Market Plaza and about half way to San Antonio, and provided housing for several hundred Chinese people (Laffey, 1993). As recorded by an early Sanborn insurance map (Fig. 1), the Market Street Chinatown was made up of tenement houses, stables, a large restaurant, a theatre, and stores with rooms in the back to house families (Sanborn-Perris Map Company, date unknown).

In the early part of January 1870, white residents of San José brought anonymous concerns about the Chinatown to the city council. A very short time later, on January 14th, a fire destroyed the entire Chinatown (Laffey, 1993). On January 20, 1870, the *San José Weekly Mercury* reported that many residents thought of the Chinatown as bothersome, but the newspaper also chastised the city fire department for not doing their duty. Although some peripheral blocks of the Chinatown also contained buildings where white Americans lived and worked, only Chinese buildings were burnt during the fire (Allen *et al.*, 2002).

Following the fire, much of the Chinese population in San José moved to an area of Vine Street near the Guadalupe River where they established a more temporary community. Winter flooding and protesting neighbors made this a less than ideal location for permanent residence (Allen *et al.*, 2002; Laffey, 1993; Young Yu, 1991, pp. 21–22).

In April 1870, the land of the first burned Market Street Chinatown was leased to Ng Fook, an agent of Li Po Tai, a wealthy Chinese businessman based in San Francisco. Ng Fook began the construction of a "fireproof" Chinatown in 1871 (Laffey, 1993). While many of the buildings in the new Chinatown were made of brick, several were still built of wood, and in 1883 fireman John Cunan, warned of the fire danger of the Chinatown because of the closeness of its wooden buildings. The Chinese community organized a volunteer fire department as a result (Young Yu, 1991, p. 29). The population of the Chinatown continued to grow and in its height this Chinatown was considered the headquarters for the estimated 3000 Chinese living in the Santa Clara Valley (Allen *et al.*, 2002). Public anti-Chinese sentiment seemed to grow with the size of the community, and many in San José supported the removal of Chinese from the downtown

**Overlay of Archaeological Feature Map on Sanborn Map**  
(Sanborn-Perris, date unknown)



Numbers on this map represent archaeological features where pecked vessels were located.

Black dots on this map represent all archaeological features from 85-31.

**Fig. 1.** Overlay of archaeological feature map on Sanborn map.

location of the Market Street Chinatown. In March 1887, the mayor and entire city council declared the Chinatown a “public nuisance” (Young Yu, 1991, p. 29).

On May 4, 1887, a fire was set to the second Market Street Chinatown: “The fire spread quickly through the wooden structures, leaping from one store to the next and soon consumed the entire quarter. Chinese ran through the smoke to try to save their belongings” (Young Yu, 1991, p. 29). The Market Street Chinatown had a volunteer firefighting team, but they were unable to respond to the conflagration because all of their fire hoses were mysteriously cut and the water tower drained (Young Yu, 2003). When the fire was over all that remained was a

brick theatre on West San Fernando Street. Following the second fire, residents founded two new communities, Heintlerville and the Woolen Mills Chinatown. To this day, there remains an active and vibrant Chinese community in San José, California.

## COLLECTION HISTORY

The excavation of the Market Street Chinatown site was conducted in 1985 and 1986 by Archaeological Resource Service (ARS) in Novato, California. The firm was originally hired to monitor construction workers as they dug the foundation for the construction of what is today San José's downtown Fairmont Hotel. When historical archaeological materials were discovered, ARS was hired by the San José Redevelopment Agency to excavate the site. The conditions of excavation were hurried and certainly not ideal. Construction workers worked with heavy equipment in the morning while the ARS team followed them marking areas where features had been uncovered. In the early afternoon the construction crew went home and the archaeologists then had the remainder of the day to excavate any features that had been uncovered that morning. Only architectural features and middens were excavated. To expedite the process, no screening was done on site and instead bags of dirt were taken away to be screened elsewhere.

During the redevelopment project, the former site of the Market Street Chinatown was divided into nine separate city lots. In planning for excavation, the Chinatown was divided into two sections and given two separate project numbers; 86-36 was the project number given by ARS to the northern portion of the site, which consisted of lots 1-4 and 9. 85-31 was the project number given to the southern portion of the site, consisting of lots 5-8 (Laffey, 1994). Due to a lack of project funding, ARS conducted minimal analysis on the artifacts from this site, and the City of San José stored the recovered materials for a number of years in a series of warehouses. In 1991, Robert Cartier and his archaeological team conducted a basic inventory of the collection, examining and assessing one out of every 10 boxes of artifacts. In 1994, Basin Research Associates, was hired to do an inventory and preliminary analysis of the materials. Once this work was completed, these materials were returned to storage. In 2001, almost 450, 12 in × 20 in × 10 in cardboard bankers' boxes of materials were transferred to History San José, a non-profit history museum, for long-term curation.

In the summer of 2002, Barbara Voss of Stanford University was contacted by archaeologist Rebecca Allen in partnership with History San José, and invited to participate in a project designed to inventory, catalog, and analyze these materials. In addition, the project held the larger goal of assessing the research potential of the collection and organizing the materials to be used by History San José as

educational tools with which to teach about Chinese American history in the Santa Clara Valley.

In the fall of 2002, the author became involved in this project taking on the role of research assistant and MA student. Under Voss's guidance, the Market Street Chinatown research team began the preliminary steps necessary for working with the collection. In consultation with History San José, it was decided that the team would begin working with the materials from the 85-31 portion of this site. In early November, the collection was transferred from this History San José storage facilities to Voss's archaeological laboratory on the Stanford University campus. Research was conducted in consultation with History San José, the Chinese Historical and Cultural Project, Bill Roop and Katherine Flynn, as well as other members of the archaeological community. It was the author's research on the collection as a whole that led to an interest in the peck-marked vessels found in this assemblage; she believed that they could be used to reconstruct a context for a site where little of the original context was recorded in a more traditional manner. Voss and her research team currently maintain an ongoing project focusing on the analysis and interpretation of this collection. The Market Street Chinatown project is now in its third year of research and analysis, and continually provides community members with project updates via an interactive website and published annual progress reports.

### PECK-MARKED VESSELS

The artifact assemblage from the Market Street Chinatown is quite diverse. Artifact analysis is ongoing, but the assemblage appears to be dominated by ceramics, faunal remains, and glass artifacts. Artifacts recovered from the southern portion of the Chinatown included an MNV of 1062 ceramic vessels; of these, 16 bear individual markings. Some of the marks on the vessels are clearly recognizable as Chinese characters and others are symbols of a more ambiguous nature (Fig. 2). Each has been hand-pecked into the surface of a plate or bowl.

Presumably, the original owners or users of the vessels made these marks. Peck marks appear on a wide variety of vessel forms ranging from large serving bowls to small condiment dishes, including personal sized bowls and plates. The majority of the marked vessels that were recovered from this particular area are Asian porcelains, although two British whiteware plates are also pecked (Fig. 3). With the exception of these two whiteware plates, bearing the same mark, all markings are unique.

Sixteen peck-marked vessels occur in the collection, all of which were analyzed in this study (Table I). The majority of the pecked vessels have a large amount of interpretive value as they have clear marks and are from areas of the southern portion of this site where provenience information was recovered. There are however, also a few pieces that are broken along their mark and were



**Fig. 2.** The peck mark on this four flowers plate reads: peace or harmony. It was disposed of in a large trash feature next to a family-run store.

consequently not fully translated. Additionally, other pieces were recovered in the surface collection, but were insignificant in the analysis of the spatial distribution of these artifacts across the site.

### Translation

Of the 16 marked vessels in this assemblage, 12 were translated. Although vessels that were not translated could not be used to name individuals or families, they still aided significantly in the spatial analysis performed for this project. The pieces break down into two categories of markings: seven are individual or family names, and five are wishes or blessings. The Market Street Chinatown assemblage seems to have a much larger number of marked vessels than is generally recorded at other sites where peck-marked vessels have been found. Other overseas Chinese sites have typically contained one or two peck-marked vessels (Greenwood, 1996; Praetzellis and Praetzellis, 1997). In contrast, 16 vessels were found in the artifact assemblage from the southern portion of the Market Street Chinatown, which covers roughly only one half of the occupational area of this site (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 3. The peck mark on this whiteware plate reads: sir or a military rank. It was disposed of in a trash feature located between the restaurant and a row of tenement houses.

Table I. List of Peck-Marked Vessels in Lot 85-31 of the Market Street Chinatown

Provenience	Vessel form	Pattern	Character	Translation
85-31/BH-1	Plate	Four flowers		None
85-31/0-4	Plate	Whiteware	品	“sir”
85-31/0-175	Plate	Four flowers	章	“Zhang”
85-31/0-188	Hollowware	Four flowers	<sup>a</sup>	“half, partly”
85-31/0-335	Bowl	Four flowers		None
85-31/1-1	Plate	Four flowers	<sup>a</sup>	“Mahn”
85-31/2-1	Plate	Four flowers	醉	“drunk”
85-31/3-1	Plate	Whiteware	品	“sir”
85-31/7-2	Plate	Four flowers	<sup>a</sup>	“sign”
85-31/18-20	Plate	Four flowers	和	“peace, harmony”
85-31/18-395	Bowl	Bamboo	<sup>a</sup>	“rising”
85-31/20-22	Plate	Four flowers	和	“together”
85-31/22-1	Hollowware	Four flowers		None
85-31/25-8	Bowl	Celadon	爸	“dad”
85-31/20-255	Plate	Four flowers		None
85-31/28-2	Bowl	Four flowers	孔	“Kong”

Note: Vessels were translated by Scott Wilson and Young Xie. <sup>a</sup>No character has been identified for this translation.

### **Spatial and Contextual Analysis**

The records kept with this collection are incomplete and include only two maps, a Sanborn insurance map from the late nineteenth century (Sanborn-Perris Map Company, date unknown) and a map of the excavated features (ARS, 1985). The latter map was drawn in relation to temporary construction pilings and does not indicate where the features were located once the pilings were removed. The one consistent factor between the two maps is the Chinatown boundary. The map of excavated features, of equal scale as the Sanborn map, was superimposed onto it to approximate the vessels' original locations. The features seemed to appear in backyards, alleyways, and building exteriors (see Fig. 1).

The marked vessels were then linked with their recorded feature numbers and were matched to the context where they had been deposited. In some cases, features appear to be linked to a particular building or group of buildings. It is inferred that individuals who pecked the characters into these vessels and discarded them in the disposal areas might also have spent time in the buildings associated with the features. This analysis indicated that the peck-marked vessels had been deposited in refuse features associated with buildings throughout the Chinatown.

With the use of these superimposed maps, analysis was conducted of all of the locations where these vessels were excavated. It appears that the majority of vessels marked with nicknames or family names were located in portions of the Chinatown identified as tenement houses, whereas the majority of vessels that were marked with wishes or blessings were associated with buildings identified as family-run stores. This distribution suggests that differences in living conditions may have influenced individuals to maintain or hybridize traditional cultural practices, providing room for a range of variation even within a single community.

### **OWNERSHIP PRACTICES IN THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The creation of a peck mark on a porcelain bowl or plate is not a quick or easy task. Porcelain is an extremely hard, rigid material, and to etch a character through the glaze and into the paste of a vessel, one would have needed to apply a hard object with enough force to chip away at its surface, but not so much as to crack the whole vessel. There seems to be something of an art to creating clean legible characters. As it was most likely not a casual, thoughtless action, and specific intention may be attributed to these marks. The Market Street Chinatown collection has a range from very faint and illegible to distinct and easily translated marks.

According to Kapchan (1996, p. 6), hybridity occurs whenever two or more historical trajectories influence one another to the extent that they might challenge the socially constructed independence of the other. Chinatowns were social locations where interactions between historical trajectories occurred on a daily basis.



Overseas Chinese people held strong beliefs regarding food, life, and the way the universe worked (Diehl *et al.*, 1998). The physical environment of the Chinatown, however, imposed constraints and limitations on the ability to maintain all traditions and beliefs. The result of the push and pull of defining oneself and one's community both within the structure of tradition, as well as within the constraints of a new environment created many cultural patterns that were neither fully traditional nor acculturated, but rather something else entirely (Bhabba, 1994, p. 219). Chinatowns were locations where local crops were prepared and then eaten in traditional cooking styles (Diehl *et al.*, 1998), where traditionally prepared foods and beverages were imported from China (Lister and Lister, 1989) and eaten off of Euroamerican ceramics, and where meats were purchased that had been butchered in American styles and then used to prepare traditional dishes (Praetzellis, 1999). Just as immigrants in other immigrant communities were blending traditional ideas and customs with the material culture and landscape of their new environments, so it appears were the Chinese immigrants in San José.

Peck-marking plates and bowls with symbols of good luck is commonly practiced in China today (Jean Shao, personal communication, 2003). It appears possible that the practice may have been just as widespread in the nineteenth century, and that this marking practice could have been a tradition that some of the immigrants to the Market Street Chinatown brought with them from China.

Holding onto familiar customs and ways of life may have provided a sense of identity for people in an unfamiliar and often hostile environment. One's taste for particular material culture is developed through familiarity and early experience, creating an affinity for material culture that is easily recognizable, and thus reinforcing a group identity for people sharing similar material culture and environments (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 175). First generation immigrants experiencing unfamiliar material culture in California may have sought to create an environment as recognizable as possible to articulate a social group inside Chinatown that was more inviting than that imposed on them by the hostile outside community. The majority of Chinese immigrating to California were grown adults, and habitus, or one's structuring world views, are primarily the product of early childhood history (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 86–87); therefore, upon immigrating to California, individuals brought their already well established habitus and views of the objective world with them. First generation immigrants tend to have a stronger bond to their countries of origin than members of subsequent generations, and they tend to be more intimately familiar with the traditional practices that work to create and reaffirm their own habitus, in addition to experiencing a stronger sense of alienation resulting from a lack of experience with new customs and objective views. As a result, we might expect that traditional material culture practices might be more common in first generation immigrant communities than they are in second and third generation environments (Ferguson, 1999). The Market Street Chinatown was one of the earliest Chinatowns in California, and the relatively large number

of peck-marked vessels, as compared to later Chinatowns, might be explained by the differences between first and subsequent generations of immigrants.

Immigrants can be separated but not alienated from their countries of origin. People are not bound by culture, but instead work to create identities that are hybrid, bridging some of the cultural and social practices of both their old and new environments (Leonard, 2001). While the marking of porcelain bowls and plates with signs of luck may have been a common practice in China, it is also possible that the practice of peck marking vessels became a hybridized art form in California's Chinatowns. Social environments created by the crowded living quarters in tenement houses and the rush of hurried patrons through the doors of restaurants may have created an environment where personal properties in the Market Street Chinatown felt less secure than they had been in the private homes in China, or even in the family-run stores just on the other side of the Chinatown. People in today's China do not mark their bowls and plates with personal names (Jean Shao, personal communication, 2003). The vessels pecked with names from the Market Street Chinatown could be a result of a marking practice that may have come about as a means of taking an already familiar cultural practice and using it in a new way to meet the needs of a foreign environment. These hybrid vessels, marked with names rather than with blessings, were found in and around the tenement houses and the restaurant, but were largely absent from the features found around family-run stores. This distribution may indicate that the social environment around the tenement houses and restaurant were different enough from the environments with which people were accustomed and comfortable, that a traditional material culture practice was altered to fit the new needs of an unfamiliar environment and ensure a new type of security.

## DISCUSSION

It is the author's contention that the marks found on these vessels are marks of ownership. Ownership, however, had a fairly flexible definition and meant different things to different individuals. Both the private ownership of individuals living in tenement houses who felt the need to hold onto personal property items, as well as the larger cultural ownership of community members wishing to engage in a practice that was both familiar and comfortable. It is possible that ownership of these vessels could have taken on a variety of significances, and that this variance may be the result of a hybridization of traditional cultural practices used by individuals in unfamiliar environments. Within the southern portion of the Market Street Chinatown site it is possible to link individuals who pecked their names or other symbols on the surfaces of vessels to specific refuse features on this site and from those trash deposits associate them with nearby buildings where these people may have spent some of their time. It is the author's belief that differences in cultural practices are related to varied living situations and these differences

can be seen through the treatment of material items such as peck-marked vessels. Despite their ubiquitous appearance on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chinatown sites, peck-marked vessels have received little notice. This study has demonstrated the interpretive potential of the analysis of peck-marked ceramic vessels on overseas Chinese sites.

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