Foodways of the Market Street Chinese:
A look at Chinese Stoneware Storage Vessels

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Intro

By 1887, the site of the Market Street Chinatown in San Jose was a bustling city with more than a thousand people living inside its walls (and yes, there were walls). They had a temple, food markets, barber shops, tenements, and restaurants (Williams 2003: 1). Pretty remarkable for a people who had seen their homes and businesses burned to the ground on the very same site less than two decades earlier. (Young Yu 1991: 29). This rebuilding is a testament to the perseverance and dedication of the Chinese overseas population to their culture. It is a culture rich in history, tradition, and community. One of the most important ways this culture is kept alive is through food, and it is through the study of their foodways that I hope to learn more about the people of the Market Street Chinatown.

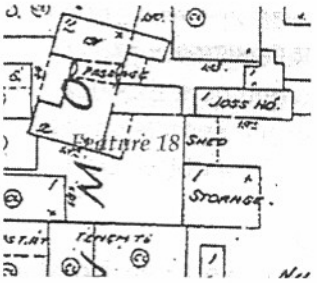
With many things relating to the Chinese culture, the overseas Chinese populations were very particular about using authentic goods from China. Connie Young Yu spoke about how, for the New Years parade, the people of California Chinatowns would have the dragons shipped from a special manufacturer in Canton (Young Yu 2/27/04). Chinese-made goods were important to the Chinese who had moved across the Pacific, and food seems to be no exception. The relatively large mass of Chinese-made stoneware storage vessels found in the California Chinatown sites suggest these towns consumed a lot of imported foods. Analysis of the stoneware storage vessels, historical documents, and historiographies will shed light on the importance of Chinese export foods and alcohol (to some degree) to cultural preservation in Chinese overseas sites.

What drew me to this project was, in part, the fact that it seems very little has been done to study the storage vessels. For whatever reason (my guess is that they just are not very glamorous from a purely aesthetical view) it seems they get lumped into a

category of "other" artifacts – those besides the small gaming tokens, the opium pipe tops, the glasswork used for medicine or alcohol, etc. The storage vessels really raised some interesting questions though. Questions like, how important was it for Chinese-American culture to eat authentic Chinese foods? Were there comparable American foods that would make acceptable substitutes? Was there something unique about the foodways of the Market Street Chinatown as compared with other overseas Chinese sites? Even if the artifacts themselves don't seem quite as exciting as fine porcelain or opium pipes, the questions and implications of the stoneware storage vessels are as interesting and worthy as any.

The Vessels

The Market Street site in San Jose is a particularly interesting site because of its role as a cultural hub in the area (Williams 2003: 1). To contextualize it, Feature 18 consists of two wood-lined cells adjacent to one another (Flynn and Roop 2/27/2004). From the 1884 Sanborn Insurance map, we can see that the cells were near a *Joss House* (a temple), a storage building, and across from a tenement house.



The materials I worked with were themselves quite interesting the more I became familiar with them. In Feature 18 there were a total of six different kinds of storage vessels I could identify, and a good portion of the collection that was unidentifiable and could have realistically contained more storage vessel types. The main forms of the

storage vessels were jars, spouted pots (also called "soy pots"), and liquor or wine bottles.

Of the category jars, there were four different kinds in Feature 18, including globular, barrel, shouldered, and bowl shaped. The globular jars vary widely in size, with the largest reaching 2 ft in diameter at their widest point (Leun 1987: 241). The picture taken of the globular jar below is from the Riverside collection, as there are only fragments from Feature 18. The barrel jars also get very large and are often not glazed on the inside. Stoneware lids were also present for these large barrel jars. The shouldered jar (also called a wide mouthed jar in the Los Angeles study) seems to be of pretty standard size – about 6 inches across at the widest point. All examples of the shouldered jars in Feature 18 were brown glazed both inside and out.

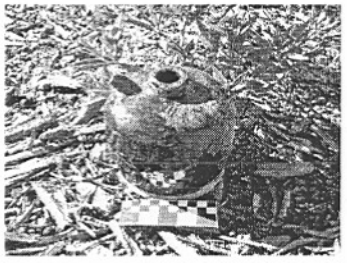
Shouldered Jar

Globular Jar

Barrel Jar

The other two vessel types, the spouted pot and the liquor/wine bottle, have some unique features. The spouted pot, glazed inside and out, has a small spout appendage and a very narrow opening on top. The bottles have a distinct hourglass shape with a broad rim. One note: the spouted pots and the shouldered jars have indiscernible bases and seem to be from a uniform design pattern. This comes both from my observation of the artifacts at Feature 18 and also the accounts of these bases at the Los Angeles site. Also, all of these classifications I am using are those being used in the Riverside study and the

vessels in Feature 18 have been identified by comparing photos also appearing in *An American Chinatown.*



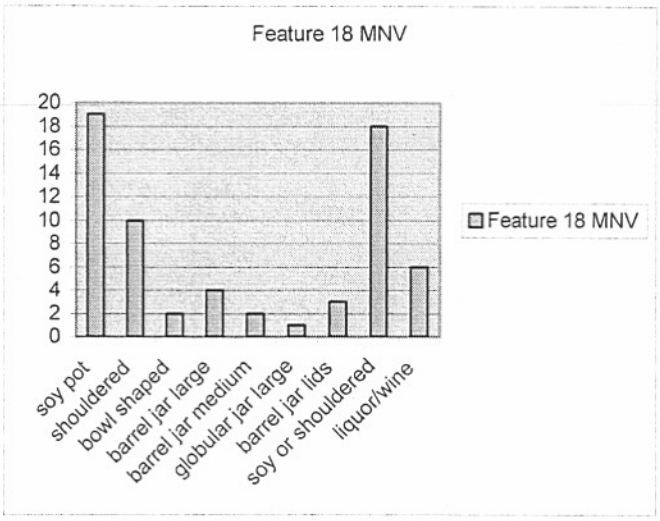
Spouted Pot

Liquor/Wine Bottle

The Data

When analyzing storage vessels, it seems the most useful information is in the numbers and ratios. Because there is a relatively large sample to work with and the vessels themselves are pretty uniform (i.e. there is little decoration) MNV counts and ratios of the vessel types hold the greatest value. For Feature 18, I decided to first look at the computerized data to find the ratio of food storage vessels to the overall MNV of the feature. Then, having identified the entire portion of the artifact group "storage vessels", I did individual MNV counts for each subcategory of storage vessel. These MNV counts were done by hand using rims as the primary means for counting the jars, spouts and/or rims for the spouted pots, rims for the for the liquor/wine bottles, and bases for a tally of both spouted pots and shouldered jars together, which, as I previously explained, are indiscernible by base alone. The results from these counts are below.

Vessel Type	MNV approx
Feature 18 total	700
Food Storage	152
soy pot	19
shouldered	10
bowl shaped	2
barrel jar large	4
barrel jar medium	2
globular jar large	1
barrel jar lids	3
soy or shouldered	18
liquor/wine	6
undefined	87



MNV Ratios (Feature 18 storage vessels)

Spouted = 12.5% Storage	Liquor =3.9% Storage	Globular = 0.7% Storage

Historical Background

Food in Chinese culture plays a role that goes well beyond that of just subsistence. Food preparation and eating are an integral part of community life. According to Moses and Whitmore, who cite Professor Chang in saying, "food preparation and consumption in China commingle practical, philosophical, and spiritual elements into a rich matrix of meanings and behaviors. Eating is seldom done by Chinese as a mere physical reflex devoid of higher meaning" (Moses & Whitmore 254). In other words, food is a tradition inseparable with Chinese culture. Food and food consumption are part of an action with higher meaning not just because of the spiritual aspect, but also for practical purposes. The Taoist principal of *fan-ts'ai* was developed as a way to promote health through a balanced diet (Moses & Whitmore 255).

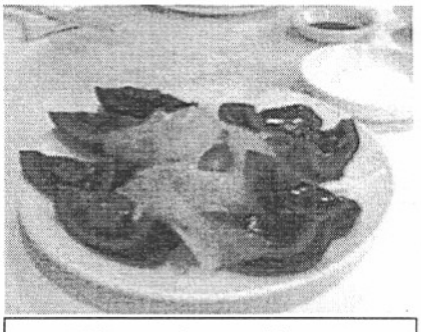
Even more important to my project, though, is the Chinese tradition of food preservation. They used a wide variety of techniques, including pickling, smoking,

salting, sugaring, steeping, drying, and soy sauce marinade (Moses & Whitmore 255). These processes were believe to not only cure the food and preserve it for later consumption, but also to bring out the natural health benefits of the food (Leun 1987: 255) It was these preserved foods that were able to make the trip across the Pacific. Preservation, by whatever means, not only preserved the food, but also a way of life for the overseas Chinese.

In 1958, Robert F.G. Spier wrote an article describing the food habits of the nineteenth-century California Chinese, in which he says,

> The Chinese continued to eat their customary foods despite emigration to a foreign land, and the manner in which this accustomed diet was supported likewise underwent little change. Not only was there a continuation of habits of diet, but also of the techniques of food production as evidenced by the implements involved. (79)

Just because they California Chinese continued their diet does not mean all their food was imported. In fact, the bulk of the food, such as pork, dove, chicken, and a variety of fresh produce, was produced locally (Moses & Whitmore 257). Herein lies the real potential for this project – figuring out what foods *were* imported and in what quantities and proportions. From manuscript records on cargo ships sailing from Hong Kong to San Francisco and also invoices from Chinese food stores throughout California, we can get a good idea of the foods being brought in. These shipments include, but are not limited to, dry oysters, shrimps, cuttlefish, dry bean curd, yams, dry duck, salt ginger, birds' nests, "thousand-year-old eggs," taro, seaweed, and a number of spices (Spier 1958: 80).



"Thousand-year-old eggs"

The storage vessels found in Feature 18 held some or all of these foods. Determining which foods belong with which vessel is not so clear however. The brown glazed storage vessel is in many ways very similar to our #8 can, the standard can you find in any grocery store. They are all fairy uniform and are a way to preserve foods, but they can hold anything from diced pineapple to chunky beef stew to cranberry sauce. Fortunately for this study, the stoneware vessels are not quite as ambiguous as to what they contained. For example, wet foods were stored in jars and pots that had glaze both on the inside and outside so the moisture would not soak into the porous ceramic. Spouts also denote wet food, in particular sauce (commonly soy sauce) (Leun 1987: 239). Wet foods also seem to be stored in small or medium sized jars, making the higher density foods easier to transport. Dry foods, on the other hand, often come in large-sized barrel or globular jars which are most often not glazed on the inside. The liquor/wine bottles are also glazed inside and out. (Greenwood 1996: 80)

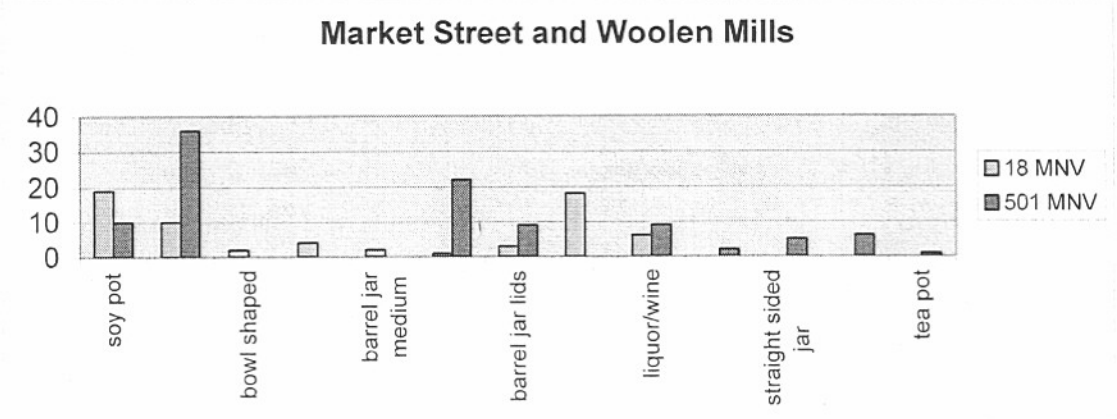
Analyzing the data

Looking at the historical documents and the data together shows that a substantial number of the vessels in Feature 18 held wet foods or sauces at one point. This seems to hold with the historical accounts that staple foods (i.e. meats and produce) were grown locally and sauces and side dishes were imported to add Chinese flavor and culture to meals. The other thing that is pretty noticeable from the data is the apparent lack of liquor/wine bottles. 4% of MNV for the storage vessels in Feature 18 is a pretty insignificant number, especially when compared with figures from other Chinese overseas sites.

Comparisons

Comparing the data from Feature 18 with that of other overseas Chinese sites is where I began to find some really interesting differences and similarities. I first compared Feature 18 with Feature 501 of the Woolen Mills site, another San Jose Chinatown. I chose Feature 501 because it most closely resembled Feature 18 in terms of its surroundings – it is next to two *Joss Houses* and a tenement building. An important demographic characteristic of Woolen Mills is that the vast majority of residents are male (Young Yu 2/27/04). Below are figures I compiled from the raw data printed in the Woolen Mills site report.

Vessel Type	**MNV Feature 18**	**MNV WM Feature 501**
All artifacts	approx 700	
Food Storage	152	216
soy pot	19	10
shouldered/wide mouth	10	36
bowl shaped	2	
barrel jar large	4	
barrel jar medium	2	
globular jar large	1	22
barrel jar lids	3	9
soy or shouldered	18	
liquor/wine	6	9
Pan		2
straight sided jar		5
Pot		6
tea pot		1
undefined	87	116



MNV Ratios (Feature 501 storage vessels)		
Spouted = 4.6% Storage	Liquor = 4.2% Storage	Globular = 10.2% Storage

The main thing that stands out is the difference in ratios of spouted pots and globular jars as compared with the total storage vessel MNV from each Feature. The percentage of spouted pots in Feature 18 is three times that of Feature 501, while the percentage of globular jars in 501 is greater than ten times that of 18. This suggests that people at Feature 18 and, dare I make the connection, Market Street as a whole consumed more liquid imported foods and less dry food than Feature 501 and Woolen Mills. Another detail to note – liquor/wine bottles at Feature 501 are there in the same proportion to all storage vessels as they are in Feature 18. This seems counterintuitive based on what we know of the demographics of the two sites.

Analysis of the Los Angeles numbers shows something even more intriguing with the liquor/wine bottles. Liquor/wine bottles account for 31% of the vessels in the Los Angeles Chinatown while only 4% at Feature 18. In addition, spouted pots, shouldered and globular jars are all in the same proportion between the two sites. Interestingly enough, the proportion of barrel jar lids to barrel jars is the same (and not 1) at both sites. (Greenwood 1996: 79-82)

Further research

While I was able to uncover some good information about the culture of the people of the Market Street Chinatown through analyzing their foodways, this project

creates more questions than answers. There is great potential for further research into this topic. Going back first to just the data from Feature 18, there is a lot of work that could be done on the liquor/wine bottles. Does the low MNV count mean there was little alcohol present around Feature 18? Or perhaps American whiskey or another spirit was the drink of choice? One problem with working with a site still in the cataloging process is that not all of the data is ready at your finger tips for analysis. Had the glass from Feature 18 been catalogued, it would be easy enough to compare stoneware liquor bottles with glass (presumably American) liquor bottles.

Staying along those lines, the comparative studies of liquor between the three sites also raise some interesting questions. Why are Chinese liquor/wine bottles seven to eight times more frequent in Los Angeles than in either Feature 18 or Feature 501 of Woolen Mills? Does this necessarily mean that alcohol is that much more rare in both Market Street and Woolen Mills? Or is it something unique about the features themselves? Looking at historiographical accounts to determine the relationships that the *Joss Houses* and tenement building had with alcohol could be one path of study.

A third area for continued research is continuing to compare foodways of Market Street and Woolen Mills. The difference in the data between the two features for both globular jars and spouted pots is a strong indication of differences in food consumption and/or preparation. What these differences are remains to be seen, but there is potential for those results to lead to some very interesting gender studies about the overseas Chinese. Woolen Mills can act as a control in demographic comparisons because it is comprised almost entirely of male laborers. Questions that come to mind are, what exactly was contained in the globular jars and is there some reason its contents are more

important to a population of men rather than families? or, are the contents of the spouted pots for some reason more important to the foodways of the Chinese American family? What does this imply about gender roles of the overseas Chinese? This is one area where there is a lot of depth.

Finally, what are the inherent biases of a project like this? Looking into different aspects surrounding the data, such as what were the roles of the *Joss House* and tenement buildings in contributing to the feature? Is this representative of the site as a whole? Did some of the storage vessels have value in being recycled and would they therefore be underrepresented in the Feature? Lastly, how well do the cataloging techniques between different sites cross over? I mentioned before that, as best I can tell, wide mouth jars and shouldered jars are two names for the same vessel. Does this always hold or are there wide mouth jars that are *not* also shouldered jars?

While this project did answer some of the questions that originally drew me to study the stoneware storage vessels from Feature 18, its real value is that it opened up doors to more important questions about the overseas Chinese. Namely, questions about culture , gender roles, and differences in lifestyle between different California Chinatowns.

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