Research on Persian Pottery Unearthed in Guangxi and Related Issues

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From 1989 to 1998 Persian pottery vessels were unearthed in succession in Yangzhou and Fuzhou. Later the same vessels were unearthed in ten places in Guilin and Rongxian of Guangxi. The vessels, with contemporary porcelain pieces, were found in the same cultural deposits undisturbed. With no doubt these scarce materials are well worth studying. On the basis of the collection of the related materials and careful analysis, we have formed some views and would like to publish them for our counterparts’ reference.

I. Persian Pottery Unearthed in Guangxi and Related Information

All the Persian pottery vessels from Guilin and Rongxian of Guangxi were gathered in the construction sites, which belonged to the reforming projects of the old towns. Judging from the revealed soil beneath the vessels, it was sterile soil except that only a small number of them were upon the cultural layer dating from the early Tang Dynasty through the late Southern Dynasties. Above these vessels were mostly cultural deposits of the Song Dynasty or of later times. Unearthed together with the Persian vessels from the same layers or ash pits were mostly porcelain pieces from Changsha Kiln, Yue Kiln and Xing Kiln respectively, and in addition, some ceramic pieces, bricks and tiles from Guangxi kilns. For further discussion the Persian pottery unearthed from Guilin and Rongxian and some related information are listed in the table affiliated to this thesis (Table 1).

Table 1 Persian pottery unearthed in Guangxi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date of unearthed</th>
<th>Location in the Tang Dynasty</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Fragments from the same layer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sihui Road  四会路</td>
<td>Mar. 1990</td>
<td>west Guizhou</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>white china bowl from Xing Kiln; plates and jars with blue-green painting glaze from Changsha Kiln</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>south bank of Shanhu Lake 杉湖</td>
<td>Aug. 1991</td>
<td>Kaiyuan Temple 开元寺; south Guizhou</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>white china bowl from Xing Kiln; blue china bowl from Yue Kiln; blue, green, brown, black, milky white and color painting glazed bowl, plate, cup, kettle, jar, Pātra, box, lamp, stove, pillow, toy, grinding slot, grinding basin, lotus-patterned tile end and shingle from Changsha Kiln</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanduo Road  三多路</td>
<td>Sept. 1991</td>
<td>west Guizhou</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>white china bowl from Xing Kiln; blue-glazed bowl, stove, ewer, lotus-patterned pile end string-patterned brick from Changsha Kiln</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yire Road  依仁路</td>
<td>Dec. 1992</td>
<td>downtown Guizhou</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>white china bowl from Xing Kiln; blue china bowl from Yue Kiln; blue, brown, black, green, milky-white and color painting bowl, plate, lamp, jar, Pātra ewer and lotus-patterned tile end from Changsha Kiln</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
II. Date of the Persian Pottery Unearthed in Guangxi

Most bowls, unearthed with the Persian pottery from Changsha Kiln, Yue Kiln and Xing Kiln stated above, have bi-disc bottoms (bi is a round flat piece of jade disc with a hole in its center used for ceremonial purposes in ancient China), wide or narrow. Compared with the circular legs or thick circular feet a small number of big bowls bear, the small bamboo-hat-shaped bowls from the same kilns have bi bottoms. While investigating into Changsha Kiln, in the section of the waste products we saw big circular-footed bowls and small bamboo-hat-shaped bi bottomed bowls in the same layer, showing that they belong to the same time though with different styles in their bottoms. A few five-lobed bowls share the features with the blue porcelain vessels from Yue Kiln that were once stored in cellars in the Tang Dynasty and were unearthed in the cellar Palace of Famen Temple 法门寺, Fufeng 扶风 County, Shaanxi 陕西 Province, that is to say they all have a thick slightly outward-slaning bottom. From the dormitory construction site of Guilin People’s Hospital (the Tang Kaiyuan Temple site) more than 500 glazed pieces in blue, yellow, brown, black, white and green were unearthed with the Persian pottery. They are believed to be from Changsha Kiln. They show various kinds of decorative technology such as color glaze, color painting, color calligraphy, modeling, molding, lithography and stamping. All these bowls, plates, cups, boxes, Pātra, stoves, pillows, bottles, kettles, lamp-stands, candle-stands, toys, grinding basins and crushing slots are believed to be from Changsha Kiln in its prime in the middle or late Tang Dynasty. Besides more than ten bowls of blue porcelain from Yue Kiln and of white porcelain from Xing Kiln, big or small, were unearthed. None of them shows the late Tang characteristics. In the ash pits also appeared segmental tiles whose brims are decorated with double-wave patterns, tile ends with lotus patterns, square bricks decorated with pressed granulation, cord-patterned bricks and a number of lead coins with the Chinese characters “开元通宝”. Blended with the Persian pottery pieces in the Rongxian Archway Base construction site were a large number of tile pieces and broken bricks with the pressed character “官”. Similar bricks with the pressed character “官” were found in the tomb of Li Jian 李谏 and his wife. This tomb dates to AD 848 in the Tang Dynasty and is located in Tonggu 铜鼓 Village, Rongxian County. The archaeological findings from Yangzhou City show in the construction site in each layer in which Persian pottery was unearthed Tang china pieces from Changsha Kiln, Yue Kiln, Xing Kiln, Shouzhou Kiln 寿州窑 and Gongyi Kiln 巩义窑 were also found. Likewise in some Thai archaeological sites blue china from Changsha Kiln and Yue Kiln were often seen with Persian pottery. So we conclude these Persian pottery vessels unearthed from Guangxi, Yangzhou and Thailand were in use in the middle or late Tang Dynasty and discarded no later than the late Tang Dynasty.

III. Features and Usage of the Persian Pottery Vessels Unearthed in Guangxi

All the broken Persian pottery pieces are from bottles.
The 40-odd pieces from the government construction site of Rongxian County show, the pieces having been joined for restoration, a relatively intact bottom with a short ring base fully glazed and some padding baking traces can be seen. This restored bottle is 40 cm high from its neck through shoulder, belly to bottom. It is estimated that its intact original had a height of more than 50 cm from its mouth to bottom. From its mouth to shoulder remnants of double flat ears can be seen. Round the shoulder there are decorating patterns of strings of pearls, parallel cords, grids and waves. On its belly there are patterns of cords and hand-molded lithography. The shape of it is similar to that of the intact Persian pottery vase with two ears (Fig. 1), which was unearthed from the Automobile Repair and Spare Parts Plant construction site in the south suburbs of Yangzhou in 1965, except for the somewhat longer belly. A broken piece of such double-ear vase was found on the construction site of Guilin General Guarding Company, which belongs to the upper part of the shoulder. Other pieces belong to the shoulder or belly. By contrast the shoulder pieces are thinner and they become thicker downwards. On both outside and inside walls bold finger prints can be seen showing the molding technology on a wheel. The inside wall is light rice-yellow with the delicate and fine substance, showing the quality of water absorption. The outer glaze is peacock blue. A few pieces, peacock-green, bear lines like those in the cracked ice. The inside glaze is light sky-blue. In some parts of the downward streamed glace scatter grayish black marks. With glaze all over the inside wall the bottle can prevent the liquid from leaking. With the double ears, the bottle is convenient for people to transport. The small mouth, long neck and big belly are the best parts for a vessel containing liquid (Figs. 2 and 3).

Some people once inferred that the Persian pottery bottles were used to preserve fresh water in order that on the one hand the ship could move steadily with the extra weight, and on the other hand the crew could get sufficient supply of drinking water. Others think they served as the container to carry spices to China. We must learn the custom of the place where these bottles were produced before we judge what these bottles were used for. According to historic archive, in the Tang Dynasty most of the tradesmen or preachers who traveled from the Middle East to China were from the regions of Persian Gulf and the Two River Reaches. According to “Old Testament”, “New Testament” and “Koran”, ancient Middle East abounded in grapes; baked cakes and grape juice were daily food and
drink for people, both rich and poor.

The containers for keeping grape juice were the leather bag, pottery bottle and wooden barrel. Among the spices yielded in the Middle East and traded abroad were frankincense, kapur, amberggris, eaglewood, anise, cumnios, myrrh and cinnamon, which were all dry spices and could be packed in cattail bags and unnecessary to be kept in heavy fragile small-mouthed bottles. As for the drinking water, it could be stored directly in the ship’s hold without any bottle, which could have been unnecessary burden for the ship. For their way of life the crew had to carry a lot of grape juice that could not be supplied for them outside their country, and the grape juice, which is rich in Vitamin C, was very important for their health for it could serve as the substitute for fresh fruit and vegetable. And later in their destination, Tang Empire, it became the vogue for the power elite to drink the remnant of the grape juice. Since the grape juice could be traded for the Chinese specialties, it turned out to be one of the goods transported to Tang Empire via the Seagoing Silk Route. It was for the trade that the Persian bottles were used as the container of grape juice.

It is reported in the past recent years that Persian pottery pieces were also found in the archaeological sites in the coastal areas of Malay Peninsula, such as Ko Kho Khao, Laem Pho, Prarot Uthong, Tha Chana, Yala and Bujang Valley. Trading ships started from Middle East often got their supplement of fresh water or took shelter from the wind at Ko Kho Khao, Thailand when they sailed through Andaman Sea before entering the Strait of Malacca. Judging from the unearthed Persian pottery pieces from the site at Ko Kho Khao to the number of 384, the empty bottles from which the grape juice had been drunk up were discarded on the way. Maybe the crews traded the grape juice for goods. Therefore it is no wonder that Persian pottery vessels have been found in the Chinese Tang archaeological sites in the coastal cities like Yangzhou, Ningbo, Fuzhou, Quanzhou and Guangzhou. But what is the reason why Persian pottery vessels have been found at Tang archaeological sites in the inland mountainous areas like Guilin and Rongxian in Guangxi? Of course there are waterways to Guangzhou and the Yangtze River. Yet further study should be made for thorough explanations.

**IV. Relation Between Persian Pottery Pots and Nestorianism in China**

According to historic archives, in the Tang Dynasty the main religions introduced from Middle East were Mazdaism, Nestorianism and Manicheism, among which only Nestorianism (Christianity) had an inseparable relation with grape juice. Christians have indispensable Holy Communion at the weekly service. They ate unfermented flour loaves and drank unfermented grape juice. The former was likening to Jesus’s body and the latter Jesus’s blood. This ritual originated at the Passover banquet of Jesus Christ and his twelve disciples. Jesus said at the party, “... he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” So grape juice was and still is needed for the Holy Communion in the weekly service in any Nestorianist (or Christian) churches.

According to the records of the Tang court, in AD 635 Nestorianism was introduced by a Persian monk named Olopen, who brought *Bible* to the capital city Chang’an and built a church with the emperor’s permission. Three years later he was allowed to do missionary work nationwide. According to the *Daqin Jingjiao Luxing Zhongguo Bei 大秦景教流行中国碑 (Tablet of the Spreading of Nestorianism in China), during the reign of Tang Emperor Gaozong (650–683), Nestorianism spread nationwide with Nestorianist churches set up in more than one hundred cities. The then Guilin and Rongxian were among the forty key cities of China. Logically Guilin and Rongxian should be among the cities in which Nestorianist churches were set up.

In a west suburb of Rongxian there is a road named Qingjing Lane (the sound “jing” may denote Nestorianism in Chinese). By the end of the road there is a terrace in a low hilly land. On the terrace there is a site of “Qingjing Temple.” Its name has existed for ages and it is difficult to trace its origin. But typical Tang artifacts have been found beneath the farming soil, such as a wall base made of big bricks, lotus-patterned tile-ends, blue china ritual ring-bottomed bowls from Yue Kiln, white china ritual ring-bottomed bowls from Xing Kiln and different colored glazed porcelain pieces from Changsha Kiln. In addition five pieces of the Persian bottle were found. In this site there is no cultural deposits of post-Tang times. From the findings stated above we can conclude that “Qingjing Temple” is a site a Nestorianist church in the Tang Dynasty and the names of the church and the road have been handed down to date.

According to historic archives, by the Tang dynasty not plenty of grapes were yielded for grape juice industry though a small number of courtyards have been found with the trace of growing of grapes. Grape juice was indispensable in the spreading of Nestorianism. In the
transportation of it from Middle East the material of its container was a problem. The sheep leather bag tends to cause ferment and a strong smell that is disgusting to Chinese people except for those living in North-east China and the bags of juice could not be stored in the cabin in piles. Since Middle East was short of wood resource the possibility of using wood barrels as the container is ruled out, considering that the businessmen could not take them back for continuous trading. Only the traditionally produced pottery bottles, cheap, practical, and without any stink, are the best option for containing grape juice in transportation. Each time when the juice was drunk up in the Holy Communion at a Nestorianist church, the empty bottles were left there for other usages until they were broken. So the discarded pieces have been found on the ground or in the ash pits.

In the Seventh Month of the Fifth Year of Huichang Reign Period (845), the Tang Emperor Wuzong ordered that Buddhism be forbidden. Later in August the same year he ordered all the priests or monks of Nestorianism, Manicheism, and Mazdaism, all three thousand or more, to resume secular life and they were put under the government of their birth places and made to pay taxes by law except for those with foreign backgrounds, who were sent back to their homeland. Then the court allowed only one Buddhist temple to be preserved respectively in Guizhou and Rongzhou (present-day Guilin and Rongxian). Other Buddhist temple and all the churches of Mazdaism, Nestorianism and Manicheism were demolished. The next year Buddhism was partly restored. But the religions introduced from Middle East never reappeared. However the pieces of Persian pottery of pottery bottles unearthed in Guilin and Rongxian, Guangxi offer us the evidence of the existence of Nestorianism in both places in the Tang Dynasty.

V. Conclusion

To sum up, we conclude that: 1. These peacock-blue glazed pottery bottle pieces unearthed in Guangxi, like the counterparts unearthed in Yangzhou, Thailand and Malay Peninsula, do not stand for the then ceramics as goods from Middle East. They were merely the containers for shipping grape juice as goods. 2. The discovery of Persian pottery in Guilin, which is situated at the upper reach of the Pearl River system and Rongxian has revealed a fact that the Middle East goods were transported through an inland water way after they reached Guangzhou port, which has not been well known ever before. It shows the Pearl River system played an important role as a passage, in south China, of the seagoing silk route in the Tang Dynasty. 3. As the evidence of the introduction to the inner south China, the discovery of Persian pottery in Guangxi, especially in Qingjing Church of the Tang Dynasty affirmed the fact in the book Daqin Jingjiao Liuxing Zhongguo Bei 大秦景教流行中国碑 (Tablet of the Spreading of Nestorianism in China) describes: In the Tang Dynasty “the doctrine (of Nestorianism) spread in all directions” and “The Nestorianist churches were set up in many cities.”

The term of “Persian pottery “is not connected only to the New Empire of Persia which no longer existed by the middle of the 7th century. The term has been used in some previous related theses and is explained as an entry in Zhongguo Dabaike Quanshu: Kaoguxue 中国大百科全书·考古学 (Chinese Encyclopedia: Archaeology). We propose that “Persian pottery” is a general term referring to the peacock blue glazed pottery which was made in the historically grape-juice-produced areas around Persian Gulf.

References


Note: The original paper, published in Wenwu 文物 2003.11: 71–74, with 3 illustrations and 1 table, is written by Li Hua 李铧, Feng Shaozhu 封绍柱, and Zhou Hua 周华. The summary is prepared by the first author and English-translated by Zhang Baoyu 张葆瑜.