

Fragments of globalization: Chinese Style ceramic finds from Songo Mnara and Sanje ya Kati at Kilwa in Tanzania¹

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“The History of Oriental Africa was written by Chinese celadon”
(Sir Mortimer Wheeler, *Tanganyika Standard*, 22 August 1955)

Chinese pottery, much like gold, is a genuine example of a commodity that has long been traded on an international scale. Highly sought-after, it has been the most widely circulated and imitated manufactured product in the history of global trade. In fact, Chinese pottery is a very efficient vehicle for cultural exchange and constitutes a major component of the world’s material culture. Thanks to the durable nature of this artifact, a wealth of examples has survived in both public and private collections, as well as in archaeological sites (both port sites and shipwreck sites) all over the world. Approaching the history of global trade via the production, distribution and consumption of Chinese pottery is a promising avenue of research, as demonstrated recently by Robert Finley.²

Our focus lies on Chinese style pottery (made in China and Southeast Asia) recently found in Songo Mnara and Sanje ya Kati, two insular medieval town sites situated in Kilwa Bay in East Africa. This article is therefore a case study of this data over a limited period— from the eleventh to the mid thirteenth century CE for the site of Sanje ya Kati and then from the fourteenth to the early sixteenth century CE for the site of Songo Mnara. The analysis will be viewed, however, through the wider historical context provided by the region stretching from Kilwa Bay and the Swahili coast to the western Indian Ocean. This trinomial approach is based on Indian Ocean world-systems theory. Scholars working in this field have suggested that the evolution of the different subdivisions of the Indian Ocean world-system was the result of a complex interplay of local, regional and global dynamics.

¹ I am grateful to Mr. Stéphane Pradines (Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale au Caire) for giving me the opportunity to study oriental ceramic shards from the two sites. I would also like to convey my particular thanks to Mr. Pierre Blanchard (architect, UNESCO), and to Mr. Bugumba Revocatus (Director of Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara World Heritage Site) and his staff, for their precious assistance during my mission at Kilwa in November 2007.

² Robert Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

Our objective here is to fit this analysis of East Asian ceramic material into historical archaeology studies already undertaken in Kilwa Bay and East Africa. In concrete terms, our discussion deals exclusively with the movement of ceramics and is at no point concerned with the Chinese diasporas. In other words, we are not returning to the debate surrounding direct or indirect trading between China and East Africa before the expeditions of Zheng He in the fifteenth century. Tentatively, we will attempt to explore the limits of Chinese ceramics in both the study of material culture in East Africa and of trade practices in the western Indian Ocean.

World-systems theory and world history

In 1974, Immanuel Wallerstein presented his theory of a European centrist world-system.³ In response to this modern vision of global trade, scholars working on the Indian Ocean have sought to demonstrate that similar mechanisms already existed in this area several centuries earlier.⁴ The Indian Ocean covers more than 70 million square kilometers and extends from Africa to Australia and from Asia to Antarctica. It was the Indian Ocean rather than the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans that was the first of the interconnected world oceans. Because of its annual monsoon suitable to linking distant shores, a series of long-distance maritime networks emerged as far back as the period of antiquity (Fig. 1).⁵ The development of these networks led to the progressive integration of the different regions of the Indian Ocean into a unified and hierarchical space.⁶ The exchanges extended beyond the Indian Ocean towards two other maritime spaces: the China Sea and the Mediterranean. The interconnection of maritime and terrestrial routes combined with regular and significant trade activity led to the foundation of Eurasian and African world-systems as

³ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1974).

⁴ Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Andre G. Franck & Barry K. Gillis (eds), *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?* (London: Routledge, 1993). For a recent review of these works, see Philippe Beaujard, "The Indian Ocean in Eurasian and African World-Systems before the Sixteenth Century", *Journal of World History*, Vol. 16, n° 4 (2005): 411-465.

⁵ Peter Mitchell, *African Connections. An Archaeological Perspective on Africa and the Wide World* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2005), p. 231.

⁶ George F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times* (New York: Octagon Books, 1975); K. N. Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

early as the first century CE.⁷ This earlier intercontinental trade system was restructured according to the rhythm of economic cycles over the centuries. Six main cycles have been observed for the medieval period. They are period 1 (first to sixth centuries), period 2 (seventh to tenth centuries), period 3 (eleventh to fourteenth centuries) and period 4 (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), period 5 (fifteenth century), period 6 (post sixteenth century). Between the first and the sixteenth centuries CE, the Afro-Asian maritime zone can be divided into three main areas, in accordance with geographic factors and exchange networks.⁸ These areas are the China Sea, the eastern Indian Ocean and the western Indian Ocean, which can be further divided into the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, a division valid for most of the medieval period. Each of these subsystems had its own “core,” i.e. China, India, western Asia and Egypt. These cores determined the hierarchical structure and nature of the trade within each area, especially with their peripheries.

The East African coast is known as the Swahili coast, which encompasses the narrow coastline and offshore islands and stretches over 2,500 km, from Somalia to Mozambique. It includes the Zanzibar archipelago, the Comoros and northern Madagascar.⁹ Recent research on the Swahili coast has established its place as a semi-periphery in the Indian Ocean world-system. This scholarship is based on historical archaeology, in which oral and written sources, archaeological and anthropological data have been cross-examined and used. “African-ness” or “African” character has been a recurring issue in scholarship on Swahili culture. During the colonial period, basic assertions were made as to the foreign, Islamic and Arab nature of Swahili culture. For followers of this theory, it was in the ninth and tenth century and only by adopting Islam that Africa entered into this history as an extension of Arab influence. This approach profoundly influenced British archaeologists, who excavated Swahili port sites from 1948 onwards. They interpreted the port cities along the East African coast as trading outposts founded by the Arabs, and have thus focused on the study of imported materials, such as Chinese and Islamic pottery.

⁷ Philippe Beaujard, “Un seul système-monde avant le 16^e siècle ? L’océan Indien au cœur de l’intégration de l’hémisphère Afro-Eurasien”, in *Histoire globale, mondialisations et capitalisme*, P. Beaujard, L. Berger et P. Norel (éds.) (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2009, pp. 82-148), p. 84.

⁸ Philippe Beaujard 2005, *op. cit.*, pp. 441-442.

⁹ Recent studies undertaken in Madagascar Island have showed that numerous sites in the Southern region might have joined long-distance trade early from 1000 AD. Conference by Chantal Radimilahy entitled “Recent Archaeological Research in Madagascar” (CROIMA-ASIE of the INALCO : *Peuplement et migrations anciennes dans le sud-ouest de l’océan Indien : les récentes découvertes et les nouvelles perspectives*, 19-21 mai 2010).

However, since the 1980s an Afro-centrist theory has prevailed whereby scholars see Swahili culture as intrinsically and completely African, accusing previous research of using archaeological data to support colonialist and imperialist ideology. Subsequently the balance has been redressed by assertions of the African basis of Swahili history which has been acknowledged as important, though at times rather overstated. Some scholars have nevertheless condemned these both positions as extreme and ultimately untenable. Debates fuelled by archeological, oral and textual research have contributed to an improved understanding of Swahili society and culture. Scholars have admitted that the Swahili port states emerged as a result of an alliance between foreign merchants and local power, which created what scholars have termed “coastal society,” “fringe culture,” or even “Swahili corridor culture.”¹⁰

A world history approach is a historical perspective that transcends national frontiers. The architecture of this global system is organized by what are known as networks. These networks are effectively trading lines that stretch across spaces, linking them together. These networks are punctuated by nodes that represent different cities, in particular port cities. The success of a port relies on the quality of its haven, its geographical position and its relation to commercial routes, both maritime and terrestrial. Port cities on the Swahili coast were fundamentally linked to international trading networks, since their surrounding regions and hinterlands were able to supply numerous raw materials of high commercial value.¹¹ This is why some researchers emphasize the minimal role of the interior in the construction of a large-scale commercial network, while recognizing the asymmetry of relations between the coast and the interior, and likewise between the center (core) and the semi-periphery, the latter being the Swahili coast.¹²

Chinese imports in the Swahili coastal region

¹⁰ Michael N. Pearson, *Port cities and intruders, the Swahili Coast and Portugal in the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 41-43; Philippe Beaujard 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 415; Mark Horton & John Middleton, *The Swahili. The Social Landscape of a Mercantile Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 104.

¹¹ Paul Wheatley, “Analecta Sino-Africana Recnsa”, in Neville Chittick & Robert I. Rotberg (eds), *East Africa and the Orient* (New York and London: Africa Publishing company, 1975), pp. 76-114.

¹² Paul J. Sinclair & Thomas Håkasson 2000, “The Swahili City-State Culture”, in Mogens H. Hansen (ed), *A Comparative Study of Thirty City-State Cultures* (Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2000, pp. 463-482), p. 474.

From the ninth century onwards, Chinese ceramics began to be exported in substantial quantities to the West through the Indian Ocean world-system. Early in 1912, Berthold Laufer (1874-1934) was already focusing on Chinese green-glazed stoneware and its Southeast Asian imitations found in this very maritime space. According to Laufer, everything relating to East Asian pottery is of the utmost historical importance.¹³ The pioneering character of this study still merits being stressed a century later. In fact, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Indian Ocean system of maritime trade was studied only through Chinese sources, themselves almost mute on trade ceramics.¹⁴ As for the East African coast, Chinese pottery evidence had been used throughout the colonial period as a chronological and cultural indicator of foreign settlement. Despite the limits of the reductive perspectives in which British archaeologists worked, their contribution to the study of Chinese ceramics is considerable: numerous sites appear to have provided evidence of these finds.¹⁵ An assemblage of types, even if rough and approximately dated, seemed to have been recognized as shared by both coastal and insular sites.¹⁶

From the 1980s, East-Africanists unfortunately relegated the study of Chinese ceramics to second place. Moreover, one can observe that in the last twenty years no Western specialists of East Asian ceramics have published data from East Africa.¹⁷ They appear to have paid more attention to core regions such as the Persian Gulf area, leading them to conclude, for example, that the diffusion of *qingbai* porcelain and that of

¹³ Berthold Laufer, "Chinese pottery in the Philippines", *Field Museum on Natural History*, public.162, *Anthropol. Series*, vol. XII, n° 1 (1912): 1-47.

¹⁴ William Rockhill & Friedrich Hirth, *Chau Ju-kua: his work on the Chinese and Arab trade in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, entitled Chu-fan-chi* (St. Petersburg: Imperial Academy of Sciences, 1911). The sole mention about ceramic traded to East Africa is from le Zhufan zhi written by Zhao Rukua in 1276. For the English translation of this notice see Paul Wheatley 1975, *op. cit.*, p.109.

¹⁵ Gervase Mathew, "Chinese Porcelain in East Africa and on the Coast of South Arabia", *Oriental Art*, vol. II, n° 2 (1955): 50-55; James Kirkman, "Some conclusions from archaeological excavations on the coast of Kenya", in Neville Chittick & Robert I. Rotberg (eds), 1975, *op. cit.*: 226-247.

¹⁶ James Kirkman 1975, *ibid*, p. 227.

¹⁷ Ma Wenkuan and Meng Fanren's book dedicates many pages to the discoveries made in these coastal regions. See Wenkuan Ma 馬文寬 & Fanren Meng 孟凡人, *Zhongguo guci zai Feizhou de faxian* 中國古瓷在非洲的發現 (The Discovery of Chinese Ceramics in Africa) (Beijing: Zijincheng chubanshe, 1987). In the last recent years, two Chinese teams, one land team under the direction of Professor Qin Dashu 秦大樹 (Institute of Archaeology and Museology, Peking University) and another underwater team directed by Professor Zhang Wei 張威 (Underwater Archaeological Research Centre, National Museum of China), are working respectively at Malindi and in the Lamu archipelago in Kenya.

Vietnamese pottery was limited to these core areas.¹⁸ This is why the study of Chinese ceramic material in East Africa is in need of updating. Fortunately, some innovative studies have recently analyzed archaeological data in this area. For instance, regarding the use of imported ceramic evidence for providing clues to the organization and mechanisms of cross-continental exchange, Henry Wright has suggested using the ratio of imported pottery to local wares as a criterion for analysis while assessing the Swahili coastal cities. He introduced an even more pertinent and appropriate notion, that of density.¹⁹ It will be the density, not the mere presence of Chinese pottery at a site, which will be used here as criterion in order to grasp the complexity of Chinese pottery consumption and circulation. In a wider background, no imperial culture had occurred in East Africa, and no royal collection of art has remained in this very area. Thanks to the wealth of recent archaeological research on East Africa – regarding religious or funerary sites, port cities and village sites, it is now possible to employ new and precise methods to investigate Chinese ceramic data from this area.

The archaeological context of Songe ya Kati and Songo Mnara in Kilwa Bay

Kilwa Bay itself was not only suited to agriculture but well provided with lucrative commodities from southeastern Africa, such as ivory, iron, slaves and especially gold from Great Zimbabwe. The greatest advantage of Kilwa is its strategic location on the Swahili coast. In fact, Kilwa Bay is located in the southernmost part that can be reached by ships sailing from the north with monsoon winds.²⁰ This geographic feature, when added to the city's dynamism (especially during the Madhali period, 1277-1505), gave it the control of coastlines further south.²¹ Kilwa had played the role of a node, by which Sofala and Madagascar could be included into the long-distance trade network.

¹⁸ Robert Finlay, "The pilgrim art: The culture of porcelain in world history", *Journal of World History*, vol. 9, n° 2 (1998), p. 150; John Stevenson & John Guy, *Vietnamese Ceramics. A Separate Tradition* (Chicago: Art Media/Paragon, 1997), p. 59.

¹⁹ Henry T. Wright, "Trade and Politics on the Eastern Littoral of Africa, AD 800-1300", in Thurstan Shaw *et al.* (eds), *The Archaeology of Africa: Food, Metals and Towns* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 658-672.

²⁰ Malyn D. Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 8.

²¹ Kilwa is one of the few cities of the Swahili coast that possesses its own written history: the Kilwa Chronicle, which is an account of the history and rulers of Kilwa originally written at the command of a sultan of that city who ruled in the first half of the sixteenth century. It has survived in two versions, both of which evidently omit some of the material set down in the original chronicle. One version is in Arabic, and was copied in Zanzibar in 1877. Another is an account based largely on the same or a similar original source incorporated in the *Deçadas da Asia* de João de Barros (dated to 1552), which is a well known and most cited text. It states

Kilwa-Kisiwani, the main island, whose surface exceeds 45 hectares, was certainly one of the largest Swahili metropolises in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, before the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean. Other islands of the bay, Sanje ya Kati, Songo Songo, Sanje ya Majoma and Songo Mnara are also rich in archaeological remains (Fig. 2).²² Archaeological fieldwork at Kilwa began in 1958 when Neville Chittick started important excavation and restoration work at Kilwa-Kisiwani.²³ A French-Tanzanian conservation and restoration project was carried out from April 2002 to June 2005 at Kilwa-Kisiwani and Songo Mnara. In addition to this, an archaeological project was launched at Songo Mnara in 2004 and at Sanje ya Kati (2005 and 2006) under the direction of Stéphane Pradines.²⁴

The Sanje ya Kati stonetown site

Sanje ya Kati is a small circular island in the middle of Kilwa Bay. Its central part is a ruin of a trading stonetown with a surface area of 4 hectares (Fig. 3). It was initially protected by a rectangular wall measuring 100 x 340 m with a tower at each corner. The ruins of the Great Mosque are located in the southeastern part of the site within the fortifications. This mosque included in its center a rectangular prayer room, flanked east and west with a wing of identical width. The *mihrab* is a semi-circular niche made in the *qibla* wall. Masonry and construction techniques are similar to those of the earliest mosque of Kilwa Kisiwani, built between c. 1050 and the early twelfth century. The excavation of the 2005 and 2006

that according to the Shirazi legend, the city of Kilwa would be founded by Hassan ibn Ali, from a princely family of Shiraz in Persia, in the second half of the tenth century; around 1277, the Shirazi dynasty was replaced by the Mahdali, one originating from Hadramawt in Yemen; the later in turn was obliterated in 1505 by the Portuguese. For the detailed presentation of this source, see G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville, *The Medieval History of the Coast Tanganyika with special reference to recent discoveries* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1962); Peter S. Garlake, *The Early Islamic Architecture of the East Africa Coast* (Nairobi & London: Oxford University Press, 1966); John Sutton 1998, "Archaeological sites of East Africa: four studies", *Azania*, vol. 43 (1998): 113-114; Stéphane Pradines & Pierre Blanchard, "Kilwa al-Mulûk. Premier bilan des travaux de conservation-restauration et des fouilles archéologiques dans la baie de Kilwa, Tanzanie", *Annales Islamologiques*, vol. 39 (2005) : 26-80.

²² In 1981, the mediaeval sites of Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara were inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

²³ Neville Chittick, *Kilwa: An Islamic Trading City on the East African Coast* (Nairobi: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1974).

²⁴ These expeditions were financed by the Commission for Excavation (Commission des Fouilles) of French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the support of the Tanzanian Department of Antiquities, of UNESCO and of the French Embassy in Tanzania. Directed by Stéphane Pradines (Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale), the team was international and included European and Tanzanian researchers. For more information, see Stéphane Pradines & Pierre Blanchard, "Kilwa al-Mulûk. Premier bilan des travaux de conservation-restauration et des fouilles archéologiques dans la baie de Kilwa, Tanzanie", *Annales Islamologiques*, vol. 39 (2005) : 26-80 ; Stéphane Pradines, "Sanje ya Kati, Kilwa Tanzanie, 2005-2006", *Nyame Akuma*, vol. 66 (2006) : 64-70.

seasons concerned the prayer room of the mosque (section 1), the part of the fortifications lying between the northeastern and the middle towers (100 m in length, section 2), and the northeastern corner of the fortifications (section 3). Section 3 includes the ruins of a large stone house (house A) and of two other smaller houses (B and C). House A was built according to a plan comprising long, narrow and parallel rooms, whose doors were not facing each other. It might have been mainly used as a warehouse. The site's occupation lasted approximately three centuries (from c. 950 to c. 1250 CE), with a heyday between 1050 and 1150 CE. The Chinese ceramics collected over the two seasons include 54 shards of *qingbai* porcelain (mainly from Guangdong or Jiangxi Province), 23 shards of Longquan green-glazed stoneware (Zhejiang Province), 21 shards of Ding-style northern whiteware, five shards of Yaozhou-style green-glazed stoneware from Xicun kiln site in Guangdong Province, three shards of stoneware with underglaze brown decorations from Xicun and 126 shards of stoneware jars with green or brown glaze from Guangdong or Fujian Province.

The Songo Mnara site

The medieval stonetown site of Songo Mnara, with its 4.4 hectares in surface, was a satellite settlement of Kilwa-Kiwisani (Fig. 4). Its main period of occupation was probably from the end of the thirteenth century to the beginning of the sixteenth. During this period the city included two mosques, a palatial complex with six groups of domestic units, five large houses and about twenty smaller dwellings, mostly situated within the perimeter wall. The excavation in 2004 consisted of nine soundings placed mainly inside of the fortifications.²⁵ In total 8,642 shards were recovered during the excavations. The majority of these are of African pottery, followed by Islamic ceramics. Only 40 shards of East Asian ceramics were found from six of the nine soundings. They therefore constitute only 0.46% of the total pottery found. In October 2006, UNESCO funded the Tanzanian Department of Antiquities to carry out conservation work at Songo Mnara. Fieldwork, which lasted until April 2008, essentially dealt with three major buildings at the site of Songo Mnara: the Friday Mosque, the Palace and a stonehouse with a vaulted anteroom.²⁶ During this operation, 63 Chinese and Southeast Asian ceramic shards were collected. East Asian finds from Songo Mnara

²⁵ Stéphane Pradines & Pierre Blanchard 2005, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

²⁶ Work was supervised by Pierre Blanchard, heritage architect for UNESCO, and Ildefonse Mllokowa of the Tanzanian Department of Antiquities.

constitute a completely new assemblage. The Chinese pieces included mainly blue-and-white porcelain, with a few items of Longquan and Guangdong green-glazed stoneware, and pieces of Fujian or Guangdong brown or green-glazed stoneware jars. Alongside these new Chinese types we also note that from the fourteenth century, Southeast Asian pottery began to be included in this long-distance trade network. The Songo Mnara finds also include Vietnamese stoneware with underglaze brown decoration, green-glazed Thai and Burmese stoneware, and white-glazed Burmese earthenware.

According to the five classes of Swahili port cities established by Allen, Sanje ya Kati and Songo Mnana belong to the category of medium-sized sites, which range in area between 2.5 and five hectares.²⁷ Compared to the work done by Chittick at Kilwa-Kisiwani in the 1950s, the recent excavations under the direction of Stéphane Pradines have yielded material of less importance and the related collection of Chinese and Southeastern Asian ceramics is small in quantity. However, this data raises very interesting questions with regard to the evidence of the patterns of consumption and trade in Kilwa and along the Swahili coast.

The appreciation and use of Chinese pottery

When analyzing the Persian Gulf market, Michèle Pirazzoli emphasized that between the ninth and fourteenth centuries, Chinese pottery was a rare commodity that was predominantly used as luxury tableware by rich merchants. It was particularly appreciated for its delicacy and transparency, as testified in this Arabic source dated to 851 CE: “They [the Chinese] have pottery of excellent quality, with which bowls as fine as glass are made: you can see water sparkle through them, even though they of pottery.”²⁸ This comparison with glassware may suggest that early in the ninth century, Chinese pottery, as well as Egyptian or Syrian glassware, could have been among the materials preferred by rich merchants for table service. Furthermore, one can observe the influence of Islamic glassware on Chinese pottery, notably on the twelfth-century green-glazed stoneware of the Ru 汝 kiln site in Henan Province, which was produced upon imperial command. The two

²⁷ J. Allen de Vere, “The ‘Shirazi’ Problem in East African Coastal History”, *Paideuma*, vol. 28 (1982): 9-27.

²⁸ “Ahbâr as-Sîn wa L-Hind, *Relation de la Chine et de l’Inde*, texte établi, traduit et commenté par Jean Sauvaget (Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1948), p. 16. Cited in Michèle Pirazzoli –t’Serstevens, “Une Denrée recherchée : la céramique chinoise importée dans le golfe arabo-persique, IX^e-XIV^e siècles”, *Mirabilia Asiatica* (Produtos raros no comércio marítimo), vol. 2 (2005, pp. 69-88) : p. 77, note 25.

distinct traditions that shaped these materials share the same aesthetic repertoire for table service. This refined and sophisticated taste for tableware may well have originated in core regions such as the Persian Gulf and Egypt, and subsequently spread into the western Indian Ocean. Indeed, artifacts made of these two materials generally co-exist at the sites of medieval ports on the Swahili coast. It is precisely this evidence that led the first British archaeologists working on the port sites in the middle of the twentieth century to deduce the Arabic nature of these settlements.²⁹ The ideological purposes which these archaeological finds were made to serve have already been discussed above. Here our foremost concern is with the status of Chinese ceramics.

Sources that reveal concrete information on the price of Chinese ware for the medieval period are extremely rare.³⁰ However, diverse information can be employed to evaluate the relative value of this commodity. Among finds from Songo Mnara, a collection of five fragments belonging to a single fifteenth-century blue-and-white porcelain dish was found (Fig. 5-3). These shards bear numerous mending holes. Michèle Pirazzoli used this evidence to demonstrate the precious character of Chinese pottery, when she observed spiraled holes that allowed for a metal wire to be passed through them in order to reconnect broken parts on a tenth-century fragment of a bowl of Yue green-glazed stoneware. This practice has also been observed in Sharma on one eleventh-century fragment of a *qingbai* porcelain bowl.³¹ Numerous thirteenth- to fifteenth-century Longquan green-glazed stonewares with mending holes have been found at Qal'at al-Bahreïn and at Julfar in the Persian Gulf.³²

In *Sanje ya Kati*, a fragment of an ivory-cream glazed stoneware bowl-base was found to contain a carefully cut post-production shape. At Kilwa-Kisiwani, Chittick found several perforated circular shards, which according to him were used as spindle whorls.

²⁹ In the 1950s, glassware and glass bead have been roughly identified as Islamic origin or Indian origin, whilst recent research reveals for their provenance various regions of the Western Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and China.

³⁰ The only known reference to price regards North Africa in the 14th century. According to Ibn Battûta (1304-1377), Chinese pottery and local pottery are worth the same price in North Africa. See Ibn Battûta, *Rihla* (Journal de routes), French translation by C. Defremery and B. R. Sanguinetti (1858), re-edited under the title *Voyage* in 3 volumes (Paris: François Maspero, 1982), vol. III, p. 214.

³¹ Bing Zhao 2004, *op. cit.*, pl. coulor.

³² For Qal'at al-Bahreïn, see Bing Zhao (forthcoming), "Oriental Trade Ceramics from Qal-at al-Bahrain harbour site in Bahrain", in *Twenty Years of Bahrain Archaeology (1986-2006)*; for Julfar, see Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Sterstevens, "La céramique extrême-orientale à Julfar dans l'émirat de Ra's al-Khaimah (XIV^e-XVI^e siècle), indicateur chronologique, économique et culturel", collection Histoire, archéologie et société (Beijing : Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, centre de Pékin, 2003), pl. 10, 13.

Photos of two examples have been published: one is made from a Sassanian shard, the other is made from a shard in fourteenth-century Longquan green-glazed stoneware with an appliqué pattern.³³ At the sites of Shanga, Gedi, Kizimkazi Dimbani and Vohémar, archaeologists have noted the presence of other potsherds made from broken imports with traces of secondary use as bead grinders or as spindle whorls.³⁴ The shards selected for the fabrication of discs reveal a preference for attractively colored glazes, for instance *sgraffiato* earthenware, black on yellow earthenware (so-called mustard ware) and Chinese green-glazed stoneware. At Mombasa, archaeologists have identified some broken Chinese shards that might have been trimmed in order to make the discs into weights, stoneware and porcelain being resistant materials that do not erode easily. Again at Mombasa, another 14 circular discs of bored pottery made from Islamic and Chinese shards have been recovered. Archaeologists suggest that they might have been used as beads, pendants or buttons.³⁵ Re-used as elements of clothing, Chinese pottery was able to acquire the status of ostentatious apparel generally enjoyed by imported textiles.

The phenomenon of reclaiming material is not confined to the Swahili coast; it is a universal practice. Be it for the benefit of artisans or users, this phenomenon attests to the value accorded to the salvaged object. Such re-using of Chinese pottery has also been found on archaeological sites in the Persian Gulf, on the Arab Peninsula, and most recently even in the Americas. As for the Swahili coast, the recuperation of broken Chinese ceramics to use as tools proves that Chinese pottery was an appreciated material and that it penetrated another aspect of material culture at a port site: that of local handicraft. Scholars have recently emphasized the importance of port-cities on the Swahili coast as centers of agricultural and handicraft production, in addition to their roles in long-distance exchange.

³³ Neville Chittick 1974, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 428.

³⁴ For the site of Shanga, see Mark Horton, *Shanga. The Archaeology of a Muslim Trading Community on the Coast of East Africa* (London: The British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1996), p. 324. For the site of Gedi, see Stéphane Pradines, *Gedi, une Cité Portuaire Swahilie. Islam Médiéval en Afrique Orientale* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 2008), fig. 137 (low, right). For the site of Vohémar, see Elie Verner & Jacques Millot, *Archéologie malgache, Comptoirs musulmans*, Catalogues du Musée de l'Homme, Série F Madagascar, Supplément au tome XI, 3 (1971), *d'Objets et Mondes*, Revue du Musée de l'Homme, 1971, p. 84 fig. 79. For the site of Kizimkazi Dimbani, see Else Johansen Kleppe, "Archaeological investigations at Kizimkazi Dimbani", in Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti (ed), *Islam in East Africa: New Sources (Archives. Manuscripts and Written Historical Sources, Oral History, Archaeology)* (Roma: Herder, 2001, pp. 361-384), p. 366.

³⁵ Hamo Sassoon, "Excavations at the Site of Early Mombasa", *Azania*, vol. 15 (1980, pp. 1-41), p. 31, 33.

All of the cultural evidence discussed above clearly indicates the relatively sought-after value of Chinese pottery. Moreover, quantitative archaeological data confirms the rarity of this commodity. It can be noted that the percentage of such artifacts from the sites or layers of sites dating from before the fourteenth century is quite low compared to the total ceramic assemblage. In general it stands at less than 1%, with the exception of the entrepôt site of Sharma which reaches 3.75%.³⁶ We find the same rates on the Swahili coast:³⁷ 0.12% in Shanga,³⁸ 0.9% in Gedi,³⁹ 0.6% in Pemba Island⁴⁰. However, at Kilwa Chinese imports were slightly more important, with 1.2% in Sanje ya Kati (excavation 2005), 2% at Kilwa-Kisiwani (phase I and II).⁴¹ The low presence of Chinese ceramic material does not reduce its ability to reveal the material culture of the importer society. This is due to its varied uses, in particular as tableware. For example, among the 126 storage jar shards found in Sanje ya Kati, only nine individual pieces have been identified, while the other 85 fragments of tableware belong to at least one ewer, seven dishes and 51 bowls. Archaeologists have observed at Shanga (Kenya) and at several sites in the Pemba Islands that, from the mid-eleventh century, a shift from jar to bowl among imports occurred.⁴² The overwhelming proportion of bowls in Chinese imports of Sanje ya Kati and of the other sites mentioned above probably reflects a new culture of food consumption at Swahili coastal sites. According to recent research, rice was being cultivated in Chwaka (the Archipelago of Pemba) in the eleventh century, and new culinary practices based on rice consumption were established from the beginning of the twelfth century.⁴³

Evidence of Chinese ceramics in sacred religious spaces is attested from the sounding S4 of Songo Mnara. The last was placed in the vicinity of the *mihrab* of the central mosque

³⁶ Axelle Rougeulle, "The Sharma horizon : sgraffiato wares and other glazed ceramics of the Indian Ocean trade (c. AD 980-1140) ", *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 35 (2004, 223-246), p. 226.

³⁷ At Mombasa, the percentage of Far Eastern sherds is of 8,3%. This very high ration may be linked to an incomplete count of African sherds during the excavation and post-excavation works. Only future research will be able to valid this hypothesis.

³⁸ Marc Horton 1996, *op. cit.*, tables 9 (p. 244) and 14 (p. 273).

³⁹ Stéphane Pradines 2008, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

⁴⁰ Mark Horton, "L'évolution des sites côtiers (région de Zanzibar et Pemba) ", Journée d'études « Sharma horizon » (Paris, CNRS UMR 8176 « Islam Médiéval », the 5th June 2009).

⁴¹ Neville Chittick 1974, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 207.

⁴² Jeffrey Fleisher, *Viewing Stonetowns from the Countryside: An Archaeological Approach to Swahili Regional Systems, AD 800-1500* (Ph. D. Dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia, 2003), p. 278.

⁴³ Adrian LaViolette, "Swahili Cosmopolitanism in Africa and the Indian Ocean World, A.D. 600-1500", *Archaeologies* 4(1) (2008): 24-49. We would thank Philippe Beaujard for the information on rice consumption in East Africa.

dated to the fourteenth century. From this sounding, four Chinese and Vietnamese pottery shards were found.⁴⁴ In 1952 Gervase Mathew observed a Chinese porcelain bowl inset in the lower part of the *mihrab* of a ruined mosque at Kua on Juani Island.⁴⁵ A fourteenth-century bottle in blue-and-white porcelain with some mortar attached has been retrieved from masonry in room E of the Great House at Kilwa Kisiwani.⁴⁶ In fact, ever since the thirteenth century, niches seem to have been dug out in the wall of the anteroom in domestic houses in order to display Chinese pottery. This domestic tradition, which Mark Horton has argued was borrowed directly from the architecture of contemporary mosques, might have been a feature specific to the east coast of Africa.⁴⁷ It proves here that Chinese pottery also occupied a private and intimate place in life on the Swahili coast, which, as Peter Garlake has shown, might have been one of the most sophisticated in the world before the sixteenth century. At Mahilaka, tenth- and eleventh-century *qingbai* wares have been discovered from the Occupation IIa (which is dated to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries).⁴⁸ This shows that the Chinese pottery might have been kept for centuries as a marker of wealth. For G. Pwiti, imported goods as well as Chinese wares can even be seen as a new form of capital.⁴⁹ According to oral sources of the nineteenth century, a Chinese pottery collection could be seen as familial wealth, as pieces have been reduced to fragments in the course of family quarrels.⁵⁰

Other material evidence suggesting the prestigious character of Chinese porcelain has arisen from the ritual culture of the dead and ancestral worship. For instance, in the Vohémar cemetery site in northern Madagascar, Chinese pottery appears in large quantities among grave goods.⁵¹ On the Swahili coast, from the thirteenth century onwards, Chinese pottery was used as a decorative element in pillared tombs or on the façades of domed

⁴⁴ Vietnamese stoneware with underglaze brown decorations might have been introduced to the western Indian Ocean trade because of the scarcity of Chinese blue-and-white (John Stevenson & John Guy 1997, *op. cit.*, p. 59).

⁴⁵ Gervase Mathew 1952, *op. cit.*, p. 50, fig. 1.

⁴⁶ Neville Chittick 1974, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 106.

⁴⁷ Mark Horton 1996, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

⁴⁸ Chantal Radimilahy, *Mahilaka, An Archaeological Investigation of An Early Town in Northwestern Madagascar* (Uppsala: Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Studies in African Archaeology 15, 1998), p. 181.

⁴⁹ G. Pwiti, "Southern Africa and East Africa Coast", in Anne B. Stahl, ed, 2005, *op. cit.* (pp. 379-391), p. 386.

⁵⁰ Hamo Sassoon 1980, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁵¹ Eli Vernier & Jacques Millot 1971, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

tombs.⁵² These two types of tombs were reserved for elite families from the Swahili coast. Such uses of Chinese ceramics demonstrate the obvious prestige that was afforded to this type of object. Most interestingly, in this particular context, Chinese pottery acquired power in a completely different dimension. It signified social belonging and membership of the elite class.

Jeffrey Fleisher recently emphasized the symbolic nature of a special group of pottery (to which Chinese wares might belong) in a different context. Fleisher argues that it was during feasts that negotiations took place between people from diverse cultural backgrounds and distant religions and that during these events local powers were established or maintained. The practice of feasts transcends elite circles as it is through public feasts that local power holders established paternal links with the ordinary citizenry. The political dimension combined with the symbolic power of food and drink assigns a ritual performance to these feasts. The choice, the taste, the preparation and the presentation of a meal were all part of the social processes involved in such feasts, leading to an emphasis on the visibility of ritual material culture. The utensils used for these occasions have both morphological and decorative aspects, which may recall their presentation function during a feasting performance. For instance, some large and open bowls or large dishes have a flattened base, allowing them to be set on the ground, with the more elaborate decoration on the inner side of a vessel only gradually being revealed in the process of shared consumption.⁵³ The same scholar argues elsewhere that mosques decorated with insets of imported bowls were public statements by the patrons of the feasts suggestive of meals both eaten and yet to be consumed. The culture of feasts, which developed from the eleventh century, played a central role in social life on the Swahili coast in the fifteenth century.⁵⁴ This hypothesis can provide a cultural explanation for one of the shifts which occurred progressively in terms of types of Chinese imports into the Indian Ocean space: a shift from Chinese sizes (small or medium sizes) to large sizes both for bowls and dishes. The first evidence at Sanje ya Kati can be noted from eleventh- and early twelfth-century shards of large and shallow bowls with everted rims and underglaze brown decorations on

⁵² Mark Horton 1996, *op. cit.*, p. 71, pl. 31, 32. Mark Horton & John Middleton 2000, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-113.

⁵³ Jeffrey Fleisher 2003, *op. cit.*, pp. 249-250, Jeffrey Fleisher, "Rituals of Consumption and the Politics of Feasting on the Eastern African Coast, AD 700-1500", *Journal of World Prehistory* 23(4) (2010): pages numbers in wait.

⁵⁴ Jeffrey Fleisher 2003, *op. cit.*, pp. 416-419.

the inside of stoneware from the Xicun kiln site (Fig. 5-1). The exceptional group of shards from twelfth-century large dishes with impressed pattern on the inside in Ding-style crème-ivory glazed northern stoneware might also belong to an assemblage of tableware for feasts (Fig. 5-2).⁵⁵ This phenomenon seems to have become widespread from the fourteenth century onwards with Longquan green-glazed stoneware and bleu-and-white porcelain. The Chinese archaeological team working in Kenya has recognized shards from large Longquan green-glazed stoneware dishes of a quality equal to those sent to the Chinese imperial court in the end fourteenth and in the early fifteenth century.⁵⁶ Such large dishes and bowls with flattened rims and/or shallow walls (and diameters exceeding 35 cm) both in Jingdezhen blue-and-white porcelain and in Longquan green-glazed stoneware became one of the principal Chinese exports to the western Indian Ocean as well as in the eastern Indian Ocean.⁵⁷ Recent excavations at the site of Fengdongyan in the Dayao village (Longquan district) have revealed for the first time evidence from a kiln site for these special items normally found outside of China.⁵⁸

In addition to this, the fifteenth century marks a turning point in the history of Chinese imports to East Africa: from this date, the quantities of East Asian ceramics in port sites exceed those of Islamic wares.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the increase in volume of East Asian imports is concomitant with the diversification of their origin. In fact, sometime in the fourteenth century, Southeast Asian pottery began to appear in the long-distance trade networks, because of the scarcity of Chinese ware. Hence, it was during the fifteenth century, that these commodities became substantial. Archaeologists working on the Swahili

⁵⁵ Northern whitewares appeared very occasionally in the western Indian Ocean. For one similar item was found at Samarkand, see Axelle Rougeulle & L. Sokolovskaja, "Stratified finds of Chinese porcelain from the pre-Mongol Samarkand (Afrasiab)", *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 6 (1992): 87-98, fig. 4b,c.

⁵⁶ Dashu Qin, *Longquan yao jizai yu Ming chu shengchan zhuangkuang de ruogan wenti* 龍泉窯記載與明初生產狀況的若干問題 (Sources on Longquan ware and questions about the production at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty), in Zhejiangsheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 浙江省文物考古研究所 & Beijing daxue kaogu wenbo xueyuan 北京大學考古文博學院 & Longquan qingci bowuguan 龍泉青瓷博物館 (ed), *Longquan Dayao Fengdongyan yaozhi* 龍泉大窯楓洞岩窯址 (The kiln site of Fengdongyan at Dayao in Longquan) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2009), p. 33, fig. 7.

⁵⁷ Eva Stroeber, "Large dishes from Jingdezhen and Longquan around the world", International conference "Global China: Material Culture and Connections in World History", 22-24th April 2010, University of Warwick.

⁵⁸ 1st Ref in wait; Bing ZHAO (forthcoming), "Oriental Trade Ceramics from Qal-at al-Bahrain harbour site in Bahrain", *Proceeding of the International Conference Twenty Years of Archaeology in Bahrain* (Manama: National Museum of History), fig. 13, 14.

⁵⁹ Neville Chittick has already emphasized the overwhelming proportion of Chinese rice bowls among imports found in Kilwa-Kisiwani from the fifteenth century (Neville Chittick 1974, *op. cit.*, p. 214).

coast in the 1960s found evidence of Southeast Asian wares, sometimes without being able to identify or date them. This is the case in particular of Burmese white-glazed earthenware from the Palace site of Gedi,⁶⁰ at that of Manda,⁶¹ and at the site of Kilwa-Kisiwani.⁶² Vietnamese stoneware with brown underglaze decoration has been found at Mombasa⁶³ and at Gedi.⁶⁴

What is worth mentioning here is the very high proportion of Southeast Asian pottery in the Songo Mnara finds, constituting 25% of the total from East Asia. In the Philippines and Indonesia, from the fifteenth century until the end of the sixteenth, Thai ceramics are found in quantities reaching 20%. In some cases, the percentage of these shards is as high as 40%.⁶⁵ For Burmese pottery, no statistic study in Southeast Asian sites is currently available. In the Persian Gulf area and in Northern Africa, Southeast Asian pottery is present at numerous port sites. However, its density is rarely adequately documented in these publications. At the site of Julfar, from the fifteenth century onwards, the assemblage of Southeast Asian green-glazed ware (Thai, Burmese or Vietnamese) appears to be equal, even larger than that of Chinese green-glazed stoneware.⁶⁶ At the site of Qal'at al-Bahrain in Bahrain, the proportion of all Southeast Asian pottery is less than 4%.⁶⁷ It seems necessary to determine **by future study** the nature of the port sites in the western Indian Ocean, which might have been one of the main markets for Southeast Asian imports.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the East Asian ceramics from Songo Mnara are most similar to those of port sites in the Persian Gulf for the two centuries immediately preceding the Portuguese period. This means that in terms of the types of Chinese and Southeast Asian ceramics retrieved from port sites, there seems to be no difference between East Africa and the Persian Gulf. This finding could have significant implications for the patterns of consumption in the port sites of this semi-peripheral region in the Indian Ocean and those of the cores, where one might have expected to see asymmetrical patterns.

⁶⁰ James Kirkman, *Gedi, the palace* (La Hague: Mouton, 1963), p. 48, fig. 13 Q.

⁶¹ Neville Chittick, *Manda. Excavations at an Island port on the Kenya* (Nairobi: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1984), p. 71.

⁶² Neville Chittick 1974, *op. cit.*, pp. 309-310.

⁶³ Hamo Sassoon 1980, *op. cit.*, pl. III d.

⁶⁴ James Kirkman 1954, *op. cit.*, p. 127, fig. 32h.

⁶⁵ Roxanna Brown, *The Ceramics of South-east Asia: Their Dating and Identification*, 2nd ed, (Chicago: Art Media Resources, 2000), p. 58.

⁶⁶ John Hansman, *Julfar, an Arabian port: its settlement and Far Eastern Ceramic Trade from the 14th to the 18th Century*, (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1985), pp. 43-47.

⁶⁷ Bing Zhao (forthcoming).

In the following section, we will deal with the diffusion of Chinese imports in East Africa, hoping to shed light on the social and economic reasons for the absence of this asymmetry.

The circulation of Chinese pottery

We will now consider the local context of Kilwa Bay itself, in particular the three excavations of Kilwa-Kisiwani, Sanje ya Kati and Songo Mnara. The analytical method proposed by H. Wright suggests a significant difference between the ratio of Chinese and African ceramics. It must be remembered that the medieval site of Kilwa-Kisiwani was the most flourishing town on the Swahili coast between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. The ratio of Chinese ceramics and local pottery excavated from this site surpasses that of the two other sites. We will now look more closely at the Kilwa-Kisiwani site by splitting the analysis into two periods which roughly correspond with the Sanje ya Kati chronology: period I (tenth to eleventh century CE)⁶⁸ and period II (twelfth to thirteenth century CE). A comparison of the Chinese imports at the two sites clearly emphasizes the importance of shards from Sanje ya Kati, in particular *qingbai* porcelain. This observation should however be mediated by the fact that house A at Sanje ya Kati (from where most of the Chinese shards were found) might essentially be a warehouse. The eleventh- to thirteenth-century occupation at Kilwa-Kisiwani discussed by Chittick, however, consists of domestic remains or religious architecture. It is therefore justified to question the relationship between the two sites during the short-lived existence of Sanje ya Kati. Based on a cross-disciplinary study of archaeological data and written sources, Stéphane Pradines advances the idea that Sanje ya Kati was a rival trading post with Kilwa-Kisiwani. From the twelfth century, the two cities competed for control of the gold trade and Sanje ya Kati was destroyed in an attack launched by the Kilwa-Kisiwani army.⁶⁹

Songo Mnara is generally regarded as a satellite town of the capital Kilwa-Kisiwani. The agricultural nature of this society may explain the smaller quantity of imported wares. Due to the very small area excavated in 2004, it seems premature to draw a conclusion on the Chinese pottery from this settlement. However, more systematic work on a larger scale

⁶⁸ Neville Chittick had initially attributed period I to the c. 900-1,000 CE (Neville Chittick 1974, *op.cit.*, vol. 1, p. 21). According to Mark Horton (Mark Horton 1996, *op.cit.*, pp. 423-425) and John Sutton (John Sutton 1998, *op.cit.*, p. 141) period I should rather be dated to the time between *circa.* 1,000 to c. 1,100 CE.

⁶⁹ Stéphane Pradines, "L'île de Sanje ya Kati (Kilwa, Tanzanie): un mythe Shirâzi bien réel", *Azania*, vol. 44 (2009) : 49-73.

led by LaViolette and Fleisher in the archipelago of Pemba in Kenya demonstrates that on small agricultural islands the presence of Chinese ceramics and, in a wider sense, imported products (Islamic pottery, glassware and glass ornaments) is almost insignificant.⁷⁰ Research done by Stephanie Wynne-Jones in Tanzania reveals the same phenomenon: in the surrounding villages of a port-city, imports were present yet less widespread in comparison to the port-city itself.⁷¹ The distribution of Chinese ceramics on the coast varies according to size and function of the settlements, and seems to depend on the degree of a site's involvement in international trading. This hypothesis remains to be verified by further quantitative studies to establish patterns of circulation of Chinese pottery on the Swahili coast.

As with all data collected from a warehouse site, that from Sanje ya Kati raises the question about the product's distribution in the local area. It is widely acknowledged that the introduction of Chinese ceramics in the port-cities of the Swahili coast is intimately linked with the arrival of Islam. It is therefore logical to deduce that its penetration towards the interior of the country would have corresponded with the inland progression of Islam.⁷² There are asymmetrical results from research carried out on the coast and the hinterland of Eastern Africa. Little systematic research is available for the latter. However, work of Paul Sinclair in Great Zimbabwe offers very interesting material evidence. From the tenth to the sixteenth centuries, Great Zimbabwe was the main provider of gold in the western Indian Ocean. Glass beads appeared there earlier in the eighth century, as well as Egyptian glassware in the tenth century layer. Hence, from 1050 imported goods (glass beads, glassware, Islamic and Chinese pottery) increased markedly and these are found in a remarkably high concentration at elite burial grounds in several sites which were engaged in maritime trade. This was accompanied by complex social and economic phenomena, such as state formation and the appearance of cattle stone architecture. At the same time, we

⁷⁰ Adria LaViolette & Jeffrey Fleisher, "The Archaeology of Sub-Saharan Urbanism: Cities and their Countryside's", Ann Stahl Brower (ed), *African Archaeology, A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 327-352.

⁷¹ Stephanie Wynne-Jones, "Theorizing identity in African archaeology", *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 7 (3, 2007): 283-286.

⁷² One counter-example proving the relationship between Islam and the diffusion of Chinese pottery can be cited here. Following V. François, the Byzantine Christian Empire had sufficient economic means and trade routes to import Chinese tableware. Yet, the archaeology provides a curious phenomenon of scarceness of Chinese pottery during the medieval period (Véronique François, "La porcelaine de Chine à Byzance et dans l'Orient chrétien: une absence remarquable", *Taoci*, vol. 4 (2004) : 67-73.

can observe a clear shift towards the local production of goods with exchange value such as gold and ivory. This might have required a more advanced division of labor, with the emergence of a more specialized labor force, and, in some large urban cities, a non-laboring elite class. From around 1250 CE, the development of Great Zimbabwe introduced the distinction between an urban and a rural economy.⁷³ It is exactly at this moment that an amount of Longquan green-glazed stoneware in high quality was imported in this very area.⁷⁴

The data presently available from East Africa emphasizes that Chinese ceramics served fundamentally as exchange goods, since their diffusion both on the coast and hinterland is mainly located at sites where trade occurred. We do not wish to elaborate further on the privileges of the consumers involved in long distance commerce, but a close relation existed between political power and the luxury goods trade in Swahili society.⁷⁵ Indeed, the control of long distance trade is seen as the fundamental factor for the existence of these port states, which jealously guarded the circulation of luxury goods towards the hinterland.⁷⁶ In the balance of trade between East Africa and the cores, Chinese pottery as well as Chinese black glass beads and textiles were used as one of the best trade goods, allowing them to obtain numerous products of high value in maritime trade, such as ivory, tortoise shell, ambergris, rock crystal, timber, gold and iron, as well as exotic birds and animals.

Using the same logic, the density of Chinese pottery can reveal the density of trade at any given moment.⁷⁷ For this purpose, we have created a quantitative diffusion map of the six main categories of Sanje ya Kati in the western Indian Ocean. They are jars in green-glazed stoneware (ninth to eleventh century, Fig. 6), jars in brown-glazed and green-glazed

⁷³ Paul J. Sinclair, *Space, Time and Social Formation, a Territorial Approach to the Archaeology and Anthropology of Zimbabwe and Mozambique circa. 0-1700 A.D.* (Uppsala: Societas Archaeologica Upsaliensis, 1978), p. 150-154.

⁷⁴ Peter S. Garlake, *Great Zimbabwe* (Clothbound: Thames and Hudson, 1973).

⁷⁵ Privileged consumption equally existed in Europe during the initial phases of trade with China. Indeed, apart from royal and princely families, the first to benefit were the families and close friends of agents working for those societies that held the monopoly over trade with the Orient.

⁷⁶ The same phenomenon has been moreover recorded for trade patterns characterizing Southeast Asia in the medieval period (Leonard Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku: Eastern Indonesia in the Early Modern Period* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993).

⁷⁷ Axelle Rougeulle is the first and only scholar has made maps of quantitative Chinese imports in the western Indian Ocean. See Axelle Rougeulle, *Les importations extrême-orientales trouvées sur les sites de la période abasside : contribution à l'étude du commerce moyen-oriental au Moyen-Age* (ph D. Dissertation, Université de Sorbonne, 1991).

stoneware (eleventh to fifteenth century, Fig. 7), *qingbai* porcelain (Fig. 8). Of course we have to consider the difficulties inherent in a statistical study. Firstly, these maps are far from exhaustive, because very little information on quantity is available in older publications. Furthermore, in most older publications, only jar shards have been identified reliably; other categories are more problematic.⁷⁸ New identification based on photographs, drawings or even descriptions remains tentative and is closely linked to the quality of publication. Despite their limitations, these maps are revealing. Let us take *qingbai* porcelain for example. One can observe that at Fostat, Sharma and Sanje ya Kati the density of *qingbai* ware is the highest.⁷⁹ This observation should however be understood in the context of the fact that the site of Sharma is an entrepôt. There are no associated village settlements in the investigated area, where the artifacts are normally denser than those from sites of a domestic or religious nature.⁸⁰ Data from Sanje ya Kati prove nevertheless that the density of Chinese ceramics at a semi-peripheral site can sometimes be higher than at core sites, such as Suhâr, Has al-Hadd.⁸¹ Furthermore, this is not an isolated case. The inventory of Changsha wares found in the western Indian Ocean shows a previous case in the ninth century: the site of Shanga yielded more than 20 shards, a higher quantity than at Fostat⁸² in Egypt and Siraf⁸³ in the Gulf. These two cases prove that the density of Chinese ceramics on a semi-peripheral site can sometimes be higher than in core sites.

With this analysis, we arrive at the diffusion of Chinese pottery in the western Indian Ocean. For Wallerstein, the trade of luxury goods had no substantial impact in the modern world-systems, because modes of exchange were above all defined by a region's capacity to

⁷⁸ For example, some old excavation reports note Chinese Northern whiteware finds, for example Ding ware or those of the Liao Dynasty. It seems necessary to check this information, since some of them are probably of Guangdong origin.

⁷⁹ From the sites of Pemba Island in Kenya, a quite large number of *qingbai* shards are found (Mark Horton 2009). This information was given by Mark Horton during the conference "L'évolution des sites côtiers (région de Zanzibar et Pemba)", Journée d'études « Sharma horizon », Paris, CNRS UMR 8176 « Islam Médiéval », le 5 juin 2009.

⁸⁰ For the data of Sharma, see Bing Zhao, "L'importation de la céramique chinoise à Sharma au Yémen", *Annales Islamologiques*, vol. 38 (2004): 255-284.

⁸¹ For the finds of Suhâr, see Michèle Plazzoli-t'Serstevens, "La céramique chinoise de Qal'at al-Suhâr", *Arts Asiatiques*, vol. 43 (1988): 87-105.

⁸² For the material of Fostat, see Dashu Qin, "Aiji Fusita yizhi zhong faxian de Zhongguo taoci 埃及福斯塔遗址中發現的中國陶瓷", *Haijiaoshi yanjiu 海交史研究*, vol. 1 (1995): 79-90 and Tadanori Yuba, "Chinese Ceramics found at al-Fustat, Cairo, 9th to sixteenth century", *Taoci* (2004): 88-95.

⁸³ Moira Tampoe, *Maritime Trade between China and the West: An Archaeological Study of the Ceramics from Siraf (Persian Gulf), 8th to fifteenth centuries A.D.*, (Oxford: B.A.R., series n° 555, 1989), pp. 54-56.

move a surplus of a commodity towards other areas where these same goods were lacking.⁸⁴ What can be retained of this theory is the need to study Chinese pottery together with other goods which exist in greater quantities, or as part of a general movement of trade goods. As for the period before the fourteenth century, imported pottery in the port sites of East Africa essentially comprised Iranian pottery, in particular hatched *sgraffiato* ware. The latter would have been mainly produced at Tiz on the South Eastern coast of Iran. Following a recent study by Axelle Rouguelle, shards of *sgraffiato* ware have been identified on numerous sites on the Sind coast, on the Iranian and Persian Gulf coasts, on the Arabian Peninsula and in East Africa (Fig. 9).⁸⁵ This geographically well-circumscribed distribution coincides nicely with the maritime activities of Persian Gulf merchants before the fourteenth century. Moreover, African pottery (triangular impressed ware) identified on several sites of the Persian Gulf and of the Arabian Peninsula provides further material evidence of a regional trade network linking East Africa and these areas.⁸⁶

The distribution of large bowls from the Xicun kiln site in Guangdong Province seems to coincide with that of the hatched *sgraffiato* (Fig. 10). These bowls include one everted rim and some floral patterns painted in iron brown under a *crème* or bluish glaze. They have a large, low and everted footed ring and one deep excised ring near the foot ring on the unglazed base. This last morphological detail, which might well be the result of the technological process, also appears on the hatched *sgraffiato* ware. What can be concluded? Firstly, that the absence of these Xicun bowls might well be the result of human error, i.e., that archaeologists did not correctly identify these shards at Red Sea sites. While awaiting further discoveries to validate the hypothesis of a larger diffusion in the western Indian Ocean, we can surmise with a certain amount of certainty that this production lasted only a short time, during which the trade of Xicun wares was largely in the hands of Persian-Gulf merchants. In fact, although recent work carried out by European, Chinese and Japanese

⁸⁴ Immanuel Wallerstein 1974, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42, Philippe Beaujard 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 440.

⁸⁵ Axelle Rouguelle, "Golfe persique et mer Rouge, les routes de la céramique aux X^e-XIII^e siècles", *Taoci*, n° 4 (2004): 41-52.

⁸⁶ For African pottery found at the site of Shihr, see Claire Hardy-Guilbert, "Al-Shihr, un port d'Arabie face à l'Afrique", *Journal des Africanistes*, vol. 72, n° 2 (2002): 39-53, fig. 8. For the site of Sharma, see Axelle Rouguelle, "Le Yémen entre Orient et Afrique: Sharma, un entrepôt du commerce médiéval sur la côte sud de l'Arabie", *Annales Islamologiques*, vol. 38 (2004): 201-254, fig. 25. For the site Julfar, see John Hansman 1985, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-51. For the evidence of African pottery in Oman, see Mark Horton & John Middleton 2000, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

scholars confirms the absence of these painted wares from Xicun at Fostat,⁸⁷ other Xicun wares of the same period are present at this site, including bowls of similar shape with a *qingbai* glaze, with or without deep carved decoration on the inside.

This short analysis leads us to an assessment of the complexity of the diffusion of Chinese wares in East Africa, and the broader mercantile network in the western Indian Ocean (Fig. 11). As for Sanje ya Kati, Stéphane Pradines has recently reasserted that domestic and religious architecture, as well as *sgraffiato* wares, constitute material evidence for its Persian connections, more precisely Shirazi connections.⁸⁸ According to the Shirazi legend widespread throughout the Swahili coast, seven port cities (Kilwa included) were founded during the tenth and eleventh century by elite members of the Shiraz sultanate in Persia. Neville Chittick has attributed phases I and II of Kilwa-Kisiwani to the Shirazi period.⁸⁹ For other historians, the rulers of these city-states, often people with mercantile backgrounds, had a tendency to invent impressive “foreign” genealogies to improve their elite status, necessary for their religious, commercial and political legitimization. Meanwhile, historians and archaeologists agree that there was a close link between East Africa and Persian Gulf during the period from the ninth century to the thirteenth centuries.⁹⁰

From the thirteenth century CE, imports became more numerous at Swahili sites. Pottery from southern Arabia and the Red Sea, such as Mustard Ware produced at Kushan near the port city of Aden, mixed with the Chinese and Persian material. This phenomenon provides evidence of the rise of maritime power of the Red Sea area. Furthermore, the absence of Mamluk ware should be seen as an argument against connections with Egypt, while port-city sites of East Africa and Aden port site shared several Chinese ceramic types.⁹¹ This might point to a change of trading partners in East Africa. Kilwa’s history appears to insert itself perfectly within this more general evolutionary framework in the

⁸⁷ Bo Gyllensvård, “Recent Finds of Chinese Ceramics at Fostat. I”, *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, n°45 (1973): 91-120; Bo Gyllensvård, “Recent Finds of Chinese Ceramics at Fostat. II”, *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, n°47 (1975): 93-117; Dashu Qin 1995, *op.cit.*; Tadanori Yuba 2004, *op.cit.*

⁸⁸ Stéphane Pradines 2009, *op.cit.*

⁸⁹ Neville Chittick, “The Shirazi Colonisation of east Africa”, *Journal of African History* VI (1965): 275-294.

⁹⁰ Philippe Beaujard 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 46; Mark Horton 1996, *op. cit.*, pp. 377, 421-423.

⁹¹ For comparaison between data from Gedi et Aden, see James Kirkman, *The Arab City of Gedi: Excavations at the Great Mosque, architecture and finds*, London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 127; for the history of Aden, see Guy Ducatez, “Aden et l’océan Indian au XIII^e siècle : navigation et commerce d’après Ibn al-Mugâwir », *Annales Islamologiques* 37 (2003): 137-156.

Indian Ocean networks. It might have been to monopolize the gold trade that merchants originating from Hadramawt seized Kilwa in 1277 CE.⁹²

John Carswell, studying the East Asian ceramic finds from the Maldives, has put forward the following hypothesis: the Maldives archipelago might be one of the entrepôts for East Africa.⁹³ Indeed, a network linking India, the Maldives and Madagascar might have been active during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁹⁴ This redistribution of Chinese pottery, as well as Chinese glassware and textiles, might have been carried out by merchants from both southern India and the Maldives, by Persian Gulf merchants and by those of the Red Sea area, according to their maritime power at a given moment in history.

Conclusion

The small set of East Asian ceramics recently uncovered at the sites of Sanje ya Kati and Songo Mnara in Kilwa allows us to pose a series of questions on the methods used to analyze this type of material in the perspective of a study of trade practices, specifically those of East Africa. From the beginning of its import to the Muslim world, Chinese pottery was appreciated for its intrinsic qualities (cleanliness, strength, weight and aesthetic). In mercantile Swahili society, the consumption of Chinese ceramics (as tableware, for display in an intimate or sacred space, or worn as decoration) does not constitute a simple indication of material standards of living, but functions as a symbol of social status. This supplementary prestigious value is more particularly linked to the nature of Swahili port states. The latter were primarily the fruit of an alliance between foreign merchants and local authorities. Once established, they equally controlled the local diffusion of luxury products and long-distance trading. In fact Chinese ceramics, along with other imported luxury goods, can be seen here more than anywhere else as a manifestation of mercantile power. It is for this reason that there was no asymmetry of consumption of Chinese wares between the port sites of East Africa, a semi-peripheral region in the Indian Ocean, and those of the cores, such as the Persian Gulf.

⁹² Jeffrey Fleisher, "Behind the Sultan of Kilwa's 'Rebellious Conduct': Local Perspectives on an International East African Town", in Paul Lane & Andrew Reid (eds), *African Historical Archaeologies* (New York: Plenum/Kluwer Academic, 2005): p. 101.

⁹³ John Carswell, "China and Islam in the Maldives Islands", *Transactions of Oriental Ceramic Society* XLI (1977): 121-198.

⁹⁴ For a detailed demonstration of this hypothesis, see Randall L. Pouwels, "Eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean to 1880: Reviewing Relations in Historical Perspectives", *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 35 (2-3, 2002, pp. 385-425): pp. 400-401.

Whilst recognizing the precious character of this exotic product during the period considered here (eleventh to fifteenth centuries), we propose a re-evaluation that draws attention to its primary character in a commercial context, that of an exchange good. During the period studied, Chinese pottery played a role in stabilizing the balance of trade between China and East Africa, as it was one of the best commercial goods. Even if Chinese pottery is one of the most widely diffused products across the world, it still never had the power to structure and re-structure networks in the same way as gold, silver or even spices did. “The ceramic route” that Tsugio Mikami 三上次男 ingeniously proposed consists only of itineraries at which traces of Chinese pottery can be found.⁹⁵ It does not apply to sea routes specially created for the traffic of ceramics, with particular regard to the western Indian Ocean.

This re-evaluation therefore has the aim of highlighting the necessity to study Chinese pottery in conjunction with other commodities. Our case study shows that it is effectively by the means of analyzing the general evolution of the movement of geographically defined products, in this case, Islamic and Indian ceramics, that we can hope to detect the complex mechanism of Chinese pottery diffusion. Only when this work has been carried out will it be possible to envisage wider studies based on the hypothesis of a shared Indian Ocean consumer culture, within which Chinese ceramic ware might have played the role of an “engine.”⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Tsugio Mikami, *Tôji no michi* 陶磁の道 (The ceramic route), *The Journal of Sophia Asian studies*, vol. 3 (1985): 1-19.

⁹⁶ This notion was first suggested by James Kirkman in 1975 (James Kirkman 1975, *op.cit.*, p. 247).