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Cultural Interchange Between Guangzhou and Southeast Asia Before the Qing Dynasty—Take the Example of Guangzhou Exported Artworks

Yuanhang Xu[1] & Xinlong Li[2]

[1] University of Malaya

[2] Universiti Teknologi Malaya

Correspondence: Yuanhang Xu, University of Malaya.

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the spread of artwork between Guangzhou and Southeast Asia before the Qing Dynasty, discovering the cultural exchange between Guangzhou and Southeast Asia through artwork. A study and visual analysis of the trade interactions between Guangzhou's exports to Southeast Asia of tooth carvings, silk, and porcelain during the Qing dynasty will be conducted to arrive at the cultural integration and diffusion of Guangzhou and Southeast Asia in the trade. I will use a literature survey, data analysis, and comparative research methods to conduct the study. There are not many studies on artworks in the trade exchanges between Guangzhou and Southeast Asia, therefore, this thesis can contribute to the study of the literature on artworks between Guangzhou and Southeast Asia. The findings of the study show that Guangzhou and Southeast Asia have influenced the habits and aesthetic level of people in both places in the spread of artworks.

Keywords: Guangzhou, Southeast Asia, artwork, cultural interchange

1. Introduction

Along with the continuous expansion of the Maritime Silk Road routes, the demand for overseas markets grew. In the 24th year of the Kangxi era (1685), the government lifted the ban on the sea that had been in place at the beginning of the Qing dynasty. Moreover, by its superior geographical location and open policy, Guangzhou became an important location for the world market during the Qing dynasty. Guangzhou's exported artworks, such as embroidery, silk, tooth carvings, and porcelain, have become famous overseas. This paper will examine the development of Guangzhou's exported artworks to explore the cultural exchanges between Guangzhou and other countries in Southeast Asia, Africa, and India.

2. Background

Guangzhou was a coastal city in southern China, strategically located around many islands and close to coastal cities such as Hong Kong, Macau, Hainan, and Taiwan. With the optimization of shipbuilding technology, Guangzhou became one of the birthplaces of the Maritime Silk Road. The advances in shipbuilding technology between the 12th and 13th centuries facilitated trade between Guangzhou and Southeast Asia and expanded Guangzhou's trade in Southeast Asia. In 1304, it was recorded that Guangzhou was trading with 104 countries, including Malaysia, Vietnam, India, and Java.[1] Guangzhou was closer to South East Asia than to Europe.

During the Ming Dynasty, the government banned merchants from sailing the seas, and the only officially recognized trade was with merchants who came on tribute missions. Only three ports were authorized to receive tribute missions, with different ports receiving different missions, and the port that received Southeast Asian missions was Guangzhou.[2] Guangzhou, one of China's major ports, was also a center for the import of spices,

ivory, pearls, feathers, rhinoceros horn, and other South East Asian goods.[3]

3. Analysis

Figure 1. White gauze wallpaper with hand- painted flowers and birds in the late 18th - early 19thcentures

Figure 2. White silk bedcover with hand-painted flowers and birds in the late 18th century

3.1 Hand-Painted Silk Exported from Guangzhou During the Qing Dynasty

Most of the hand-painted silk from the Qing dynasty that survives is made of yarn, silk, and satin, and most of the patterns are decorated with floral and botanical motifs. To meet the aesthetic needs of Westerners., these floral and botanical patterns were either directly traced and drawn by popular Western designs or were decorated with oriental and Chinese elements preferred by Westerners.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Chinese silk and Indian cotton were two essential types of textiles traded along the Maritime Silk Road. If Chinese silk captured the hearts of the entire upper class of European Chinese silk captured the hearts and minds of the whole of European upper class, Indian cotton reaped the fame of the whole of Western society. Indian printed cotton won the hearts of Western civilization with its bright colors, brilliant patterns, skin-friendly touch, and easy care.[4]

Indian printed kinds of cotton, with their bright colors, brilliant patterns, skin-friendly feel, and ease of care, won the hearts of the European market and became one of the main fabrics used for clothing in Europe. Among the many printed pieces of cotton exported from India, the ‘Tree of Life’ pattern is the most representative. The ‘tree’ pattern is the most usual, usually on the white ground, decorated with a brightly colored pattern of flowers and trees; the rocks have trunks growing out, branches winding, and flowers and leaves turning brightly. The model has changed several times to adapt to the European market, incorporating European aesthetic habits and even Chinese design elements with a strong exotic flavor. To strengthen the competition and better occupy the Western consumer market, hand-painted silk exported from Guangzhou also appeared to imitate the Indian style

of the “tree of life” theme pattern.[5] The hand-painted silks were decorated in traditional Chinese decorative styles and with decorative elements from Indian export printed cotton and European Rococo-style textiles.

This late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century wall hanging with painted birds and flowers on a white gauze ground (figure 1), 394 cm long and 73 cm wide, is in the collection of the China Silk Museum. The main body of the scene consists of two parts: a flowering tree at the base, its branches slanting across the ground and covered with flowers, the soft ends of which are tied with red silk thread to form a Chinese floral basket; the upper western half embellished by with a scattered pattern of birds and flowers, and the sides of the wall hanging are decorated with a European Rococo-style vine and floral motif. This wall hanging combines Chinese floral and oolong motifs, Indian-style ‘tree of life’ motifs, and European rococo motifs, reflecting the diversity of artistic styles that characterized the hand-painted silk patterns exported from Guangzhou.

Another white silk bedspread with painted birds and flowers from the second half of the 18th century (figure 2), 274 cm long and 251 cm wide, is in the Victoria and Albert Museum, England collection. A vibrant, flowering ‘tree of life’ motif dominates the scene’s center. Its winding branches are decorated with Chinese elements, such as birdcages, baskets of flowers, and flying birds favored by Westerners. In contrast, the edges of the scene are decorated with bunches of small flowering trees.

Figure 3. (Early Qing dynasty) Carved rhinoceros horn cup of immortal pan-loft, You Tong mark, now in the National Palace Museum, China

3.2 Qing Dynasty Rhinoceros Horn Carving

In addition to the private trade, the tribute of ivory, rhinoceros horn, tortoiseshell, amber, coral, and other rare items paid by the tributary emissaries of the Southeast Asian countries contributed significantly to the diversity of art exported from Guangzhou. In the maritime trade, China’s transportation hub with Southeast Asia attracted thousands of resident foreign traders—Cham, Malay, Indian, Persian, and Arab - who lived in their urban neighborhoods with their religious buildings and burial sites.[6] Ships sailing southwest would pass through Hainan Island and then often stop to trade with the Cham people who lived on the east coast of present-day central Vietnam. Cham people for trade. Cham villages became ports of call, selling local amber, gold and silver artifacts, ivory, rhinoceros horn, and tortoise nails.[7] The country developed a skilled ivory and rhinoceros horn carving craft, which peaked during the Ming and Qing dynasties. However, this began to change towards the end of the last century, as rare animals such as rhinoceroses and elephants declined—the United Nations wildlife regulations listed rhinoceros horns and ivory as protected animals. Customs banned rhinoceros horn products from entering and leaving China, while the long-established art of rhinoceros horn carving in China would eventually decline. However, these heirloom rhinoceros horn cups from the Ming and Qing dynasties have

become increasingly valuable because of their scarcity and have become one of the most sought-after items in museums and collectors' collections.[8]

The famous carver You Tong made this cup in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, and it is now in the Palace Museum in Beijing. (figure 3) The cup is 11.7 cm high by 27 cm long and 8.7 cm wide, of beeswax color, the sides yellowish and pale, the center slightly darker, yellow with a slight black tinge, and the whole body translucent. The cup is engraved with a poem by the Qianlong emperor and two seals of the emperor, 'Bid' and 'Langrun.' The front part of the vessel is engraved in seal script with the words 'A further floral example' and 'Youtong'. The front of the boat is engraved in seal script with the words 'relay huajiazi' and 'young,' followed by a small seal of 'Yuyuan.' The carving technique is a combination of deep and shallow relief and circular carving, with a variety of styles blended into one. The entire rubbed form of the cup is smooth, with the walls of the hull part of the cup being relatively thin. The rear part of the boat is in the shape of a boat canopy, with an older man sitting leisurely with his feet up and legs crossed, holding a ruyi in his hand and smiling at the front, surrounded by a cluster of traditional lotus flowers and plum blossoms. The artisan has cleverly fashioned a boat from the shape of the rhinoceros horn, carving the trunk of a tree in the prow of the ship and carving the sides of the boat in shallow relief. The entire piece is delicately carved (early Qing dynasty). You Tong style rhinoceros horn carving is an immortal pan-loft cup.

This is one of the many works of rhinoceros horn carved by You Tong, which is now in the National Palace Museum, and are vivid, and evocative. This rhinoceros-horn cup was kept in the palace, and the Qianlong emperor found it in an antique box in 1783, marveling at the skill of You Tong's carving and writing an imperial poem in praise of You Tong's skills. The cup is a rare example of late Ming and early Qing rhinoceros horn ware.

Figure 4. Image source: Google (Left)

Figure 5. Vietnamese blue and white porcelain, 15th century, in the National Palace Museum, China (Right)

3.3 The Boom in Exported Ceramics

From the 9th century onwards, Chinese porcelain became a dominant product in export markets. The Chinese porcelain found in Southeast Asia was made during the Western Han Dynasty (1st to 2nd century AD). Chinese porcelain was not only technically superior to earthenware, it was also beautifully shaped. This is why many Southeast Asian ships sailed north to Guangzhou in search of goods. As maritime trade continued to develop, a number of transportation hubs were established along the Chinese coast with Southeast Asia for the exchange of local products such as porcelain or tea, and one of the main ones was established in Guangzhou, where the Chinese government established a maritime customs office in 713.[9]

In early 1984, near the Burmese border in western Thailand, the Mon and other hill tribes began excavating some 100 graves, believed to contain the remains of both Thai and Mon peoples. Much Chinese porcelain was found in these tombs, as well as swords and jewelry.[10] The spread of Chinese porcelain brought popular Chinese

motifs to South East Asia. For example, dragons, phoenixes, and peonies were popular with the Vietnamese and were incorporated into the ceramics made by Vietnamese potters[11]. Chinese porcelain was also used in Islamic and Christian ceremonies.

These two 15th-century Vietnamese celadon porcelains (figure 5) are in the National Palace Museum, China. They are decorated with incised flowers in imitation of the celadon of the Longquan kilns, with traces of branch firing on the inner base of the vessel, and are based on the techniques and decoration of Chinese Song ceramics. The lines of the form are graceful and skilful, and the patterns are exquisite. The pottery kilns of northern Vietnam actively participated in the world trade of ceramics by imitating Longquan celadon and Jingdezhen Shufu white porcelain, celadon and colourful porcelain. The discovery of Vietnamese celadon tiles in Indonesia and the large quantities of Vietnamese export porcelain unearthed from the Hoi An shipwreck also demonstrate that Vietnamese ceramics had a market in Southeast Asia and played an important role in the world trade of ceramics.

4. Conclusion

This article examines the mutual spread of culture between Guangzhou and Southeast Asia and its impact from the novel perspective of the development of Guangzhou's exported artworks. It combines a comprehensive analysis of the spread of Guangzhou's exported silk, porcelain and rhinoceros horn carvings in Southeast Asia with an analysis of the process by which the exported artworks were integrated with and absorbed into the local culture, and the impact they had on the original culture of the region.

Trade facilitated cultural links between Guangzhou and Southeast Asia, resulting in the flow of a wide range of exquisite artworks, such as silk, porcelain and ivory carvings from Guangzhou, into Southeast Asia, as well as influencing the regional cultures of Southeast Asia. The spread of the porcelain trade also influenced the decorative patterns of Vietnam and Thailand.[12] Trade was vital to the development of the Chinese economy and was also an important source of economic support for the smaller countries of Southeast Asia.[13] At a time when early Europe was growing and expanding, Asia also fundamentally influenced every aspect of the world's maritime trade. Asian merchants, seagoing ships and investors were no longer passive victims of European invasion, but active participants and effective competitors in maritime trade.

Each culture has its uniqueness, and as time goes on, foreign cultures and technologies will inevitably evolve towards adaptation to the local natural environment and socio-economic and cultural thought. Cultures and technologies adapted to regional development are digested and absorbed, while those not are discarded.

In short, Guangzhou's exported artworks and Guangzhou's art and culture spread to Southeast Asia through the medium of envoys, merchants, and immigrants, thus achieving a spatial transfer of ceramic culture from one place to spread to another. In turn, the diffusion and spread of exported artworks and culture in Southeast Asia involved links with local food, architecture, religious beliefs, and social customs. Some cultural forms and features of Chinese artwork culture are appreciated and adopted, replacing certain features of the original local culture or becoming part of a particular local culture. In this process of cultural integration, it has led to the formation, emergence, development, and prosperity of a new culture of Chinese art; on the other hand, in the process of appreciating and adopting Chinese export art culture, Southeast Asia has always taken the development of the natural environment, social economy and cultural thought of the local area as its starting point. Chinese art culture and technology adapted to its development are digested and absorbed, while Chinese art culture that is not adapted to its cultural and technological development is discarded. In a constant process of cultural fusion, they create a unique art culture for their people and region.

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