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EXPRESSIONS OF TRADE: OBJECTS FROM NORTH CHINA IN 14TH CENTURY SINGAPORE

Alexandra Choo

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In 1983, a decision was taken by Government authorities to redevelop Fort Canning into a recreation park. The author then expressed through the press, the need to make an archaeological investigation of the Hill before any further disturbances- apart from the already existing fortifications, building, roads and landscaping- make the retrieval of any reliable archaeological data almost impossible¹.

For the last few years, the National Museum of Singapore has embarked in efforts to explore the archaeological potential of this site by organising short periods of excavations whenever funds were available.

To date, four (4) periods of excavations have been organised: January, 1984, (Miksic), June, 1984, (Choo), November, 1987, (Intra Asean Excavation and Conservation Workshop) and November, 1988, (Miksic). The results of these explorations have been published separately by the National Museum².

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The following note primarily describes finds exposed during non-archaeological excavations conducted on the hill by the Public Works Department (PWD) in the course of upgrading various facilities such as pathways, sewerage and electrical systems. Such activities were always attended by the National Museum and archaeological material was salvaged on several occasions.

In December, 1985, the steep western slopes of the hill, an area enclosed between two paths immediately under the Telecoms Building, were excavated as part of an operation aiming to consolidate the grounds. Inspection of the works at several occasions resulted in the recovery of ceramic material all from a depth of approximately seventy (70) centimeters from ground surface.

A second opportunity for observations was presented when the area of the old Christian Cemetery was excavated for the construction of raised tiled pavement and several broad steps.

From the excavated soil from a depth up to 1 meter from ground level, ceramics were collected by the author and geologists, Lee Kim Woon and Loy Wei Choo, of the PWD in April, 1987.

Although all piles of soil could not be screened with thoroughness, ceramic material in this area seemed to be abundant, but most probably of secondary deposition.

Eighteen (18) fragments of celadon bowls and plates, twenty-seven (27) fragments of stone wares including mercury jars, and fragments of jars with brown glaze were recovered.

Finally, the most exciting find was exposed during a shallow excavation at the western side of the Hill, immediately behind the eastern wing of the National Theatre site. An existing narrow path made of concrete was being broken in order to have it widened and replaced by a path made of thick ceramic tiles in the form of bricks.

Workers from Thailand, employed by a private contractor who was engaged by PWD for this job, found fragments of a Kuan jar, Tz'u-chou ware or the type painted with a dark brown pigment on a white slip. The fragments were sent to the National Museum together with stoneware and celadon fragments found at the same spot. (November, 1987)

The author made an immediate check at the site of the find and halted temporarily all subsequent works. In a rescue operation, the excavation of a 2 x 2 square was planned, with the aim of exploring the location as close as possible to the spot where the fragments of the jar were found.

The square was laid exactly under the old concrete pavement which had been broken up at an elevation of twenty (20) meters and it was oriented N 20 degrees W to N 70 degrees E.

A layer of stones had been arranged at the spot to serve as a base for a thin layer of cement on which the new brick pavement was to be constructed.

The stones were removed; and immediately underneath, a layer of brown clayish loam appeared which was slowly excavated by the use of trowels. This layer of soil was very rich in cultural materials consisting mainly of ceramics. Recent breakage caused by the weight of the machinery which was used to break the cemented path had occurred but fragments of the same vessels were found "in situ" and were subsequently pieced together. A few more fragments of the Kuan jar were recovered from the square.

The fact that whole vessels were not found in this thin layer which seemed to contain only 13th and 14th century material may suggest that it was a secondary deposit. However, the total absence of modern materials from the assemblage suggests that deposition took place not long after the 14th century. This cultural layer was between twenty (20) to thirty (30) centimeters thick and was resting on compact soil consisting of light brown to yellow sandy clay which is the residual solid of Fort Canning Hill. Excavations stopped when this stratum was reached.