

Snuff Bottles and China Trade Paintings

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Cartas Escripitas:

José Ignacio de Andrade's *Cartas Escripitas da India e da China* was first published by the Imprensa Nacional, Lisbon, in a two volume set, in 1843. During the course of his letters Andrade chronicled his departure from Lisbon for India, and his subsequent voyages to Macau (澳門) and Guangzhou (廣州) China. Andrade's wide understanding of China had been derived directly from his twenty years in the Far East as a civil servant in the colonial administration. The volumes were also adorned with twelve lithograph portraits by Mauricio José Sendim depicting Andrade, his wife Maria Gertrudes Andrade, and various other subjects.¹ Two of the latter are of particular interest, for in addition to being associated with the China trade, each of the figures depicted is holding a snuff bottle in his hand (Fig. 1). The subject of first portrait is identified as being that of Saoqua (秀官), a well-known Hong Merchant whose Chinese name is given as Ma Xiuguan (馬秀官); Hong name, Shuntai hang (順泰行); and official name, Ma Zuoliang (馬佐良).² It may be observed that all trade in Guangzhou was conducted through Hong merchants, who served as private brokers to foreign traders. Andrade's account of a banquet held at Saoqua's house (1832, *Costumes Na Mesa*) is full of praise and admiration for the delicacies served, the specially prepared settings to the meal, the number of servants, as well as the gracious manner in which friends were received. Cha-Amui, the subject of the second portrait mentioned, is referred to as being one of Andrade's personal friends, and in whose house he met a 'man of letters' recently arrived from Nanjing.³ As to Cha-Amui's identity, he could have been one of the comprador's engaged in the China trade and speculate that 'Amui' might refer to Anhwei province, a source for many merchants. However, the main point here is that the presence of Andrade, his two friends and their bottles of snuff were typical reflections of the Portugal's long sojourn in Macau.

The Introduction of Snuff :

The royal *estanco* of tobacco was one of the most lucrative Portuguese crown monopolies. Vast

quantities of tobacco and snuff were shipped from Brazil to Lisbon, where it was re-exported via Goa and Malacca.⁴ This somewhat awkward method of distribution nonetheless, resulted in varieties of tobacco indigenous to Brazil reaching Macau before 1600. As to the use of snuff, one need look no further than a poem written in 1684. Wu Li (吳歷, Simon Xavier a Cunha), was one of the six master painters of the early Qing dynasty. He entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus at Macau in 1682, and went on to describe his life during this period in a collection of poems which he entitled *Sanbanji* (三巴集). The title was in reference to St. Pauls' cathedral, where he had studied.⁵ In one of his poems, Wu gave thanks to a friend for having given him snuff to cure his sickness.

‘Unsatisfied gluttony brings endless sickness;
Searching everywhere for a good prescription I find a distant friend.
It is not known that this kind of tobacco can cure a sickness;
However, it makes my nostrils greedy for more.’⁶

Interestingly enough, a reference to the Kangxi emperor's (r. 1662-1722) acceptance of a container of snuff also dates to 1684. As recorded in the *Xichaodingan* (熙朝定案), this occurred during the course of the emperor's first southern tours. When he reached Nanjing the sovereign was welcomed by two Jesuit Fathers who presented four gifts of European manufacture. Returning three of them to the missionaries for their own use, Kangxi made an exception of their gift of snuff. This suggests that he was already familiar with this luxury item, and was particularly partial to it.⁷

The missionaries were not the only ones to disseminate the custom of taking snuff. In addition to using the substance themselves, *A History of Macau* (澳門記略, *Aomenjiliueh*), relates how the Portuguese residents there used snuff, and rolled leaf tobacco with paper, which they then lit and smoked. In a paragraph explaining how the Portuguese dressed, they are described as having little purses for snuff bottles, which they carried upon themselves, and notes that one could even find glass snuff bottles in all colors, in St. Paul's cathedral.⁸ Therefore, while various theories have been presented as to when and how China acquired the habit of taking snuff, it is reasonable to look to this Portuguese colony as a source for this custom.

In return for their favored status, the Portuguese at Macau paid an annual ground rent which was sent to Beijing together with elaborate presents. Included among the gifts the Senate of Macau presented to the Qing court in 1714 and 1719, were forty-eight small glass bottles of *tabaco de amostrinha*, a fine snuff

from Brazil. The tribute for 1721 contained snuff of the first grade called *fei-yan* (飛煙), and that of the second grade, *dou-yan* (豆煙), which was identified as being snuff of a ‘duck green color’.⁹ That the Kangxi emperor (康熙 r. 1662-1722) took snuff may be confirmed by a reference in the *Pengshanmiji* (蓬山密記) which records that in 1703 while bidding farewell to Kao Shiqi (高士奇), the sovereign took from his own belt two snuff bottles which he ‘used himself’ and one bottle of snuff to give to his servant.¹⁰ Thus, supported by imperial patronage snuff-taking developed into a fashionable habit with its own ritual, and the need arose for suitable containers. This led to the production by Chinese artisans of snuff bottles in a seemingly endless variety of forms and materials.

Meanwhile a steady flow of snuff and presents continued northward to Beijing. Macau’s archives for December 1732 mention an *Administrador do Tabaco de China*, who was apparently replaced by another official the following year. The *Arquivos* for the years 1734-36, and 1746 contain many references to the tobacco trade, administration, snuff and *amostrina*, and various related problems between Goa and Macau. Further details in Macau’s archives for the years 1768-70, 73, 75, and 79, record negotiations between the Mandarins at Guangzhou, the officials at Macau, and the superintendent of trade at Goa, over the price paid for the commodity. To cite an example, in 1763 the Senate of Macau shipped 600 *arrateis* (one *arrateis* = one pound, 16 ounces of weight) of *amostrina* and ‘snuff of quality’ to the Beijing court. Afterwards the court officials expressed dissatisfaction with the price, and Macau had to make up the difference.¹¹ Given the scope and extent of the trade in snuff through Macau and Guangzhou, it was perhaps inevitable that the vessels containing it would figure among the finest Qing dynasty (1644-1912) works of art.

Types of Snuff Bottles:

Andrade’s stay in Guangzhou occurred during the reign of the Daoguang emperor (道光, r. 1820-50). The emperor was known to be a taker of snuff, particularly since several portraits of him holding a snuff bottle have survived.¹² Many of the snuff bottles he used were likely to have been made in the imperial ateliers. However, there are three types of snuff bottles which may be attributed to production in the Guangzhou area: inside painted bottles with port scenes, porcelain ones with export style décor, and snuff bottles adorned with painted enamels (Fig. 2).¹³

In his letter *Viagem de Macao a Cantão*, Andrade related that this trip took sixty hours. One reason for this amount of time might have been that foreign vessels were strictly prohibited from going past Whampoa Island on the Pearl River (珠江, Zhujiang, 珠江, Zhujiang Boca Tigris), which compelled the traveler to complete the remaining twelve miles in a topless small boat. Thus, the port scenes depicted on a small group of interior painted snuff bottles would have been recognized by Andrade. Dotted along the Pearl River were small islands containing fortifications called ‘folly forts’. The Chinese had originally built them for defense purposes, but had mostly abandoned them by the end of the eighteenth century, and European trading companies were using them as warehouses. Passing along Honam Island (湖南, Henan), in the foreground of the snuff bottle scene shown here (Fig. 2a) and by the Dutch Folly Fort, one comes upon the city walls, Guangzhou’s most famous pagoda, and the surrounding hills.

Dated to sometime between 1805 and 1820, these snuff bottles are unsigned, which leaves unanswered the question as to whether they were the work of a single artist, or a particular school. In fashioning these bottles the artist employed a process similar to the one followed by reverse glass painters. Following a meticulously prepared sketch the artist first painted in the details of his composition, then the various shadings, and finally the ground colors. However, unlike the artist who could alter the design on his canvas or paper by simply painting over it, an artisan working on an interior glass painted snuff bottle could not change his mind.

The topic of another of Andrade’s letters was the trade in China. Guangzhou was astir with commerce. Hong merchants, such as Saoqua, procured the porcelains and arranged for their decoration. These wares were almost exclusively supplied by kilns, some five hundred miles away, at Jingdezhen (景德镇). Craftsmen there worked on an assembly line basis, everyone had his own specialty, and a single piece of porcelain passed through the hands of as many as seventy workmen. Porcelains decorated with the *famille rose* palette, as such, are not rare, but export ware made for overseas trade was one matter, and snuff bottles another. We might bear in mind that while westerners traditionally used boxes to hold snuff, the Chinese used bottles. Therefore, a snuff bottle made at Jingdezhen and decorated with an export border pattern in *famille rose* enamels would constitute an anomaly. Of the known examples, one has typical sprays of flowers on its sides and on the front and back, ‘portraits’ of a man and lady (Fig. 2b).

Of course we do not know if these figures were meant to represent actual people, but inevitably in the exportation of porcelains to the west, the snuff bottle made its presence known.

As China's main gateway for foreign trade, Guangzhou artisans were accustomed to adopting western techniques into their crafts, such as enamel painting on metal. These artisans received commissions from the court, such as the set of fifty enamel snuff bottles which are recorded as having arrived at the Beijing court in 1779. Some of the Guangzhou craftsmen also worked in the Beijing palace workshops. To cite an early example of this, a memorial sent in 1716 by the governor of Guangdong province (廣東) relates that he was sending to Beijing two enamel craftsmen he had located together with two apprentices.¹⁴

While further research is needed concerning the two enamellers, the document does suggest that there was a workshop at this time for the production of painted enamel wares in the Guangzhou region.

The painted enamel snuff bottles made in Guangzhou possessed a distinctive style in the treatment of details and color scheme. Somewhat lighter in weight than their Beijing metal counterparts, the enamel colors are brighter and the fluently painted designs are very different from the bottles fashioned at the palace workshops. Western themes were popular, as in the example illustrated here (Fig. 2c). Elements of western architecture and even foreign flowers in the decor has been viewed as 'a distinctive local characteristic arising out of the influence from European painted enamels and oil paintings'.¹⁵

Paintings for the Western Market:

From the start of the China Trade until its decline in the second half of the nineteenth century, every foreigner who set foot in Guangzhou wanted to return home with a memento of this strange land. A regular industry of Chinese artists painting for the western market developed, and since most westerners had little appreciation for Chinese art or esthetics, the artists adopted western standards. It was not a one sided exchange, for the Chinese, in their turn, became fascinated with foreign objects. The results were at times a bit curious. One might find depicted in an oil painting, a western style chandelier hanging from the ceiling of what was purported to be a 'typical Chinese interior'.

Oil paintings of Hong merchants formed another genre. In some examples the merchant is portrayed full length, in others, a three quarters view, with the most notable feature being that the figures are shown almost full face, which was a departure from traditional flat Chinese portraiture. They are almost always depicted attired in mandarin robes with the insignia of their official rank, which the Hong merchants had

received in return for their financial contributions to the court. It is highly likely that the lithograph portrait of Saoqua in Andrade's *Cartas* was copied from a painting in oils.

A notable exception to the above is the portrait inscribed on the reverse with the name Liang Feng-Gang (梁風岡, Fig. 3). Childs Gallery of Boston, Massachusetts, most kindly shared the following information.

‘ This portrait [oil on canvas] is one of the few portraits known which depicts a Chinese merchant who is not a member of the Co-Hong, a group of Cantonese [sic] merchants identifiable by their characteristic mandarin dress. It is related to a similar portrait in the Girard College Collection in Philadelphia.

Note that the sitter is holding a snuff bottle in his right hand and on the thumb of his left hand, he is wearing an archer's ring.

This merchant may be a member of the Liang family, which as the Kinquas (經官 corrupted by Europeans from Kingkuan), operated the Tian-bao (天寶) Hong from 1808 to 1856, when the business was ruined by fire. It may be that Liang Feng-gang is a relative to Liang Jing-guo (梁經國, Kinqa I) or Liang Cheng-xi (梁丞, Kinqa II), or even that this is an informal portrait of one of these merchants, marked with a nickname. The Liang family are important to historians of the China Trade for reasons beyond the activities of the Kinquas. A great-grandson, Liang Jiabin (梁嘉彬), prepared the great Chinese history of the hong, the *Guangdong Shi-san-hang-kao* (廣東十三行考), which is available in a helpful partial English translation.’¹⁶

With regard to the habit of taking snuff, around 1837, a Manchu bannerman, Shen Yu (沈豫), wrote the following in his ‘Miscellaneous Notes of the Autumn Shade Studio’ (秋陰雜記 Qiuyinzaji). ‘Snuff was introduced at the beginning of this [Qing] dynasty and was initially popular among the Manchus and court officials. Recently even peddlers and herd boys are holding snuff bottles.’¹⁷ This remark makes it apparent that, what had been a custom prevalent in court circles, had now morphed into one for all social classes.

Notes

1. Tilbagetilbogen, [http://oerby.dk/sider/Ignacio de Andrade.htm](http://oerby.dk/sider/Ignacio%20de%20Andrade.htm).

2. John King Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast 1842-1845*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953, vol. 1, p.249, vol. II, p.86.
3. *Cartas Escriptas*, vol. II, pp. 67-69, 129-32. Andrade also mentions the names of several other prominent Hong merchants with whom he was acquainted.
4. José Roberto Amaral Lapa, *A Bahia e a Carreira da Índia*, Brasil: São Paulo, Companhia Editora Nacional, 1968, brasileira vol. 338, pp. 294-97.
5. Arthur W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943, pp.875-77.
6. Chang Lin-sheng, 'Enamel-Painted Snuff Bottles of the Ch'ing Dynasty' in *Journal of the International Chinese Snuff Bottle Society*, vol. 11, Spring, 1979, p. 8.
7. Chang Lin-sheng, 'Snuff Bottles in the National Palace Museum' in *Snuff Bottles in the Collection of the National Palace Museum*, Taipei, National Palace Museum, 1991, p. 28.
8. 印光任 Yin Guangren and 張汝霖 Zhang Rulin, 澳門記略 *Aomenjilue* in 嶺海異聞錄/ 祁坤作 撰 *Linghaiyi wen lu / Qi Kun zhuan*[Guangzhou]: Zuijing tang [1890?], juan 2, 15a &b.
9. Ibid, 33a.
10. 高士奇 GaoShihzhi, 蓬山密記 'Pengshanmiji,' in *GuxueHuikan*, Shanghai: Guocuixuebao she, Deng Shi, comp. 1923, juan 2, 4b.
11. P. M. Sarmiento, *Arquivos de Macau*, Macau: Imprensa Nacional, 1965, vol. 5, 3rd series no. 6, Julho-Dez. pp. 146-47, 168, 179-180; 1966, vol.5, 3rd series no. 6, Janeiro-Julho, pp. 305-06; 1967, vol. 7, 3rd series, no. 1, Jan. pp. 16-17; 1968, vol. 9, 3rd series no. 1, Jan., pp. 41-42.
For an illustration of a bottle of *amostrina* from Brazil see note 15, np.
12. A court painting of the Daoguang emperor holding a snuff bottle in a garden setting was illustrated in the exhibition catalogue, *Der Verboden Stad: Hofculturvande Chinese Kaisers (1644-1911), The Forbidden City: court Culture of the Chinese Emperors (1644-1911)*, Rotterdam: MusuemBoymans-van Beuniger, 1990, p. 156. For another example of the emperor holding a snuff bottle see Hope Danby's *The Garden of Perfect Brightness*, London: Williams and Norgate, 1950.
13. It may be noted that an inventory made in 1835 of the Daoguang emperor's holdings, the entry on snuff bottles makes no mention of inside painted ones.
14. Note 7, p.44, #27, and note 14, p. 63.
15. Yang Boda, *Tributes from Guangdong to the Qing Court*, Hong Kong: Art Gallery, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1987, p. 54.
16. Correspondence 1 February 1983. Also note 5, pp. 42, 501-02.
17. Gerard C. C. Tsang, 'Chinese Views on Snuff', in *Chinese Snuff Bottles*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Museum of Art, 1977, p. 20, #28.

Captions

1. *Portraits of Soaqua and Cha and Amui,*

Lithographs, from *Cartas Escriptas da India e da China*, Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 1847, 2nded.

2. Snuff bottles: a.) rock crystal with inside painting of Guangzhou port scene, 2 ½ inches; b.) porcelain with figure of a woman and export enamel decoration, 3 ¼ inches; c.) Guangzhou enamel scene of a western figure in a landscape playing an instrument, 2 ¾ inches.

(Private collection)

3. *Portrait of Liang Feng-Gang,*

oil on canvas, inscribed on reverse with sitter's name,
c. 1815. 31 ¾ x 23 ¾ inches.

(Photo courtesy of Childs Gallery, Boston, Ma.)