

LIFTING THE LID: EARLY CHINESE EXPORT TEAPOTS

Lecture given by Shirley Mueller on Tuesday 14 November 2006

Though tea was a national pastime in China for centuries, it was imported to the West for the first time in 1610.¹ In Europe this new beverage was not only novel, but also a welcome relief as an alternative to alcoholic drinks. Because it was different from existing beverages, it required an appropriate vessel in which it could be brewed.

The first official teapots for this purpose were ordered by the Dutch East Indies Company in 1639. These were described as "...200 tea-pots with covers and handles, also with ribs according to No. 4 *samples*..."² Though we do not know what these teapots looked like, or even whether they were porcelain or red stoneware (which the Chinese preferred for tea), we do know that over the next 150 years Chinese export teapot form and style changed dramatically. Initially the teapots were unique, as the Chinese who made the pots and the Europeans who negotiated the orders, struggled to develop the most suitable teapots for Westerners.³ Later, in the 18th century, teapots became uniform⁴ as production was industrialized owing to increased (fig. 1). These modifications⁴ are summarized in Table I. What is not included is the presence or absence of a vent in the lid. That is the focus of this paper.

The vent was an important consistent feature of mid to late 18th century Chinese export porcelain teapots (fig. 2). It allowed steam to escape as the tea was brewing. This innovation meant that hot water was less likely to erupt from the spout after boiling water was poured into the teapot. In spite of this, there is evidence to suggest that lid perforations were not present in early porcelain teapots.

A lid perforation was not present in porcelain teapot lids found in the 1643 Hatcher wreck (fig. 3, two lids on the left). Likewise, there is no perforation in the lid of the pot used for tea included in the 1690 inventory of Burghley House⁵ (fig. 4). Many other teapots that I examined from this same time period do not have vents. They were present, however, in the lids of teapots found on the Vung Tau (fig. 5), a ship that sank in 1690 enroute from China to Batavia after stopping in Vietnamese waters. This does not mean, however, that teapots after 1690 uniformly had lid perforations. The innovation was slow to catch on.

For example, though virtually all teapots exhibited this lid modernization by 1750 (fig. 2, right two teapots), twenty-five years earlier the results were mixed. The cargo of the *Ca Mau*, a ship that sank off the South coast of Vietnam during the reign of Yongzheng (1723–1735) contained teapots that both did and did not have a lid perforation.⁶ Likewise, other teapots produced around 1720 also show the same disparity (fig. 6), that is, a vent may or may not be present.

There is another interesting aspect regarding the development of the teapot lid perforation. Chinese artisans did not always understand the purpose of the perforation, and therefore made

¹ Parmentier, 1996.

² T. Volker, 1954.

³ Shirley Maloney Mueller, 2006A.

⁴ Shirley Maloney Mueller, 2006B.

⁵ Jon Culverhouse, personal communication.

⁶ Shirley Maloney Mueller, submitted.



Fig. 1. Early, mid and late eighteenth century armorial teapots (left to right).

Table 1: Summary of changes in 18th C. Chinese export teapots (Mueller, 2005 B)

	Early	Mid	Late
Size	Small	Medium	Large
Shape	Globular/pear	Globular/Bullet***	Drum
Decoration	Chinese/European	Chinese/European	European/American
Strainer Holes	0–3*	3	3 or more
Finial	Acorn/Teardrop**	Teardrop	Flower or Fruit-ornate

*One hole does not strain.

**Ball not illustrated

***Waisted teapot is copy of European shape



Fig. 2. Lids of armorial teapots from figure 1. The left 1724 teapot does not have a vent. The middle 1750 lid has one at 11 O'clock. The right 1775 lid has one at 1 O'clock.

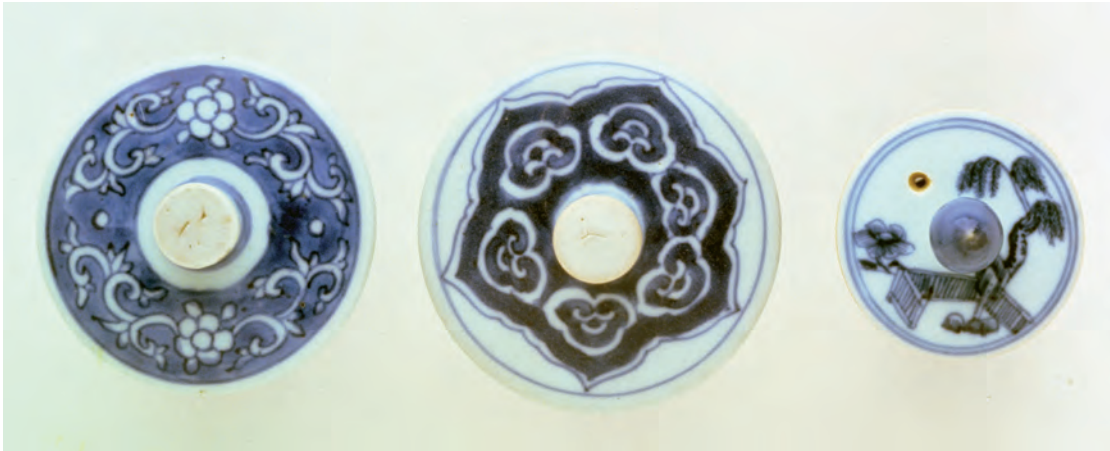


Fig. 3. Teapot lids from the 1643 Hatcher shipwreck (two lids on the left) do not have vents. The lids from the 1752 Hatcher shipwreck known as the Nanking Cargo (lid on the right) do have vents (at 11 O'clock in this photo).



Figure 4: 17th century teapot included in the 1690 inventory of Burghley House. The lid does not have a vent. The Burghley House Collection.

functional (fig. 7). Some lid perforations were simply too small to allow steam to escape. This suggests that some Chinese artisans did not initially understand the function of the perforation they were producing. Further, they were not supervised carefully enough to produce the desired result on a regular basis.

⁷ Jane Klose, personal communication.

incomplete vents in the lid early on. These incomplete perforations were not functional. Though seven of eight porcelain pots from the Dutch shipwreck of the *Oosterland*, that sunk off the coast of South Africa in 1697, had holes in the lid, the underside perforation on the lid was barely the size of a minute pin prick.⁷ This has implications that I did not understand until I was at the University of Cape Town in South Africa in August, 2006. Then, I was personally able to examine red stoneware teapot lids from the *Bennebroek*, another Dutch ship that sunk in 1713, also off the coast of South Africa. There were five lids with appliqué on them. Though all five had perforations on either the top or the bottom of the lid, they went through to the other side only on three. Even these successful penetrations were only minute pin pricks like those reported to me by Jane Klose⁷ and were not functional.

This means that both the *Oosterland* and the *Bennebroek* contained teapots with lid perforations that did not work for the purpose for which they were intended. This observation introduces a new concept. Though a vent in a teapot lid may be present, it might not be



Fig. 5. Teapot (left) and its lid (right) from the Vung Tau cargo, circa 1690. There is a vent in the lid at 6 O' clock.



Fig. 6. Two early 18th century famille verte teapot lids. The one on the left has a steam hole at 11 o'clock. The one on the right does not.

One reason that early porcelain export teapots did not have lid perforations may have been because stoneware teapots, which the Chinese preferred for tea, did not uniformly have lid perforations. For example, an early 17th Century teapot from the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware marked Xu Youquan does not have a functional vent, but others in that collection of the same date do.⁸ Additionally, some of the stoneware teapots listed in a 1674 inventory in the National Museum of Denmark did not have a vent, but others in the collection of the same date do.⁹

The stoneware teapot, more porous than the porcelain teapot, did not require a steam hole to release steam to the same extent that nonporous porcelain teapots did. This is because Yixing stoneware absorbs up to 4% of the hot fluid in the pot.¹⁰ There is residual tea within the body of the pot that leeches out so that hot water poured into the empty pot will turn brown and taste faintly of tea.

⁸ Kwok, 2006.

⁹ Olsen, 2006.

¹⁰ Valfre, 2000.



Fig. 7. The teapot lids in Fig. 6 turned over. Both have lid perforations on the underside of the lid, but only the one on the left has a patent perforation. The one on the right is not patent and therefore not functional.

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