

The Importation of Byzantine and Sasanian Glass into China during the fourth to sixth centuries

Mei-Ling Chen

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

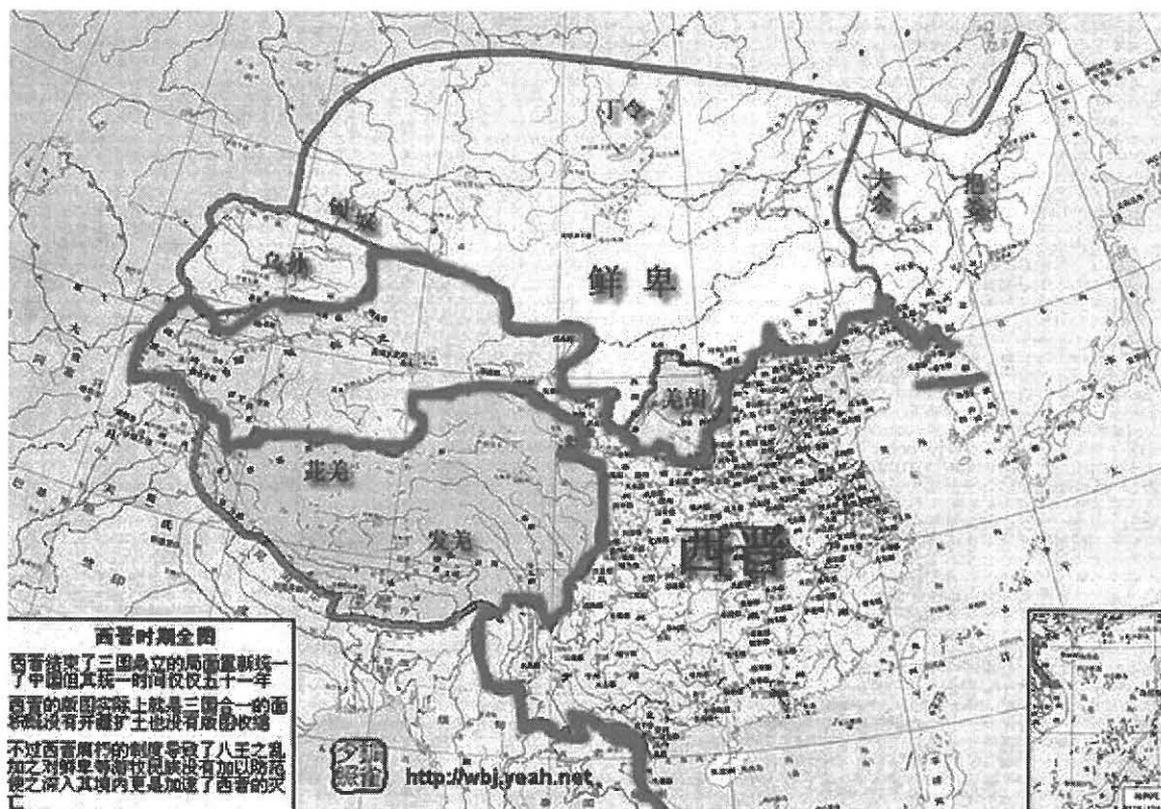
Introduction

Long-distance contacts involving China, Persia and the Roman world started in Antiquity, but the most well-known set of contacts, involving the so-called Silk Road, thrived for much of the medieval period. The Silk Road, as is well-known, started at Xian, the capital city of China's T'ang dynasty (618-907), went through Baghdad and Antioch, before reaching Egypt, Constantinople and Rome. In recent years, work by Chinese archaeologists has established that a demand and curiosity for exotic goods in China had actually been developing at least since the fourth century. This is clear from the discoveries of foreign commodities in recent Chinese archaeological excavations.

Finds of Eastern Roman and Sasanian glass not only provide good evidence for the inflow of foreign cultures and commodities into China during this period, but also

well reflect the political situation of contemporary Chinese society.

Fourth- to sixth-century China was in a fragmentary state: it was unstable politically and one of the major problems it confronted was the constant threat and invasions of the barbarians from the north. Coincidentally, this was an analogous situation to that faced by its western neighbour, the Roman Empire, confronting the invasions of Germanic tribes into southern and western Europe. In the second half of the third century, the Han Chinese had established an empire known as the Western Jin (Map 1). This polity was ended by the Xiongnu in 316 and their successors established a new authority in the south of China, known as the Eastern Jin (centred around modern-day Nanjing). This heralded the beginning of a period of antagonism between North and South which lasted from the fourth to the sixth century (Map 2). In the throes of such territorial change, Han Chinese control of the overland trade route between northern China and



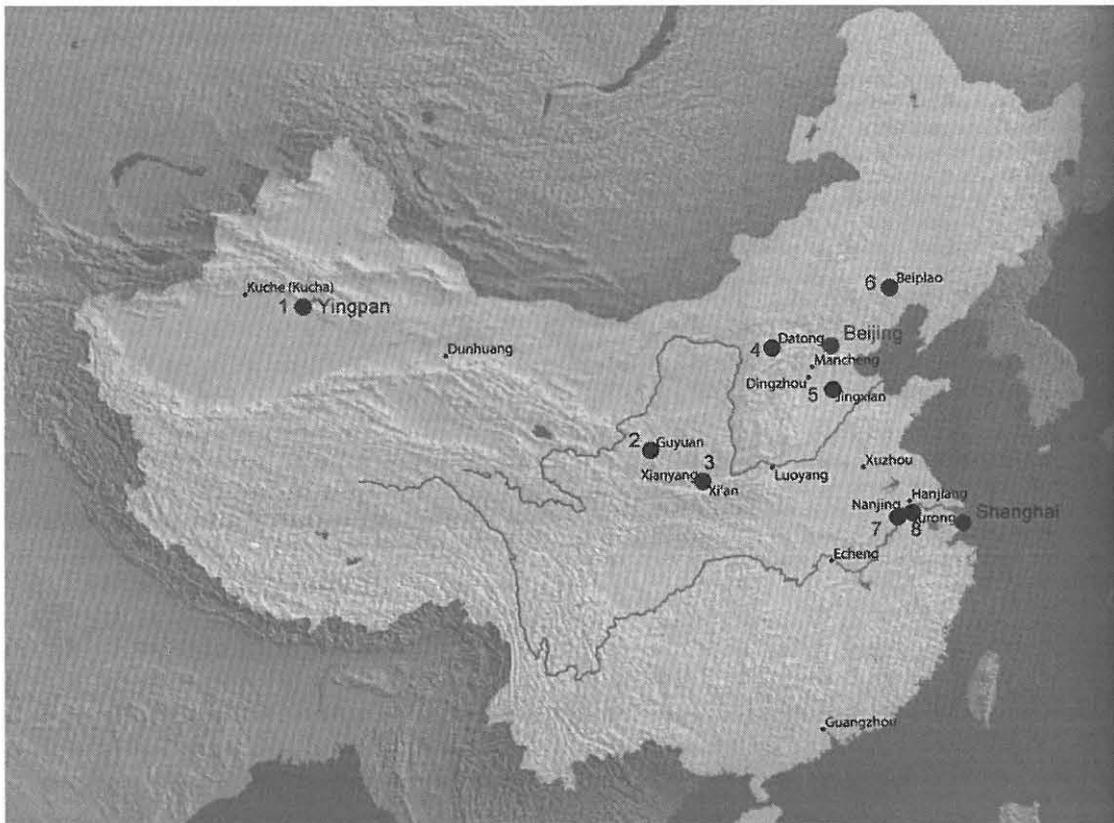
Map 1. China in the second half of the third century.

Thick grey encircled areas relate to the territory of the Western Jin Dynasty (265-316AD)

Source: <http://www.21class.com/resource/library/text.asp?id=857>



Map 2. China in the fourth century: the beginning of the antagonism between North and South
 (Thick dark encircled areas relate to the territory of the Eastern Jin Dynasty)
 Source: <http://www.21class.com/resource/library/text.asp?id=857>



Map 3. Distribution map showing sites where Eastern Roman and Sasanian glass has been found in China
 (After Watt, 2004, p.56).

the Western Region (Chinese Turkistan) was lost to the non-Han Chinese people who had close contact with the Central Asian traders. The Eastern Jin polity, which had established itself in the South in order to survive, had to maintain its foreign contacts through a maritime trade route instead. Therefore, the competition between North and South further stimulated the development of both overland and maritime trade routes in the early medieval history of China.

Interestingly, the distribution of finds of Byzantine and Sasanian glass in China also reflects such this dual phenomenon.¹ In this paper, I take the imported glassware as a point of focus and discuss the sites where this glass is found, starting with the western-most sites and proceeding in an eastwards direction (Map 3).

Yingpan, Xinjiang Autonomous Region

Glass sherds have been found at several sites in Xingjiang Autonomous Region, along the Southern and Northern Silk Routes. For example, a glass beaker 8.8 cm in height and 10.8 cm in diameter (rim) was found at Yingpan in Weili county (Fig.1).² This beaker, dating to the Eastern Jin period, has effloresced and the colour has become yellowish-white. However, as An Jiayao has observed from an analysis of the broken rim, the original quality of the glass is fine and it was transparent with a yellowish hue. The wall of the beaker was decorated with two horizontal rows of curvilinear facets, with 12 oval facets in the first row and 7 round facets in the second. This is a typical Sasanian glass design, favouring such cut facet decoration. A similar glass beaker of the same size was uncovered from a Partho-Sasanian tomb at Shimam on the south-west of the Caspian Sea coast³.



Fig. 1. Glass beaker uncovered from Yingpan, Xinjiang (After Fuxi Gan, 2005, p. 16, pl. 8.9).

Guyuan, Ningxia Autonomous Region

Moving east to the Central Plain of China along the Yellow River from Xingjiang, a transparent glass bowl with pale green hue was excavated from the tomb of Li Xian (dated 569) in Guyuan, Ningxia in 1983 (Fig. 2).⁴ Li Xian (503-569) was the Grand General and Commander of the Northern Zhou dynasty (part of the Northern Dynasties) which was established by the sinicized Xianbei people.

The height of this bowl is 8cm and the diameter at the mouth is 9.5cm. This vessel is different from the Yingpan glass beaker insofar as it is a typical Sasanian hemispherical bowl shape and was decorated with concave circular facets in relief. There are 8 circular facets in relief in the upper row and 6 in the lower row, and one in high relief served as a foot.

According to An Jiayao, this bowl was made in the mould-blown technique on the basis of the uneven thickness of the walls and the presence of tool marks.⁵



Fig. 2. Glass bowl uncovered from Guyuan, Ningxia (After Watt, 2004, p. 258) Xianyang, Shaanxi Province, cat. 158).

A transparent dish with cut-facet decoration was excavated from the tomb of Wang Shiliang and his wife, in Xianyang, near Xian, Shaanxi Province (Fig. 3).⁶ The tomb was dated to 583. Wang Shiliang was Duke of Guang-chang and Grand General of the Northern Zhou Dynasty.

The height of this dish is 3cm, and the diameter of the rim is 10.8cm. This dish has a thick wall and was decorated with 2 rows of circular facets. Although the dish has a yellowish tinge, and is partially covered with a layer of efflorescence, it still retains a high quality of transparency. An Jiayao regards this as a Roman or Early Byzantine glass because a dish with similar shape and decoration was uncovered in Iraq and was believed to

¹ In this paper I use the term 'Byzantine' to describe the Eastern Roman world from the reign of Constantine I onwards.

² Jiayao An, 'Wei, Jin, Nanbeichao shiqi de boli jishu' (Glass Technology of Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties), in *Zhongguo gudai boli jishu de fazhan* (Development of Chinese Ancient Glass, ed. Fuxi Gan, ch. 8 (Shanghai, Shanghai kexue chubanshe, 2005).

³ Shinji Fukai, *Persian Glass* (New York and Tokyo, Weatherhill / Tankosha, 1977), p.29.

⁴ James C. Y. Watt. (ed.), *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 AD* (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), p.258.

⁵ Watt, p.258, cat. 158.

⁶ Watt, pp.258-259, cat. 159.

have been inherited by the Sasanians from the Byzantine Empire⁷. However, Roman and Byzantine glass tends to have thinner walls, whereas this dish has thicker walls, and so some doubt has been cast on this interpretation.



Fig. 3. Glass dish uncovered from Xianyang, Shaanxi (After Watt, 2004, p. 258, cat. 159)

Datong, Shanxi Province

Another transparent glass bowl with cut facet decoration was excavated from a tomb in the suburb of Datong, Shanxi Province (Fig.4).⁸ The dating is no later than mid-fifth century. The diameter of the rim is 10.3cm. Different from the previous Sasanian cut-facet glass vessels, this bowl was decorated with 4 interlaced rows of small oval facets and a row of 6 circular facets as well as one circular facet at the bottom. This colourless glass has good quality of transparency. Its thick wall clearly shows its Sasanian characteristic when being compared to the thin Roman glass bowl with similar decoration uncovered from a late third-century grave at Leuna in Saxony.⁹



Fig. 4. Glass bowl uncovered from Datong, Shanxi (After Watt, 2004, p. 156, cat. 65).

Jingxian, Hebei Province

A light green transparent glass bowl decorated with wave pattern but covered with a layer of efflorescence on the surface of both inside and outside was excavated from the tomb of Madame Zu, at the Feng family cemetery in

Jingxian, Hebei Province (Fig. 6).¹⁰ The Feng family served in the Northern Wei court and the tomb was dated to the fifth to sixth centuries.

Quite different from the previous thick Sasanian glass vessels, the wall of this bowl is only 0.2cm and the diameter of the rim is 10.3cm. The body of the bowl was decorated with applied thick trails forming a wave or net pattern, and at the bottom, the bowl was attached with a short ring foot and left with a pontil mark. According to An Jiayao and Yoshimizu, some glass vessels with applied wave pattern were also found in Southern Russia and northern coast of Black Sea region.¹¹ Therefore, this is likely to be a Byzantine glass bowl.



Fig. 6. Glass bowl uncovered from Jingxian, Hebei (After Watt, 2004, p. 157, cat. 66).

Beipiao, Liaoning Province

Then in the northeast of China, a special zoomorphic glass sprinkler was uncovered from the tomb of Feng Sufu in Beipiao, Liaoning Province, dating to 415 (Fig. 7).¹² Feng Sufu was the younger brother of the ruler of the Northern Yan of the Sixteen Kingdoms period (309-439).



Fig. 7. Glass sprinkler uncovered from Beipiao, Liaoning (After Watt, 2004, p. 59, fig. 48).

⁷ Watt, pp.258-259, cat. 159.

⁸ Watt, p.156, cat. 65.

⁹ Hugh Tait (ed.), *Five Thousand Years of Glass* (London, British Museum Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Watt, pp.156-157, cat. 66.

¹¹ Watt, pp.156-157, cat. 66. Also, see Tsunco Yoshimizu, *Toyo no garasu: Chugoku, Chosen, Nihon (Oriental glass: China, Korea, Japan)* (Tokyo, Sansaisha, 1977).

¹² Jiayao An, 'Glass Vessels and Ornaments of the Wei, Jin and Northern and Southern Dynasties Periods' in *Chinese Glass*, ed. Cicilia Braghin (Firenze, Leo S. Olschki, 2002), pp.49-50.

This sprinkler was apparently a Roman glass produced by free-blowing technique. It has been generally described as a duck-shape water dropper with trailed threads of glass around the neck and upper body, which were taken as wings of the duck.¹³ However, it does not seem to be convincing to describe it as a duck form since there are no clear indications of a duck head, beakers and wings. Instead, it is more likely to be a slug because on one hand, in Greek and Roman art tradition, the representation of images and objects were usually concrete and explicit. In other words, it is unlikely to represent a duck. On the other hand, as aquatic themes play an important role in Roman art, it is not unusual to see Roman glass objects made in the forms of fish, molluscs and crustaceans, and the like. A beautiful Roman glass sprinkler blown in the shape of a snail, dating to the fourth century, provides a good reference (Fig. 8). This sprinkler is now in the collections of Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery.¹⁴

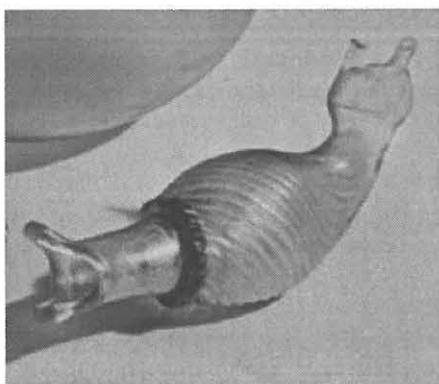


Fig. 8. Snail sprinkler (After Bristol Museum, cat. 174).

Xiangshan, Nanjing, Jiangsu Province

Finally let us look at the find-spots in Southern China. A few imported glass vessels dating to the Eastern Jin period have been uncovered in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province. One is a Roman beaker excavated from Tomb 7 at Xiangshan, Nanjing, dating to 322 (Fig. 9).¹⁵ The tomb belongs to the cemetery of an influential noble family, Langyewang, of the Eastern Jin.

Unlike the previous glass vessels, this beaker was not that well preserved. Not only it is covered with a layer of efflorescence but also has cracks and damage all over the vessel. This beaker, originally transparent, was decorated with horizontal lines, seven vertical oval facets, and a round circular facet at the bottom. Its height is 10.4 cm and the diameter of the rim is 10.8cm.



Fig. 9. Glass beaker uncovered from Xiangshan, Nanjing, Jiangsu (After Watt, 2004, p. 210, cat. 116).

Jurong, Jiangsu Province

An exquisite colourless glass bowl was excavated from Chuncheng in Jurong county, Jiangsu province, dated to 439 (Fig. 10).¹⁶ The height of this bowl is 6.3cm and the diameter of the mouth is 8.5cm. The body is decorated with six rows of hexagonal facets just like a honeycomb, one of the well-known Sasanian glass styles. When taking a closer look, it is amazing to see a small honeycomb gleaming inside each hexagonal facet, which makes the play of light more appealing. At the bottom, the bowl is decorated with more rows of facets. Since this bowl contains few air bubbles, it has high quality of transparency and crystal-like colourless-ness. Based on the thin wall and regular shape, the bowl was likely to be made in mould-blown technique, then ground and polished.



Fig. 10. Glass bowl uncovered from Jurong, Jiangsu (After Watt, 2004, p. 211, cat. 117).

According to Fukai, both mould-blowing and free-blowing techniques were used in Persia during the Partho-Sasanian period, both thick-walled and thin-walled vessels were produced.¹⁷ With the help of mould, the execution of complex forms can be facilitated. Therefore, this is again an excellent piece of Sasanian glass.

¹³ An, pp.49-50. Ellen J. Laing. 'A Report on Western Asian Glassware in the Far East', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 5 (1995): 109-110.

¹⁴ Nicholas Thomas, *Ancient Glass - The Bomford Collection of Pre-Roman & Roman Glass on loan to the City of Bristol Museum & Art Gallery* (Bristol, City of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, 1976).

¹⁵ Watt, pp.210-211, cat. 116.

¹⁶ Watt, p.211, cat. 117.

¹⁷ Fukai, p.31.

Concluding remarks

From the above finds, it is clear to see that good quality, transparent, and decorated glassware was imported into China during the fourth to sixth centuries from both the Persian and Eastern Roman empires. However, whereas in the West, glass was mass produced and trade in glass widespread, especially after the invention and spread of the blowing technique around the Mediterranean region during the first centuries BC and AD, glassware was, in contrast, very rare in China. Thus, the owners of this high-quality imported glassware were mainly aristocrats. The distribution of the find-spots clearly demonstrates direct contacts between Chinese Turkistan and the Central Plain area, which are likely to have been mediated along the middle and lower Yellow River which stood against the power in Nanjing in the Lower Yenzi River.

In addition, analysis of this assemblage reveals that Chinese aristocrats had a taste and a preference for crystal-like, colourless glass, particularly that where the cut facets were arranged in a geometric pattern and

further enhanced the light effect. As these vessels were executed so finely, it seems that the Chinese believed them to be made of real crystal and called them 'shui jing wan', which means 'crystal bowl'. Ge Hong (283-343), a well-known contemporary Daoist philosopher with an expertise in alchemy left an important information in his work 'Baopuzi' that 'the crystal bowls made in foreign countries, are in fact prepared by compounding five sorts of (mineral) ashes. Today this method is being commonly practiced in Jiao and Guang (that is, Annam and Guangdong). Now if one tells this to ordinary people, they will certainly not believe it, saying that crystal is a natural product belonging to the class of rock crystal'.¹⁸

In conclusion, the impact of luxurious Early Byzantine and Sasanian glassware imports in China encouraged the Chinese craftsmen in today's Vietnam and Guangdong region to imitate it. This suggests close contact between Nanjing and the seaports in Indo-China, which served as gates of inflow of foreign cultures, commodities and even possibly technology. The East-West trade routes, both overland and maritime, were apparently in rapid development during this period.

¹⁸ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China, vol.15, Alchemy and Chemistry* (Taipei, Taiwan Commercial Press, 1985), p.108.