

TIBETAN SANSKRIT LANCA CHARACTERS – CHINESE PORCELAIN

Sanskrit, a liturgical language used in Buddhism and Hinduism, appears on a limited number of Chinese porcelains produced over four centuries during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Sanskrit *Lanca* script is used in Tibet and Nepal for Buddhist prayers and religious texts, and most of the character groups found on ceramics represent mantras or invocations taken from one of the sutra texts. This type of mantra or prayer-poem was chanted repeatedly as the sound vibration was believed to have calming and transformational powers. Single *Lanca* characters also appear on porcelains and typically represent one of the Buddhas or bodhisattvas.

Porcelains featuring the stylized writing system of Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* script were intended either for religious rituals at the Ming and Qing courts or as a gift to a Tibetan Lama, Mongolian emir, or other personage of high status. Both the shape (predominately stem cup or stem bowl, butter-lamp form cups, small wine or lustral cup, dish, monk's cap ewer) and any accompanying Buddhist decorative motifs (including the eight Buddhist auspicious objects – wheel of the law, conch shell, parasol/umbrella, canopy/victory banner, lotus, jar, fish and endless knot; as well as *vajra* motifs - thunderbolt like object and emblem of the indestructible nature and divine force of Buddha's doctrine) were indicative of special use in religious ritual or as a gift for a Tibetan or Mongolian aristocrat. It has also been suggested that when a Chinese prince or princess married a person of Tibetan nobility, these pieces were used at the wedding ceremony.

Yuan dynasty (1271 to 1368) rulers maintained a close relationship with Tibet mainly for military and political reasons. The early Ming emperors, especially Yongle and Xuande, continued the close relationship, and the practice of using Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* script as a decoration on porcelains started in the Yongle period. Emperor Yongle (1402 to 1424) and subsequent emperors up until the emperor Hongzhi (1488 to 1505) were Buddhist and symbols of Buddhism, including Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* script, were popular during their reigns. Use of the script became widely popular during

the reign of the Chenghua emperor (1465 to 1487) as evidenced by the considerable quantities of imperial porcelain with Buddhist mantras and Tibetan script produced during his reign.

The Jiajing emperor (1522 to 1566), who was a devout follower of Taoism and attempted to suppress Buddhism, ceased relations with Tibet, but they were restored in the early Qing dynasty. The Kangxi emperor (1662 to 1722) was a devout follower of Tibetan Buddhism and the succeeding emperors, Yongzheng and Qianlong, continued this tradition. Tibet was gradually conquered by the military power of the Qing government, but Qing emperors remained upholders of Tibetan Buddhism. Documented examples of the continued later use of Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* script include plates with four tiers of stylized Sanskrit *om* (sacred symbol) characters on the cavetto, which were recovered from the Diana Cargo shipwreck in Malaysia dated to 1817 of Jiaqing period (1796 to 1820); and plates decorated in the central medallion with a large Sanskrit character for *om* (sacred syllable), along with three tiers of a stylized version of the same character decorating the cavetto, which were recovered from the Desaru shipwreck, also found in Malaysia and dated to 1830 of Daoguang period (1821 to 1850).

Representative examples of porcelains with Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* script, dated mid 15th century to 1830, and from the Collection of this writer are the following (11) with the Ceramics Catalogue Number indicated:

M-177 - *lianci* (lotus pod) shaped blue and white bowl, the sides decorated with serrated edge upright plantain leaves and a Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* character inscribed between two of the leaves (a feature believed to be unique in this series of bowls). D: 14.1 cm. Ming: 16th century. Acquired in Taipei (May 1993).

M-232 - hole-bottom saucer dish, the center decorated with four large Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* characters encircled by a double ring of 12 and 18 repetitive *Lanca* characters of simplified version for *om* (sacred syllable). The underside is decorated with another double ring of the same *Lanca* characters as the interior, but consisting of an equal number of characters (29) in each ring. D: 9.6 cm. Ming: mid to late 15th century. Acquired in Singapore (November 1993).

M-242 - blue and white *lianci* (lotus pod) shaped bowl, the central medallion decorated with six radiating lotus panels enclosing distinct Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* characters, and the cavetto also decorated with the same six *Lanca* characters resting atop lotus blossoms. D: 14.6 cm. Ming: late 15th century - Hongzhi period (1488 to 1505). From the Lena Shoal (Busuanga) shipwreck in north Palawan, Philippines, and acquired in Manila (April 1997).

M-245 - hole-bottom saucer dish, the center with two Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* characters encircled by ten repetitive smaller *Lanca* characters of simplified version for *om* (sacred syllable). Decorated on the underside with a double ring of the same *Lanca om* characters - 26 characters in the upper band and 23 characters in the lower band. D: 10.1 cm. Ming: early 16th century. From the Philippines excavations, and acquired in Manila (April 1997).

M-373 - small bowl decorated on the sides in underglaze blue with three tiers of repetitive Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* characters of simplified version for *om* (sacred syllable). D: 9.5 cm. Ming: late 15th to early 16th century. From the Jolo (Gujangan) shipwreck, Jolo, Sulu marine excavations, Philippines; and acquired in Manila (November 2008).

M-414 - blue and white bowl, central medallion is decorated with a Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* character surrounded by a double line border. D: 9.3 cm. Ming: second half of 15th century - Tianshun period (1457 to 1464) to Chenghua period (1465 to 1487). From the Tet

shipwreck - discovered in Vietnam somewhere between Phu Quoc Island and mainland Cambodia just before Tet in 2009 (lunar New Year - late January 2009), and acquired in Saigon (June 2010).

M-418 - blue and white bowl, central medallion is decorated with a Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* character surrounded by a double line border. D: 9.2 cm. Ming: second half of 15th century - Tianshun period (1457 to 1464) to Chenghua period (1465 to 1487). From the Tet shipwreck - discovered in Vietnam somewhere between Phu Quoc Island and mainland Cambodia just before Tet in 2009 (lunar New Year - late January 2009), and acquired in Saigon (November 2010).

C-042 - blue and white plate (forms a pair with C-145) decorated in the central medallion with the Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* character for *om* (sacred syllable) encircled by a double line border. Three tiers of a stylized version of the same *Lanca* character decorate the cavetto. D: 18.8 cm. Qing: Daoguang period (1821 to 1850) - circa 1830. From the Desaru shipwreck in Malaysia, and acquired directly from the shipwreck excavator Sten Sjostrand of Nanhai Marine Archaeology, Malaysia (December 2007).

C-088 - blue and white plate (forms a pair with C-092) decorated on the cavetto with four tiers of stylized Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca om* (sacred symbol) characters. D: 27.5 cm. Qing: 1817 of Jiaqing period (1796 to 1820). From the Diana Cargo shipwreck in Malaysia, and acquired from a dealer in London (November 2008).

C-092 - blue and white plate (forms a pair with C-088) decorated on the cavetto with four tiers of stylized Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca om* (sacred symbol) characters. D: 27.6 cm. Qing: 1817 of Jiaqing period (1796 to 1820). From the Diana Cargo shipwreck in Malaysia, and acquired from a dealer in London (January 2009).

C-145 - blue and white plate (forms a pair with C-042) decorated in the central medallion with the Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* character for

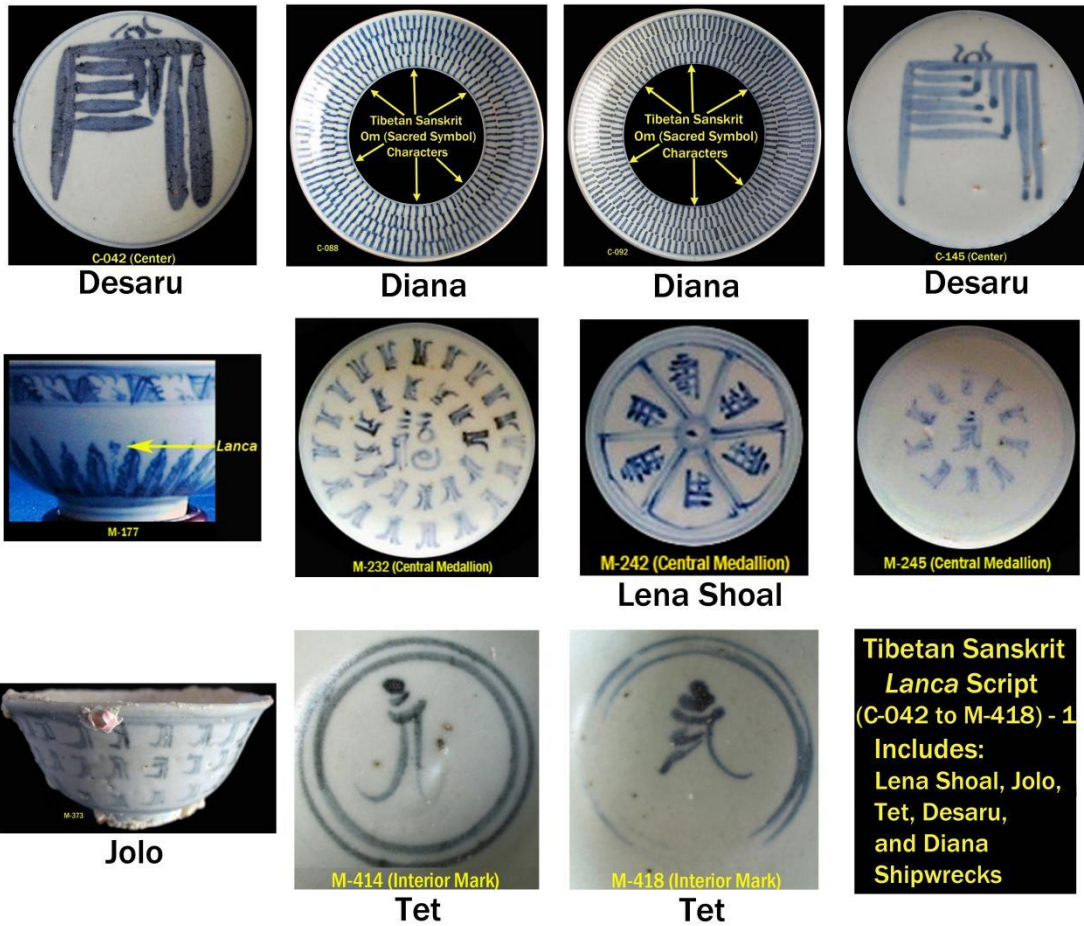
om (sacred syllable) encircled by a double line border. Three tiers of a stylized version of the same *Lanca* character decorate the cavetto. D: 18.9 cm. Qing: Daoguang period (1821 to 1850) - circa 1830. From the Desaru shipwreck in Malaysia, and acquired from a dealer in America (January 2011).

Images of the Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* script referenced for the above eleven porcelains are included in the photo which follows below captioned “Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* Script (C-042 to M-418) – 1,” and a full view of the porcelains is included in photo No. 2.

In addition to the five wrecks indicated above (Lena Shoal, Jolo, Tet, Desaru and Diana) other shipwrecks from which wares with Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* script have been recovered include the following (date and location of sinking, and type of wares are indicated):

Pandanan Wreck (mid 15th century, Philippines) – bowls,
Santa Cruz Shipwreck (circa 1490, Philippines) – cups and bowls,
Brunei Shipwreck (late 15th century, Brunei) – cups, bowls, dishes;
Ko Samui Shipwreck (1506 to 1521, Gulf of Thailand) – bowls,
Witte Leeuw (1613, off St. Helena Island) – dishes and bowls,
Wanli Wreck (circa 1625, Malaysia) – bowls,
Tek Sing Shipwreck (1822, Indonesia) – small cups,
Reef Wreck (early 19th century, unknown location) – cups.

A representative sampling of relevant recoveries from these eight shipwrecks is included in the photo which follows further below captioned “Shipwrecks - Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* Script.” Chinese porcelains with Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* script were widely distributed and found throughout Southeast Asia as is clearly illustrated in these shipwreck findings in the Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.



The three tiers of repetitive Tibetan Sanskrit *Lanca* characters of simplified version for *om* (sacred syllable) in the small bowl above (left) can be read like a prayer wheel; as the bowl is rotated, the prayer is released.





NOTES:

- 1) Higher resolution photos for the above images, as well as additional photos of the ceramics with *Lanca* script, are included in the accompanying Photos Folder.**
- 2) Detailed Descriptions of each individual porcelain with *Lanca* script briefly described above are included in the **Ceramics Catalogue** in the corresponding Ming or Qing ceramic category. Details include the Catalogue Number, description, size, dating, provenance (origin, place and date of acquisition, cost), and any references to comparable examples.**
- 3) Similarly, additional Photos of each porcelain (including the base) are included in the corresponding **Ceramics Catalogue - Photos Folder**.**

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