

Old French China

by Silver Donald Cameron

ISLE MADAME, NS –

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. For sea-girt Nova Scotians, the global economy is nothing new. It's faster and surer now, and the empire which currently governs world trade doesn't like to be called an empire.

In Louisbourg, NS, it's exactly *la même chose*. In the 1740s, the gracious dining tables of sophisticated French officials and merchants at the Fortress of Louisbourg were set with porcelain dinnerware from Jingdezhen, China. Today you can buy it again -- not reproductions, but the exact same china, made in the same place by the same people.

Situated on a well-protected, almost ice-free harbour on the Atlantic coast of Cape Breton, Louisbourg became the capital of France's Atlantic territories after the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. Thirty years later it was a prosperous and bustling walled city, the third-busiest port in North America. It was captured by the British for the second and final time in 1758, and demolished. The federal government began to rebuild it in the 1960s as a make-work project for redundant coal miners, and about a quarter of the original town has now been reconstructed.

Louisbourg is unique in many respects. It is an historic site of genuine importance; its fall was a crucial event in the clash of two mighty empires, and its capture in 1745 was the first joint initiative by the 13 colonies which became the United States. It is also among the rare historic sites which has no later city built on top of it. The buildings in the Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Park are replicas -- but the foundations and the paving stones were put there by subjects of the Bourbon kings of France.

The reconstruction required solid historical information, so Louisbourg has become an important centre for historical and archaeological research. We know that the fortress town maintained a worldwide trade within the French imperial system, involving the Far East, the Caribbean and metropolitan France, and an extensive covert trade with New England. In addition to the written records, we have many of the physical objects, including 69,000 ceramic fragments, many of them shards of porcelain imported from China.

In 1995, the senior archaeologist at the Fortress, Andrée Crepeau, had a call from Walter Ostrom, an internationally-acclaimed ceramicist at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Could the two institutions co-operate on some ceramics workshops, and also mount an exhibition of Louisbourg ceramics at the NSCAD gallery in Halifax? Ms. Crepeau assembled a show of porcelain to show aspects of the town's 18th-century social life.

"At the opening," she recalls, "a man came up to me, and said, 'These are from Jingdezhen. I'm from Jingdezhen, and I want to call you about marketing some of this porcelain.'" His name was Jiangshen Li (he is known in the West as Jackson Li) and he was a visiting professor on an exchange with Walter Ostrom, who was then in China himself.

"Jingdezhen is the spiritual home of potters, worldwide," says Professor Ostrom. The Chinese have been making porcelain since 800 AD, and they were exporting it all over the world by the 15th century. People were wild about it in Europe. It was hard, tough and beautiful, but you could see through it. Who could imagine that? Porcelain sort of transcends its earthy origins. They couldn't believe it was made of clay.

"Europeans didn't know how to make porcelain until the 1700s. It all came from China, and the best of Chinese porcelain was from Jingdezhen. All roads lead back to this city. And there's a group in Jingdezhen still making it as they did 500 or 1000 years ago."

Jackson Li visited Louisbourg, where he was astonished at the ceramics collection. Ms. Crepeau gave him photographs and drawings as well as some small shards, and Mr. Li returned that fall with two hand-

painted prototypes. (The quality of the painting, says Ms. Crepeau, was Abreathtaking.≡) Parks Canada funded some additional research, and a non-profit support group, the Fortress of Louisbourg Volunteers, agreed to distribute the porcelain commercially. The first shipment of 3500 pieces arrived last April.

Louisbourg/Jingdezhen porcelain will be available exclusively through the Volunteers, who will supply high-end retail outlets -- ideally including the gift shops of major museums and galleries across North America. (The porcelain will be on view soon at <http://compu-clone.ns.ca/~fortress/>) Current plans include a travelling exhibition to promote it in Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, Washington, Boston, New York, Shanghai and Jingdezhen.

Trading with China, the great new frontier of global commerce. *Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose.*

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