

Common Artifacts in Southeast Asia:

Chinese Export Porcelain

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When one thinks of the word “history”, something extraordinary and far from his daily life will probably be the first thing to come to mind; the words such as emperors and empresses, ruling elites, big ideas and religious beliefs will definitely be included in the list. However, the very root of history essentially stemmed from ordinary things that are also the essentials in our lives such as rice, sugar, salt, tea and coffee. These are not only the starting point of history but also inevitably products that are shaped by social systems, technologies and political system.

Little do we know that history may just simply begin with 3 meals a day which people from all walks of life are struggling to sustain every single day from cradle to grave. When food security was established, people have been seeking different things to eat. Thus, civilizations may be partly reflected through the complexity of what people consume. This complexity and advancement began when people traded what they did not have with others. Clearly, for the ruling elites, immense resources and effort were put to obtain the “exotic” ingredients that separate them from the rest. However, when the elites did, the commoners would imitate.

From this reason, the merchants took this opportunity for trading. The effort to differentiate oneself from the crowd by seeking the special ingredients in a dish was intensified to the point that it created a total discrepancy and shook the world with land and maritime trades, even wars and tragedies which finally resulted in history. This was one of the reasons why China which regarded itself as the center of the world [1] would trade with smaller kingdoms such as Siam for seemingly simple ingredients such as rice and spices. Unfortunately, the attempt to differentiate oneself by special culinary ingredients has not always been a peaceful approach. Many ended up in hundreds of years of power struggle and violence abuse. For example, just simple spices such as pepper and nutmeg were ones of the causes that made some islands in Indonesia fell under the colonization by the Dutch [2-3]. The need for th basic ingredients such as sugar also played a surprisingly important role that gave rise to ruthless slave trade from Africa to South America [4]. China also lost the sovereignty of Hong Kong to The British Empire for 99 years due to the trade deficit brought about by the English passion for tea [5-6].



Figure 1. (A) The head of figurine decorated with pieces of porcelain which were from under the river in Ayutthaya, a former Capital of Thailand. Pieces at the eyes are similar in pattern and age to the Ming bowl that was discovered in a shipwreck under South China Sea near Vietnamese coast(B). (C) The top view of the same figurine as (A) shows that decorations that are used on its head are in the similar pattern from the Ming blue and white bowl found in the river in Indonesia (D).

Proper table wares are indispensable for proper dining and nothing is more perfect than porcelain. It is durable, light in weight, and pleasant to see. Moreover, unlike metal and wooden wares, porcelain leaves no residual odour from the previous meal. Plus, it does not distort the taste, color and odour. While many countries were able to produce the earthen wares, only China could produce porcelain wares early in the history. There were demands in almost every part of the world, many were done in accordance with their own cultural preferences such as the blue and white vase with Arabic letters showing Islamic influence and the specific grapes designed on blue and white wares that were popular among the Ottoman during Ming Dynasty [7]. Interestingly, unlike that of other continents, the porcelain that was exported to South East Asian countries still bears the same style and decorative patterns that were genuinely Chinese used by Chinese people in China itself [8]. The most notable example of this was the discovery of more than 350,000 porcelain pieces in the wrecked Chinese Junk Tek Sing [8].

Possessing fragility, the porcelain made before 18th century that were used for culinary purpose are hardly seen in the modern days. However, there are a few cases where unused Ming's and Qing's porcelain of 18th century was discovered, such as in the shipwrecks in the South China Sea, the rivers located near the important trading ports, underground burials or as decorative items in the temples in South East Asia.

Porcelain is also perfect for surface decoration as they can stand the test of time better comparing to woods and metals. One may be able to estimate the age of certain religious sites by examining the porcelain on building decoration. For ordinary people, the beautiful pieces of porcelain are probably valuable sources of aesthetic appeal. For an archaeologist, a small piece of porcelain may provide them a crucial historical clue of the particular site. When we take a look at many small pieces of Chinese export porcelain on stupas in Thailand, ones that were in shipwrecks in South Chinese Sea near Vietnam, or the ones found in the rivers in the Philippines and Indonesia; their similarity in shapes, patterns and ages are served as important tools that unfold historical moments as well as socio-economic activities that countries in SEA shared.



Figure 2. (A) A set of unused lotus petal pattern porcelain plates found in Ayutthaya in good conditions indicated by more brilliant color and glossy enamel. (B) The lotus petal pattern porcelain plate from a private collection in Philippines, discovered from a shipwreck, the colors are dull and enamel is no more glossy due to corrosion by sea water. This particular pattern is typical of Chinese export porcelain during early Qing dynasty and this kind of plate could be found in Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, thus, suggesting the trading relationships as well as economic demands between Southeast Asian countries and the Qing court.



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