

Trading Ceramics: The Findings from the Shipwrecks along the Coast of Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

The overland ‘Silk Road’ has served as the main conduit for the exchange of goods and culture between China, Southeast Asia, and the West since the Han Dynasty. Its primary role has been diminished due to the establishment of sea routes by the Tang Dynasty, thus Guangzhou (China) became one of the main gateways for maritime trade with Southeast Asia and the West.

Southeast Asia is strategically situated at the passage of the maritime trade route, connecting the East and the West. It has thus been known to be an area rich in precious metals, and luxury products such as pearls, rhino horn, tortoiseshells and spices since ancient times. In addition, it is also used as an entrepôt complex on the maritime route between the East and the West.

With a particularly favourable geographical situation, Vietnam's waters play a particularly important role in the ‘Maritime Silk Road’.

Over the past three decades, dozens of ancient shipwrecks have been discovered related to the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ in Vietnam's territorial waters. Those shipwrecks are evidence of the ceramics trade, which may have taken place for centuries along the coasts of Vietnam.

This paper deals with the ceramic collections discovered on one of the shipwrecks in Vietnam's territorial waters, being housed at the History Museum in Ho Chi Minh City. It is dated from the ninth to nineteenth centuries. It may demonstrate the process of economic and cultural exchange from the East to the West at that time.

Keywords: shipwreck, ancient ceramics, maritime silk road, Vietnam's territorial waters.

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese ceramics during the Kangxi reign of Qing Dynasty dated in 1690, from Hòn Cau Island shipwreck, Vũng Tàu-Côn Đảo province

In 1990, a wreck measured 32.71 metre length with 9 metre width was discovered at a depth of 40 metres below the sea surface, buried in sand 1 metres deep, located in the Cau Island area (Hòn Cau in Vietnamese), Côn Đảo district; coordinates at N8°38'15" latitude, E108°48'50" longitude. The excavation was conducted under the cooperation of Vietnam Salvage Joint Stock Company (henceforth Visal), with the multi-nations of underwater archaeologists and divers from Canada, the US and the UK. More than 60,000 artefacts have been recovered, most of which are Chinese ceramics, possibly destined for the European market, produced from Chinese kilns such as Jingdezhen (Jiangxi province), Shantou and Dehua (Fujian province). Along with the copper coins, two Chinese inksticks “墨” (Mò) marked with the characters “庚午” (GengWu) were found, suggesting that the ship was built in the Kangxi reign of the Qing dynasty around 1690.

Besides the Chinese style items, European style objects were also found on the wreck, possibly porcelain ordered from Chinese kilns. Their shape is a testament to their technical and artistic flair making them admired all over the world.

The Ho Chi Minh City Museum of History has received from the Ministry of Culture and Sports 229 artefacts including the vases, jars, pen tubes, cups, plates, and the small statues.



Figure 1 Chinese ceramics dated in Kangxi reign around the seventeenth century from Hòn Cau Island shipwreck preserved in the Ho Chi Minh City Museum of History. Left - Vase BTLS 10045, blue and white, MD: 12.6 cm, H: 21.5cm. Right - Dish BTLS 10.136, blue and white, MD: 12.9cm, H: 3.0cm.

Thai ceramics dated to the sixteenth century, from Hòn Dầm Island shipwreck, Kiên Giang province

The wreck was found at a depth of 10 metres below the sea surface, 5 kilometres far from the shore of Dầm Island (Hòn Dầm in Vietnamese), Phú Quốc district, Kiên Giang province; coordinates at N9°59'00" latitude and E104°02'00" longitude. The size of the shipwreck is nearly 30 metre length and 7 metre width, divided into several bulkheads with a width of 1.8 metres each. More than 16,000 ceramics have been found, mostly the celadon or green glazed, brown glazed, and underglaze black wares produced from Sawankhalok (or Si Satchanalai) and Sukhothai (Sukhothai province, Thailand) kilns dated to the sixteenth century.

Thai style celadon or green glaze ceramics, also called “*Đông Thanh*” glaze in Vietnamese; and other colours such as light grey, blackish brown or yellow, white and grey, included unglazed earthenware utensils. The shape is mainly small jars, with or without handles, small bowls, plates, and other household

items. Some reflections of the Vietnamese ceramic forms and decorative elements on blue-and-white wares can be seen in the Thai underglaze black ceramics, specifically the boxes, kendi (known as a container of Indian derivation using contain liquid with the mouth on the top for filling, neck for handle, and the spout for pouring), and the covered jars painted black flowers on white slip background. Some other Thai large celadon bowls also suggest that they had influenced from the Southern Song ceramic (南宋 1127–1279) in the South China.

Glazed ceramic figurines are prominent among the other types of ceramics found on this shipwreck. They include the figurines of a mother holding a baby, an elephant with a mahout and warriors protecting the elephant feet, and other forms of animal, such as a hare with their own details being very vividly embossed.

The Ho Chi Minh City Museum of History owns 218 artefacts, of which nine have been transferred. Types of artefacts kept by the museum include bowls, plates, covered boxes, jars, pots, elephant figurines, kendi.



Figure 2 Sawankhalok ceramic dated in the sixteenth century from the Hòn Dầm Island shipwreck preserved in the Ho Chi Minh City Museum of History. Elephant BTLS 30.394, Celadon, MD: 18.5 x 10.7 cm, H: 19.4cm.

Chu Đậu ceramics from a Cham Island shipwreck, Hội An, Quảng Nam province, fifteenth century

The shipwreck was found at a depth of 70 metres below the sea surface, close to the Cham Island area on coordinates at N16°16'08" latitude and E108° 27' 00" longitude. The excavation was conducted under the cooperation of the archaeologists from the Vietnam History Museum in Hanoi, Visal, and Saga Horizon Company (Malaysia) The project was carried out in three years, from 1997-2000 with joint-operations between the archaeologists from the UK, Malaysia, and Slovakia.

240,000 ceramic items were recovered from a wreck measuring 29.4 metre length with 7.2 metre width, divided into 19 bulkheads. The ceramic origins are likely Dai Viet, Champa, Thailand, and Chinese.

Ceramics made from kilns in Chu Đậu (Hải Dương province) and Thăng Long (Hanoi) are outstanding in quantity, style, and type. These kilns are located in the north of Vietnam active in ceramic production since the late fifteenth century onwards.

Ceramics found in the Cham Island shipwreck are mainly the housewares, containers, and utensils for eating and drinking. Some designs are served as religious utensils such as incense burner, kendi.

These ceramics represent the development of export ceramics with varieties of decorative techniques creating a distinct tradition of Vietnamese ceramics.

The Ho Chi Minh City Museum of History currently keeps 4,675 artefacts. 4,366 objects were requested by the Ministry of Culture and Information and the rest were transferred to the Police Department.



Figure 3 Chu Dau ceramics dated in the fifteenth century from the Cham Island shipwreck preserved in the Ho Chi Minh City Museum of History. Kendi BTLS 16.956, cobalt blue pattern, DM: 18.6 cm, H: 15.1 cm. Covered boxes Collection of History Museum.

Chinese ceramics during the Yongzheng reign of Qing dynasty dated to eighteenth century from the Cà Mau shipwreck, Cà Mau province

An ancient shipwreck was found in the waters of Cà Mau province, coordinates at N7°41'12" latitude and E105° 29' 18" longitude. The excavation on this shipwreck was cooperated between the National History Museum in Hanoi, the Cà Mau Provincial Museum and the Visal. The excavation was conducted for two phases, carried out from August 1998 to January 1999 and from April to October 1999. Although the wreck is not intact at a depth of 35 metres below the sea surface, the remains suggest the wreck was 24 metre length and eight metre width.

Nearly 50,000 recovered items are the ceramics including blue-and-white and overglaze enamel by multi-coloured painting possibly from Chinese kilns such as the Jingdezhen (Jiangxi) and some kilns in Guangzhou (Guangdong). Notably, there are some European-style porcelains such as milk bottles, wine jugs with handles, plates decorated with flowers and a Dutch landscape. Inscriptions on some objects suggest that they were probably made under the Yongzheng reign (雍正 1723–35) of Qing Dynasty. These ceramics are thus assumed to be destined for the European market.

Excavations also found items belonging to merchants or sailors such as lamps, pots, boxes, seals, amulets. Notably, Chinese metal coins of the Qing dynasty are the diagnostic finds to confirm the dating of this shipwreck.

A total of 1,392 artefacts were transferred to the Ho Chi Minh City Museum of History: blue-and-white and overglaze enamel wares in the forms of the chalk boxes, bowls, large plates, equestrian statues, baby figurines, burnt lamps.



Figure 4 Chinese ceramics dated in Yongzheng reign around the eighteenth century from Cà Mau shipwreck preserved in the Ho Chi Minh City Museum of History. Left - Jarlet BTLS. 22.390, blue and white, DM: 8.3 cm, H: 7.4 cm. Center - Jar with cover BTLS 22.008, blue and white, DM: 12.5 cm, H: 3.8cm. Right BTLS 22.010- Dish, blue and white, DM: 17 x 10.5cm, H: 3.0cm.

Chinese ceramics dated to the seventeenth century from the Bình Thuận shipwreck, Bình Thuận province.

In 2001, a shipwreck was discovered at a depth of 40 metres below the sea surface about 65 kilometres from the coast of Bình Thuận province, at coordinates N10°33'30" latitude, E108°35'55" longitude. The remains suggest the wreck was a length of 23.4 metres and a width of 7.2 metres. The excavation was conducted under the cooperation between Visal and the Vietnam History Museum in Hanoi during 2001-2002.

The recovered ceramics were mainly household items such as cups, plates, pots and jars decorated by blue-and-white and overglaze enamelling from Chinese kilns such as Shantou (Guangdong province) and Zhangzhou (Fujian province) dated to the early seventeenth century. The “Zhangzhou ware” or also called as “Swatow ware” is heavy in weight, poor technical and poor artistic quality compared to the blue-and-white and overglaze enamelling wares of Jingdezhen kilns in Jiangxi province those probably satisfied the international markets, such as Southeast Asian and Japanese markets. The Zhangzhou wares are characterised by the sand stuck on the bottom, which was the placing technique to prevent the glaze from becoming stuck in a chamber during the firing process in the kiln.

The hypothesis is that the wreck was once property of the Chinese merchant I-Sin-Ho, who went missing at sea on his way back from Southeast Asia. It is based on a report of the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*:VOC) on 21 July 1608 referred to by Dr. Michael Flecker, an underwater archaeologist who participated in the excavation.

The total numbers of ceramics kept at the History Museum include 117 ceramics, 15 ceramics were purchased and donated, the rest are transferred by the Police Department, especially the bowls, jars, plates, and the chalk boxes.



Figure 5 Chinese ceramics dated in the Late Ming Dynasty around the seventeenth century from Bình Thuận shipwreck preserved in Ho Chi Minh City Museum of History. Left - Covered box BTLS 28.033, blue and white, DM: 10.4cm, H: 6.4cm. Centre - Dish BTLS 28.099, blue and White, DM: 26.8 cm, H: 5.2 cm. Right - Dish with overglazed enamels BTLS 23 911, DM: 25.8cm, H: 5.0 cm.

Other unknown provenances

In 2019 many fishermen have discovered and recovered a lot of white glazed, copper green glazed and splashed household ceramics from the Chinese kilns of Ding (Hebei province) and Changsha (Hunan province) even some kiln in Zhejiang province during the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD). These Tang ceramics were found in the waters of Southern Vietnam between the coast of Vung Tau and Con Dao Island. Similar ceramics found in these underwater sites were previously found on the Belitung Island shipwreck in the Java Sea. In 1998, more than 60,000 ceramics and other luxury objects of gold and silver were recovered. This evidence found from the shipwreck and underwater sites provides the early evidence of trade linked between China, Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

The Ho Chi Minh City Museum of History currently houses more than 30 ceramics, especially vases, bowls, plates, cups, and cups with white glazed, copper green and splashed decorations.



Figure 6 Chinese ceramics dated in the Tang Dynasty around the nineteenth century from waters of Southern Vietnam preserved in Ho Chi Minh City Museum of History. Left - Dish BTLS 35.450, green glazed, DM: 16.1 x 9.9cm, H: 2.1 cm. Centre - Dish BTLS 35.448, white glazed, DM: 14.0, H: 3.2 cm. Right - Bowl BTLS 35.453, DM: 11.8 cm, H: 4.2 cm.

Problems raised in the study of ceramics found on shipwrecks in the East Sea of Vietnam

The discoveries of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Thai ceramics on shipwrecks in the East Sea of Vietnam among the collection of the Ho Chi Minh City Museum of History represent the important roles along the maritime trade or called “Maritime Silk Road” originated from China and passed through the maritime route in the East Sea of Vietnam. The Chinese ceramics of Tang Dynasty found from waters of Southern Vietnam near the coasts of Vung Tau and Con Dao Island are a most recent discovery suggesting the early period of international maritime trade between the East and the West.

The ceramic collection also reflects the problems in the study of politics, economy, culture, society and trade between the East and the West for a long period of history. Economic and cultural exchange through the art and technologies of ceramic productions, art and trades suggested they were diverse between China, Vietnam, Thailand, and other Western countries in different periods of time. They also show the important role of maritime routes and ports in Vietnam along “Maritime Silk Road.”

Based on the discovery and excavation of ceramics from shipwrecks in the East Sea of Vietnam, the awareness about underwater cultural heritage may actively conduct within a legal perspective and international cooperation to ensure the protection, conservation and promotion of underwater cultural heritage is sustainable and bringing the long-termed benefits to the community in Vietnam.

CONCLUSION

This article is an introduction on the collection of ceramics found from the shipwreck context in the East Sea of Vietnam currently kept at the Ho Chi Minh City Museum of History. The maritime trade of Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai ceramics demonstrated economic and cultural exchange activities between the East and the West along the “Maritime Silk Road” especially in the Vietnamese waters from the 8th to the 18th centuries.

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