

Cinnabar Washes on the Bases of Vietnamese Ceramics¹

Nguyen Dang Khoa and Phan Quoc Quan

Vietnamese ceramic researchers have long believed that chocolate bases were unique to wares made in Vietnam in the 15th and 16th centuries (Le Dynasty)². The chocolate bases occur on white-glazed enamelled high-footed bowls decorated with an orchid motif which were produced mainly in Chu Dau (Hai Hung). The same type of bowls were discovered in Ngock Hanh, a well-known martial arts centre during the later Le-Trinh period. Ceramics with chocolate bases were also found dating from the Le-Mac period at sites such as Minh Thi (Tien Lang), An Quy (Vinh Bao-Hai Phong). Although the number found was limited, it was sufficient to compel scholars to seriously consider whether the method of painting a base with a chocolate colour may have been a technical feature of Vietnamese blue and white ceramics of the 15th and 16th centuries.

At a recent conference of French ceramic scholars, a woman, who is an expert in Thanh Hoa pottery, presented a paper that addressed the issue of whether a connection existed between wares with chocolate bases and the religious beliefs of the Vietnamese. Further evidence is needed to draw any positive conclusions on this subject. However, Vietnamese scholars, particularly one expert on Bat Trang pottery, believe that chocolate washes were applied for aesthetic, rather than religious, purposes.

A detailed survey of specimens obtained from a dated, stratigraphic context needs to be conducted to determine the technique used to produce chocolate bases and on what types and forms it was applied. Then it would be possible to identify the relationship

between these wares and their purpose, whether it was for export, religion, or function. Vietnamese scholars do, however, accept that the chocolate base may have had some significance beyond that of aesthetics because the base of a pot was never glazed. Celadon pots, for example, of the Nguyen period have unglazed bases, are often crudely finished, and are without a chocolate wash. Conversely, several pots found in the Muong graves of the 14th century had painted chocolate bases. The function of the chocolate wash is unclear, but its origins can be determined.³ First, Vietnamese scholars affirm that the chocolate wash on bases is not exclusively a feature of blue and white wares but it is also found on white-glazed enamelled wares decorated with an orchid motif. Both types of wares date to the 15th and 16th centuries. A chocolate wash was found on the base of a celadon *kendi* from Guangzhou in China and dated to the Northern Song Dynasty. The base is not entirely covered with a chocolate wash as a small unglazed circle remains in the centre, a characteristic feature of Northern Song celadons. A few high-footed, white-glazed enamelled Vietnamese bowls (Tiba wares) dating to the 15th and 16th centuries also have a chocolate wash on the base with an unglazed circle at the centre. Others are left unglazed and unwashed.

The colour of the chocolate on the Northern Song *kendi* is not as dark or as intense as that of the white-glazed bowls decorated with an orchid motif. Furthermore, the technique of applying a chocolate wash differs. While the Vietnamese pots of the 15th and 16th centuries have a spiral trace of the potter's

brush, it is not visible on the Chinese *kendi*. In Vietnam it was applied by placing the bowl on a potter's wheel and turning it clockwise or counter-clockwise against the brush. In China the bases of monochromes and celadons were glazed until the Southern Song period. In Vietnam, up to the Nguyen period, the bases of white-glazed wares and those decorated with an orchid motif were mostly unglazed. Traces of a circle painted with a brush on the unglazed base of wares found at the Ting de-Thah kilns suggest that the potter turned a vessel upside down on his wheel and, while the wheel was turning, he applied a brush to the wet clay. In contrast, monochromes and celadons from the Long Quan kilns have rough bases, some are even stained, and suggest that little care was taken in the application. Some of these forms, though, have chocolate washed bases similar to those ceramics found at the Muong graves in Hoa Binh. The chocolate on these examples is a dark, deep colour and sometimes appears to be black. The clockwise or counter-clockwise spirals are not visible like those on the chocolate bases of white-glazed pots decorated with an orchid motif and dating to the 15th and 16th centuries. The chocolate base and the technique of applying the wash in the Nguyen period are similar to those of 14th century celadons.

During the Ming period in China, a chocolate wash was rarely used whereas during the same time in Vietnam the technique of applying a chocolate wash on the base was fully developed and frequently used on white-glazed pots decorated with an orchid motif. Thus, scholars believe that the chocolate base was a particular feature of Vietnamese ceramics. Further study of this interesting subject is needed to determine the function and occurrence of this technique. ■

- 1 Cinnabar is a mineral that was used as a pigment for painting the bases of Vietnamese ceramics but as the technique is generally referred to in English as a 'chocolate base', the editor has substituted

'chocolate' for 'cinnabar' throughout the text unless it occurs in a quotation.

- 2 D'Argence argued that the chocolate base was a feature of Tran Dynasty ceramics (13th and 14th centuries). Subsequently, scholars confirmed his opinion. See D'Argence 'Chocolate Colored Bases' in BEFEO, Hanoi, 39:1939. The authors believe that during the Tran period, even though bases were washed in chocolate, they were not as popular as during the Le Dynasty. Nguyen Manh Cuong concurred with this idea through an analysis of a pottery collection in Nha Thap (Nghe An) where he found a difference in colour between the black-coloured base of the Tran and the Le periods. See Nguyen Manh Cuong, 'Chocolate bases on pots from Nha Thap (Nghe Tinh)' in *Discoveries in Archaeology in 1983*, Hanoi:182.
- 3 Nguyen Ba Van also says that chocolate washed bases appeared during the Tran period and were popular during the Le-Mac period. As for the function of the chocolate washes, he wrote that "through the analysis and study of the chocolate washes, we can see that the high-footed wares with chocolate bases were mostly used as ritual ware in Buddhist temples and village communal houses. Perhaps it was a sign to distinguish them, endow them with prestige to be used for the ruling class and for export. Or it may have been a marker used at certain kilns or ceramic villages ... or a dexterity to conceal its ground quality" in Nguyen Ba Van, 'Ceramics of the Mac Period' in *Arts Under the Mac Period*, Hanoi, 1993:99.

Nguyen Dang Khoa is a researcher at Vietnam Fine Arts Museum, and **Phan Quoc Quan** is the secretary of Vietnam National Historical Museum.