



The author (middle) examining pottery sherds at Parit Yaani, Johore.

## ***Discoveries and Research***

*on Ancient Trade Ceramics In Peninsular Malaysia*

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Plate from Longquan Kilus, Zhejiang (14th century), found at Lembah Bujang, Kedah.



Plate from Sawankhalok, Thailand (14th-15th centuries), found in Melaka.

**M**ost historians of Malaysian history believe that the history of Malaya only began with the founding of Melaka, in 1400 A.D. They argue that no concrete historical evidences dated prior to the formation of Melaka has ever been found. They seem to overlook the contribution of ceramics in dating.

A number of ceramics, dated back to the seventh century, have been found on the Peninsular Malaysian archaeological sites. Despite these finds, literary sources have only made vague references to this region. Not only that, their accuracy has also been challenged.

Ceramics is a category of artifact which is least perishable in tropical climate and corrosive soil. The typological study of ceramic finds can provide vital evidence for the dating of archaeological sites, for the study of the nature of habitation and trading patterns in the early centuries as well as for the cross cultural influences that existed between the countries involved.

This article presents evidence for early trade and cultural relations between maritime countries in East-West trade routes which includes Peninsular Malaysia. Full exploration of the potentials of typological studies on oriental ceramics discovered in Peninsular Malaysia cannot however be implemented as yet. The archaeology of Peninsular Malaysia is still not sufficiently documented for such an endeavour.

Available data from previous excavations suggest, even after very careful consideration, that Peninsular Malaysia only played an intermediary role in the *entrepôt* trade of East-West

maritime activities. It utilized available inland river routes on a limited scale.

Although not comparable to the importance of the Mekong, the Menam and other major rivers of Peninsular Southeast Asia, the Peninsular Malaysian river routes did carry most of the wares mentioned in this article. They reached this part of Southeast Asia in transit, destined towards other places and countries.

This role played by the Malaysian river routes can be seen very clearly on the evidence shown by the Pengkalan Bujang. This port, in the Sung and Yuan times, was engaged in the handling of wares from both the Middle East and the Far East. An increasing number of wares came from the Far East during the T'ang, Sung and Yuan times.

The pioneer antiquarian work in Peninsular Malaysia was carried out by Col. James Low in Province Wellesley and Kedah<sup>1</sup> during the second half of the last century. This was followed by the researches of I.H.N. Evans in 1925 (1932:79-134) and H.G.Q. Wales<sup>2</sup> in 1940. After the second world war, archaeological work and research remained dormant, except for some archaeological investigations of sites initiated by P.D.R. Williams-Hunt between 1949 and 1951.

In 1954, the excavation of Gua Cha in Ulu Kelantan, by G.De.G. Sieveking, brought this country to the limelight in the archaeological sphere. This site is considered to be the most significant and important for the interpretation of the pre-historic background of Malaysia. It is also the same to other archaeological researches and the reconstruction of the pre-history in the

region. As such it is one of the most important sites excavated so far.

Following Gua Cha, sporadic archaeological excavations and investigations were undertaken by Sullivan and student members of the Archaeological Society of the University of Malaya, and the field of interest shifted to the ancient Hindu-Buddhist remains of shrines and temples situated in the Bujang Valley in Kedah. Thereafter, A. Lamb's research in 1954 (1960) led to the reconstruction of the Shivaite tomb or temple at Chandi Bukit Batu Pahat.

In 1960, the then Museums Department of the Federation of Malaya sponsored two archaeological excavations at Melaka and Johore Lama<sup>3</sup> in the southern part of Peninsular Malaysia. Both these sites produced huge quantities of ceramics, earthenware, stoneware and porcelain fragments.

The wares found in Melaka, as one would expect, are somewhat dated earlier than those found at Johore Lama. They include many Chinese blue and white pieces of the middle 15th century, the period when the Melaka Sultanate was at the height of its power and prosperity. The wares found in Johore Lama are mainly from the 16th and 17th centuries. Among them are many pieces of Chinese export porcelain of the blue and white type. In all, Melaka and Johore Lama have yielded at least 8,000 fragments of Chinese export ceramics, along with wares from Annam and other Southeast Asian countries.

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It is interesting to note that, among the sherds discovered at Kota Tinggi, Johore, one bears the six-character mark of the Ch'eng-hua reign period (1465-1487), reports Colin Jack-Hinton.

Jack-Hinton asserts that according to John Pope (*Jack-Hinton, 1963:33 and Pope, 1956:107-108*) there are only some thirty known existing odd pieces of blue and white made in the Ch'eng-hua reign. And they are marked with **nien-hao**. Other examples of fragments bearing the Ch'eng-hua **nien-hao** have been found in Ceylon. Furthermore, Jack-Hinton states that John Pope himself has noticed two examples from Kota Batu, Brunei (Pope 1958:267-269).

The fragment from Kota Tinggi is perhaps not one of the finest examples in the period when Chinese pottery reached a level of particular perfection. But Jack-Hinton (1963:33) believes that the nature of its clay, the pale shade of underglazed blue, and the calligraphic style of the **nien-hao** all point to the fragment's authenticity.

As a result of his investigation in 1959, A. Lamb carried out another excavation in April 1961, in Pengkalan Bujang (1961:2112 & 37-17), Kedah. This excavation unearthed several thousand fragments of Chinese porcelains. They were mainly green-glazed celadons of Sung and Yuan dates. These wares were mixed with the ceramic produce of Thailand and Indo-China.

Also found were fragments of Islamic glass which were parts of small bottles. This glass, at one time, was widely exported by Egypt and Syria to Southeast Asia. Other significant finds of beads were also

encountered. A. Lamb believes that in Pengkalan Bujang there was once a very cosmopolitan trading centre.

In March and April 1962, the Department of Zoology, University of Malaya, staged a six-week expedition, headed by Load Medway,<sup>4</sup>



One of the Sawankhalok jarlets found at Kampung Seberang Tayur, Terengganu.

to Pulau Tioman. The aims of the expedition were purely zoological. But in the course of their investigation of the area's fauna they came across archaeological remains and fragments of ceramics, Chinese and non-Chinese origins. The finds include gritty micaceous and non-micaceous earthenware, gritfree earthenware, brown-buff and green-glazed stone-wares and celadons.

Due to their fragmentary nature these sherds regrettably do not yield enough information for reconstruction of the vessels. However, it appears that the majority of the sherds represent small rounded bowls. Among them, Tom Harrison

identified the Yueh type green-ware with folded rim, the white **Ch'ing pai** porcelain (*export types*) and a fine Lung-Ch'uan type celadon fragment. He was also able to identify a sherd among the finds as Sawankhalok; he dated it as late as the 15th century.

Was Kedah in the Pengkalan Bujang era only concerned with **entrepôt** trade, or was it also a centre for the interior? Excavation sites in Calatagan, Philippines, and in Sarawak indicate that their inhabitants sought Chinese and other refined ceramics for use as grave furniture. Probably then, some of the Pengkalan Bujang ceramics might have been destined for the same purpose.

It appears that even today some **Orang Asli** tribes (*aborigines*), like the Senoi, are still using imported ceramics for their burial ceremonies.<sup>5</sup> The origins of this burial practice seem to go back to ancient times. And it certainly deserves further detailed investigation and study.

In comparison with the coastal plains, it is true that our archaeological knowledge of the culturally conservative part of interior Peninsular Malaysia, is still very slight. Future archaeological work will have to explore these areas and it should also be emphasized that virtually all earlier excavations were far too restricted but conclusive enough. A number of ceramics brought ashore by coastal fishing or accidentally unearthed by the villagers provide additional proof of this.

In the late 1930's, two celadon dishes were found by two Malay fishermen in a river a few miles upstream from Serokam in the Sidam

District of Kedah.<sup>6</sup> The dishes indisputably proved to be of Chinese origin. They were well-fired and heavily potted. The colour of the dishes is attractive and characteristic celadon grey-green. The glaze of both vessels is of the hard felspathic variety and is remarkably thick and glossy. There were no traces of cracks.

The decoration is incised. The smaller of the two dishes has a freely-drawn floral pattern incised on the centre with vertical grooves on the sides producing a ribbed effect. The larger one has a central dragon design with a carved band of leaves around the sides.

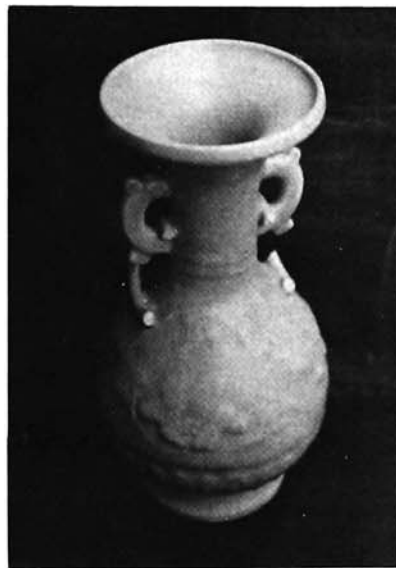
On stylistic grounds B.A.V. Peacock (1959:35) is inclined to date both pieces to the beginning of the Ming Dynasty. In 1982 one celadon dish was discovered when it stuck to the net of a fisherman in Tanjung Dawai, Kedah.

A further important chance discovery of a buried hoard of ceramics, both stoneware and porcelain, was made in October 1960. A party of Malay workmen found the ceramics while digging a drainage ditch at the edge of a wet rice field near Kerubong,<sup>7</sup> seven miles to the north of Melaka town. The porcelain typologically consists of three main groups: monochromes, blue and white, and polychromes. There were also glazed and unglazed stonewares among the finds.

Among the many export wares found in Southeast Asia there is one large group to which many of these Kerubong pieces belong. This group is now recognized as Annamese or Vietnamese blue and white porcelain. Vietnamese blue and white wares were made and exported for a long

period of time, right through the Ming Dynasty and probably until the end of the 17th century.

In 1974 a farmer in Kemaman, Trengganu, while digging a post hole for his cattle shed, came across five pieces of ceramics at a depth of about 1.5 meters. Three of these pieces are small Chinese celadon jarlets while the other two are



Above: Ring-handled vase from Longquan Kilns, Zhejiang (14th century), found in Pahang.

Below: Fragments of a bowl found at Pulau Tioman, Pahang.



Sawankhalok brown bottles. This discovery was first reported, in early 1976, to the Muzium Negara. Oswald A. Theseira, the museum's Curator of Pre-history at that time, investigated the site. The result of his investigations has been published in the *Federation Museums Journal* (1976).

How did these ceramics, from distant countries, such as India,<sup>8</sup> China and other Southeast Asian countries, manage to find their way to the sites mentioned above? Undoubtedly, their presence can be attributed to trade contacts and consequent cultural and political influences in the past.

Delicate Sung wares achieving unrivalled quality were for centuries very much in demand throughout Southeast Asia, and as far west as the east coast of Africa and the Middle East. Like their early Persian and Arab counterparts sailing from the Persian Gulf, Indian and Chinese traders were also drawn by the rich and unique produce of Southeast Asia. They stimulated trade in Peninsular Malaysia both in terms of maritime and overland trade routes. Ceramic finds of Peninsular Malaysia cannot be understood without reference to these developments.

With the exception of the excavations at Pengkalan Bujang, none of the earlier Peninsular Malaysian excavations was specifically planned in search of ceramics. Ceramic finds represent a by-product of these excavations. Even at Pengkalan Bujang, ceramics remained of secondary importance.

Although H.G.Q. Wales had visited the site in 1936, and A. Lamb in 1953, the excavation took place



**Top:** Blue and white plate (late Ming, late 16th or early 17th century), found at Johore Lama, Johore. A similar piece (*fragments*) has been found at Parit Yaani, also in Johore.

**Left:** Bowl from Longquan Kilus, Zhejiang (14th century), found at Lembah Bujang, Kedah.

only in 1961. This was after A. Lamb had completed excavations, started in 1959, and reconstructed the Chandi Bukit Batu Pahat.

The 1970's saw the increased participation of local scholars in the research of ceramics discovered from Lembah Bujang. Leong Sau Heng of the History Department, University of Malaya, has analyzed, for her M.A. thesis, the types of ceramics found at Lembah Bujang. She

excavated with B.A.V. Peacock. In the late 1970's and early 1980's Nik Hassan Shuhaimi of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, together with his students, also carried out excavations at a number of sites in Lembah Bujang. Among the other artifacts they discovered were ceramics. The M.A. thesis submitted by the author to the University of Durham in 1978 also analyzed ceramics from Lembah Bujang and

other sites in Peninsular Malaysia.

In the 1980's ASEAN museums closely cooperated in archaeological researches and excavations. Their project was carried out at Sungai Mas in Kedah. The team, comprising museum personnels from Negara Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, discovered Chinese as well as Middle Eastern ceramics. Nik Hassan Shuhaimi (1986:288) reports that Chinese ceramic fragments found in Sungai Mas dates back to the T'ang and Sung period.

The ceramics found during controlled excavations or by chance discoveries are still being reported in various journals.<sup>9</sup> But no attempt has, so far, been made to study them comprehensively, i.e., in relation to ceramic finds in other parts of Southeast Asia and the Far East.

Although Michael Sullivan (1962:61-75) produced a summary survey of the ceramic finds in Peninsular Malaysia, it only took the form of a brief report. The typological approach was sadly neglected, if not overlooked.

A survey of currently available publications relating to ceramics in Peninsular Malaysia leaves one with the superficial impression that the natives of Peninsular Malaysia did not know how to appreciate the use of porcelain in their daily lives. This also explains why, in terms of the export ceramic finds which are both Chinese and Southeast Asian origins, Peninsular Malaysia is not mentioned in the same league as those of the Philippine and Indonesian islands. The only explanation for this, is that no major excavations have thus far been conducted in Peninsular Malaysia. Excavations made are not

comparable in importance to those at some celebrated sites, for example, the Calatagan in the Philippines and Kota China in North Sumatra.

No thorough archaeological investigations have yet been undertaken in the interior parts of Peninsular Malaysia. It is highly desirable that more investigations in this area should be undertaken in the near future to ascertain the rightful place of Peninsular Malaysia in terms of trade ceramics.

In this connection the importance of underwater archaeology cannot be ignored. The step taken by the Fine Arts Department of Thailand to salvage a few sunken ships in the Gulf of Siam is a decisive one in the right direction. Incidentally, a similar project has been initiated in Peninsular Malaysia, but it is still in an early stage.

In the future, a general survey of the Straits of Melaka must be carried out. The recent offer, from the Fine Arts Department of Thailand through SPAFA, to train personnel from Museums of Southeast Asian countries in this field must be welcomed.

The same Department has estimated that there are about 40 sunken ships still lying on the seabed in the Gulf of Siam.<sup>10</sup> Expectations for the Straits of Melaka and South China Sea can be just as high.

As far as Peninsular Malaysian ceramic studies are concerned, both in terms of archaeology and making relevant materials available for study from both public and private collections, one thing is certain: a great deal more research work is required for the whole period of export ceramics.

## FOOTNOTES

1. For an account of several stone inscriptions found in Province Wellesley on the Peninsular of Melaka, see Low, J. (1848), pp. 62-66; and (1849), pp. 247-249.
2. Wales, H.G.O. (1940), pp. 1-85; and (1947), pp. 1-11, Alastair Lamb notes that although Wales had done pioneering research in this field "he often failed to publish his material in anything like an adequate way, so that much of what he discovered we must still see through his eyes only, not having been supplied with plans, sections, sketches or photographs". Lamb A., (1961), p. 70.
3. Cf. Matthews, John, (1961), pp. 237-242; Jack-Hinton, Colin (1963a:24-30), Solheim W.G.II and Green, E., (1965), pp. 1-75.
4. Cf. Medway, Lord, (1962), pp. 56-63. For a recent study, see Southeast Asian Ceramics Society, West Malaysia Chapter (1985).
5. General information obtained from the Director-General of the Department of Orang Asli Affairs.
6. Cf. Peacock, B.A.V., (1959), pp. 33-35. The dishes were initially purchased by the First Prime Minister of Malaysia, who was then the District Officer of Kuala Muda District. They are now displayed in the Kedah State Museum, Alor Star. The writer wishes to thank Y.A.M. Tunku Abdul Rahman, the First Prime Minister of Malaysia, for graciously agreeing to be interviewed and for the hospitality extended to him during his visit to Penang.
7. Cf. National Museum, (1961), pp. 37-39; Matthews, John, (1961), pp. 239-241. The finds were sold to an antique dealer the day before the Director of Museums visited the site, but it was fortunately possible to trace the dealer and to recover the articles, some of which are now preserved in the Muzium Negara. It is interesting to note that a hoard of ceramics of similar nature had been accidentally unearthed earlier by a Malay farmer in Johore Lama, see Beamish, A., (1955), pp. 2-8. Another hoard was discovered at Parit Yaani (also in Johore) in 1979.
8. Since it merits separate and detailed treatment, it will not be mentioned in this paper. However, the writer realizes that both Chinese and Indian cultural influences are equally important to the Malaysian society.
9. Some of the finds are not illustrated and this makes typological studies of the finds more difficult. For example, I.H.N. Evans, (1932), pp. 205-206, reports that six or seven Chinese celadon dishes were discovered by the Malays at Sungai Serai, Pahang. The last owner of the finds was Mrs. C.J. Windsor, but her present whereabouts is unknown.
10. For more details about the ceramics found on board the sunken ship near the Gulf of Siam, see Roxanna M. Brown (1975), pp. 356-370.

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