

# Newly Identified Chinese Ceramic Wares

## From Ninth Century Trading Ports in Southern Thailand

by Ho Chuimei, Pisit Charoenwongsa, Bennet Bronson  
Amara Srisuchat, and Tharapong Srisuchat

**T**he sites of Ko Kho Khao and Laem Pho in Southern Thailand date to the ninth century AD. They contain very large amounts of Chinese porcelain of that period: perhaps more than any other site in Southeast Asia.

Ko Kho Khao is near Takuapa on the west coast of the Thai Isthmus. Laem Pho is on the east coast near Chaiya. Both sites are thought to have been major entrepôts on the main international trade route between China and the Middle East, which for at least several decades between 800 and 900 A.D. seem to have run across the Isthmus rather than through the Straits of Malacca to the south.

In order to study the Thai portions of that trade route, an archaeological project was carried out in 1988-1990 by a team representing the Fine Arts Department of Thailand and the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. The project involved excavations at both Ko Kho Khao and Laem Pho as well as surface collecting at Pa Yang, located one kilometre from Laem Pho and apparently a part of the same ancient settlement. The directors of the project were Pisit Charoenwongsa and Bennet Bronson. Field directors were Ho Chuimei and Tharapong and

Amara Srisuchat. Financial and other support was provided by the National Geographic Society and other sponsoring institutions.

The following discussion is based on finds made by that project, supplemented by published data from earlier excavations at Laem Pho (Thepchai 1983). It is intended as a summary identification guide for use by archaeologists working elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Although many of the wares described here are reported for the first time, at any Southeast Asian site, there is little doubt that most of them were traded widely within the region. They should occur in many places. This report may help in recognizing them.

The identifications given here are derived partly from data gathered during a recent field work by one of the authors, Ho Chuimei, at kiln sites in southern and central China. We have tried to include references to published works when these exist. However, our comments on kilns and their products are in many cases based at least partly on Dr. Ho's own photographs and field notes from China.

The Chinese ceramic assemblages at Laem Pho and Ko Kho Khao include at least ten groups of wares. They are:

- 1) Changsha wares from Hunan province,
  - 2) Yue ware from Zhejiang province,
  - 3) Ding ware from Hebei province,
  - 4) "Northern White" ware, perhaps from Henan province,
  - 5) Meixian ware from northern Guangdong province,
  - 6) Gulao ware from the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong province,
  - 7) Yanggan ware from the Leizhou peninsula in southwestern Guangdong province,
  - 8) Fengkai ware from the Xijiang (West River) area in western Guangdong province,
  - 9) Guangdong Coastal green wares from a number of kiln centres in central and southwestern Guangdong province, and
  - 10) Green and white splashed ware of unknown origin, perhaps from Henan and/or Hunan provinces.
- The first three ware groups are known from many sites outside China (e.g., Mikami 1990; Whitehouse 1973). The last seven, however, have rarely been identified in non-Chinese contexts. Although most have probably been found before at sites in Southeast Asia and regions farther to the west, their exact places of origin appears not to have been recognized.



**Ding ware from Laem Pho and Ko Kho Khao. These are from high-quality Ding vessels of ninth century types. Later wares from the Ding kilns in Hebei Province are exhibited in many museums.**

1. **Changsha wares**, made at Tongguan north of Changsha in Hunan province, are represented at Ko Kho Khao and Laem Pho by a variety of shapes, body pastes and glaze colours. They are very common at both sites. There are five types of bowl, three types of ewer, covered boxes of different sizes, small jarlets, and incense burners with four legs. They show five modes of surface decorations--(a) molded applique, often with brown patches on a yellowish green glaze background, (b) polychrome paint, (c) monochrome dark greenish-brown, (d) monochrome yellowish green, and (e) flambe blue-green. The first two modes are easily recognized but the last three are not; they might well be mistaken for Yue or other Chinese wares. To the authors' knowledge, the flambe blue-green glaze has not previously been identified at any site outside China.

2. **Yue ware** at Ko Kho Khao and Laem Pho is common and of generally high quality. Most and perhaps all of its come from kilns at Shanglinhu and in the Ningbo area in Zhejiang province. Bowls, of which 12 types have been identified, are the dominant vessel form, along with

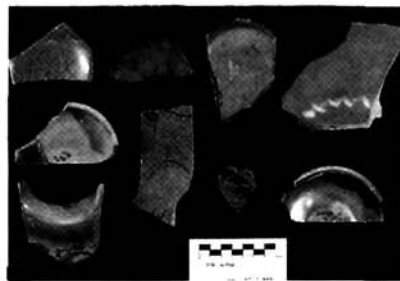
several types of jars, three sizes of small boxes, and a few incense burner fragments. Almost all examples have a well-fitted smooth grey-green glaze over a fine grey stoneware body. The most common bowl shape is one with an everted rim but straight wall and a very low or flat base with more than 10 small crescent-formed spur marks visible in the interior. Rim diametres are in the 21-22 centimetre range. Several of the other types of bowl have *bi*-footings. A small number of Yue

sherds with incised designs, applique strips or open work decorations are found at Laem Pho but not at Ko Kho Khao.

3. **Ding wares** are distinguished from "Northern White wares" by their thinness, their fine-textured white clays, their characteristic Ding shapes, and the fact that their glazes adhere well to their bodies. The shapes of the Ding wares found at Laem Pho and Ko Kho Khao belong to the late Tang rather than the Five



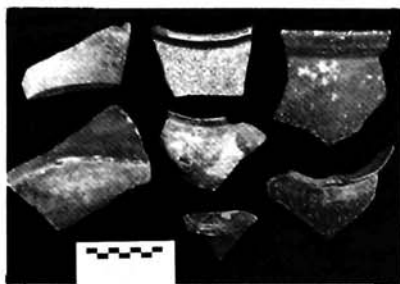
**Changsha ware from Laem Pho and Ko Kho Khao. Many kinds of decorations are used on this famous type of ceramic, which is found in Java and the Middle East as well as in Central Thailand. Made in Hunan Province.**



**Yue ware from Laem Pho and Ko Kho Khao. Among the finest ceramics of Chinese history, Yue wares were often imitated. These are genuine Yue pieces of early types from Zhejiang Province.**



**Northern White ware from Laem Pho and Ko Kho Khao. Some pieces are imitations of Ding wares. They are not found at sites later than about 900 A.D. The kilns may be in Henan Province.**

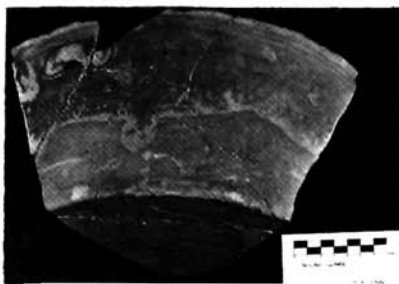


Fengkai ware from Laem Pho and Ko Kho Khao. Thin, grey-black jars from Fengkai in Western Guangdong are said to have been found in Central as well as Southern Thailand. They have not yet been well studied by Chinese archaeologists.

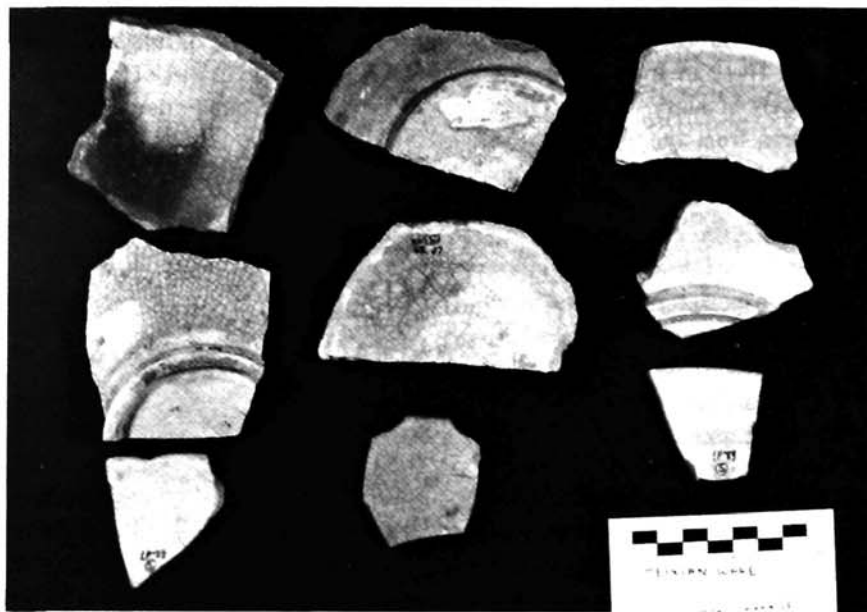
Dynasties or Song periods. They include small and large jars, spouted vessels, plates, cups, cupstands, lids, boxes, and eight types of bowls. The most common of these bowls, sometimes known as "Samarra bowls" by art historians, have classic flat bi-footrings and out-turned lips with a slight beading along the edge.

We have not attempted, incidentally, to divide these fine white export vessels into Ding and Xing wares. Certain specialists have maintained that some of the finer Ding wares found in Southeast Asia are really Xing wares. However, the products of the Ding and Xing kilns, which are only 100 kilometres apart, are very similar, and those of the latter contrary to traditional opinion, are not readily distinguishable from Ding wares, on the basis of form or the fineness of their bodies.

4. **Northern White wares** are conspicuous at the sites where they occur because of their colour and, due to their strength, the large size of the broken fragments. Bowls with short footrings, slightly everted rims with diameters in the 22-24 centimetre range and S-curved walls are features



Gulao ware from Ko Kho Khao. Large basins like this one, with pink-coloured rims and green glazes, are very common at Ko Kho Khao and Laem Pho. They come from a group of kiln sites in central Guangdong Province.



Meixian ware from Ko Kho Khao and Laem Pho. Green glazed bowls made at Meixian in Northern Guangdong were among the finer wares exported to Southern Thailand in the ninth century. They are sometimes mistaken for Yue wares.

of the most common for type. There are four other types of bowl, two types of flanged lids, a possible spittoon, and three types of jars. The vessels have a fine white slip which covers the entire body except the lip of the footring. The slip is very hard and often bears the imprint of the crackle in the glaze, which tends to have flaked off. The bodies are yellowish and relatively coarse.

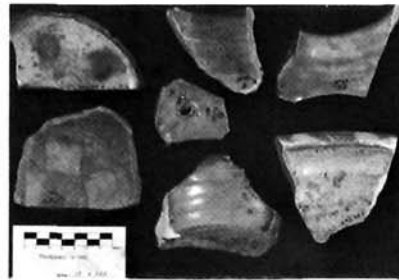
It is not known where the Northern White wares were made, although they occur in large quantities in non-kiln contexts at Yangzhou (Gu 1989). Specialists within China have suggested that such vessels could have come from Gongxian in Henan province. However, vessels with

identical shapes and similarly slipped bodies have not yet been found at Gongxian or other kiln centres in Henan.

5. **Meixian ware**, made at the Shuiche kiln centre in Northeastern Guangdong province (Zeng 1985:74; Gu 1987:214), is represented at Ko Kho Khao and Laem Pho by medium-sized bowls. All have a smooth green glaze with large crackle. The most distinctive Meixian feature is a glazed *bi* base with three unglazed patches on the footring. Like the best Yue and Changsha bowls and unlike any other green-colored export wares of this period, Meixian bowls do not have spur marks on the inside.

6. **Yanggan ware** is a term devised by the present writers to designate the products of late Tang period kilns such as Macheng and Fengshu in Suixi and Longtousha and Yaotoushan in Lianjiang. All are located within the Yanggan River drainage on the Leizhou Peninsula in Southwestern Guangdong (Guangdong 1989, Fig. 145-7). Yanggan ware is found in moderate quantities at Laem Pho but is somewhat more scarce at Ko Kho Khao. It appears at those sites in the form of shallow medium-sized bowls, jars with lugs, and basins. The bowls are characterized by starshaped patterns of five rectangular marks on their interiors where the glaze was scraped away before firing. Many of them have a solid button base with a navel-like projection in the centre. All have a thin yellowish green glaze, often finely crackled, which is applied over a coarse light-coloured or white body. The bodies are whiter than those of any other early ceramics made in Guangdong.

7. **Gulao ware** too is a term devised by the writers. It refers to a group of basins made at the Fenggang kiln in Gulao subdistrict, Heshan county, Guangdong province. Two of the writers have observed the basins *in situ* at Fenggang, and it seems likely that other centres in the same region made similar vessels. In spite of the fact that the Gulao kiln has been surveyed and reported (Xue 1985), no such basins are mentioned



**Yanggan ware from Laem Pho and Ko Kho Khao.** With a thin green glaze and a thick white body, such wares are quite common at Laem Pho and Ko Kho Khao. This is the first time they have been identified outside China.

in the Chinese ceramic literature. They are characterized by wide unglazed rims that are reddish in color, by flat bottoms, and by the presence of either two or four horizontal lugs on the exterior. The interiors and upper arts of the exteriors are covered by a mottled olive green or grey-green glaze. Rim diametres are mostly in the 40 to 50 centimetres range; the depth is about 20 centimetres.



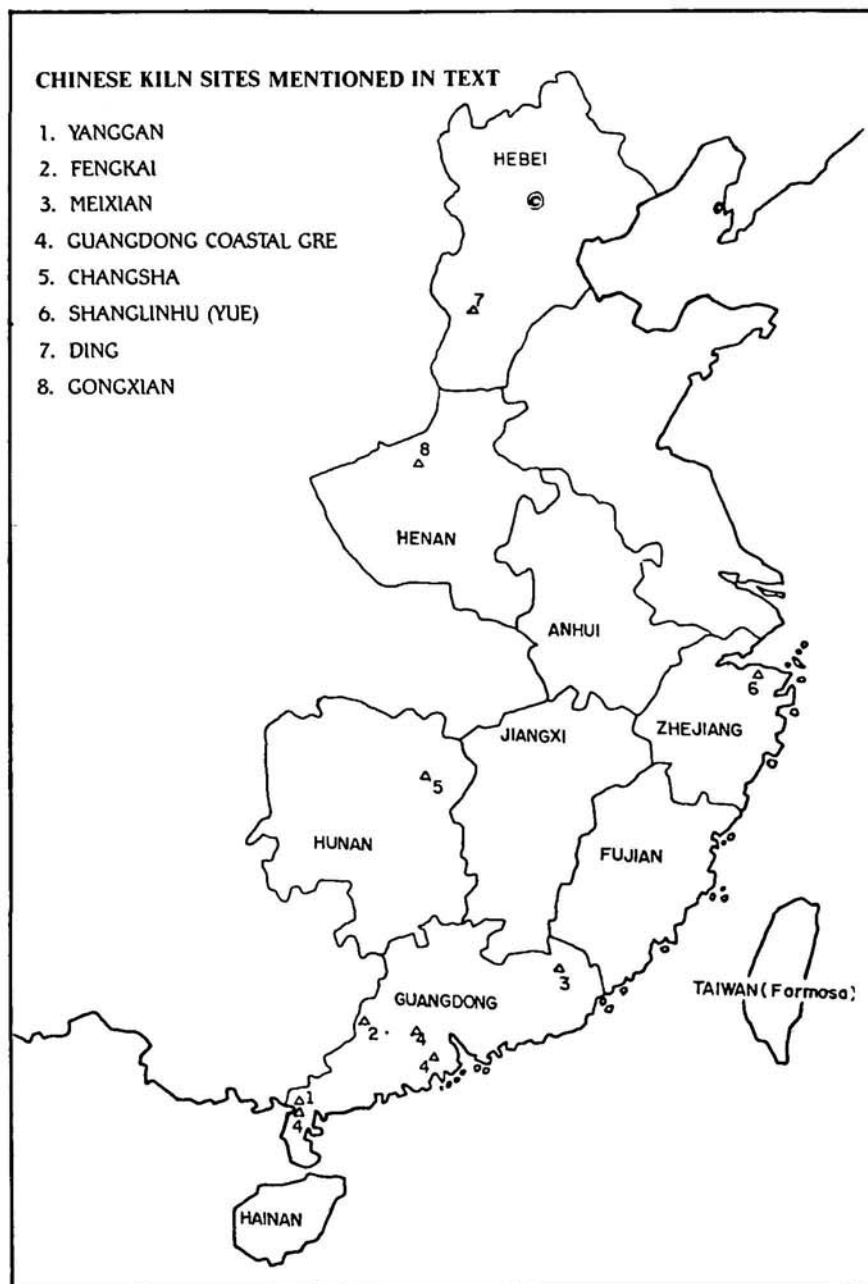
**Guangdong Coastal Green ware from Laem Pho and Ko Kho Khao.** Storage or shipping jars and flat bowls without footings of these kinds were made at numerous kilns in Southwestern and Central Guangdong Province. It is not known what commodities were shipped in the jars.



**Green and White Splashed ware.** Sherds of this ware are rare at Laem Pho and Ko Kho Khao. There are also very similar sherds at both sites that come from the Middle East. These are Chinese, however. The kiln is unknown but may be in Henan Province.

8. **Fengkai ware** is named after the county where one of the writers first saw the ware *in situ* at a kiln, in Gubaoyong, Fengkai country, Guangdong province. The ware was also made at Shuiguakou in Yunan county (Guangdong 1989, Fig. 167-9). Both kilns are on the Xijiang River near the border of Guangxi province. The vessels in question are small to medium-sized thin walled jars with shoulder lugs and flat bottoms, made of hard grey unglazed stoneware that is often covered with a thin black slip. The slip is matte or slightly shiny and may be vitrified. They are known from several non-kiln sites in Guangdong province (see Yang 1966, Cameros & Williams 1984, Shang 1964). They are common at Laem Pho and not rare at Ko Kho Khao.





9. **Guangdong Coastal Green wares** represent a less specific category of ceramics than those previously mentioned. Glazes cover a range of dull green colours and often adhere poorly to the bodies. Shapes include large and medium-sized jars as well as shallow bowls and plates that may have served as lids. The jars are thick and durable, with short straight rims, four or six horizontal lugs on their

shoulders, and flat bases. Some examples have one or more Chinese characters inscribed under the glaze at the shoulder. The bowls—which are more common at Laem Pho than Ko Kho Khao—are shallow with an everted rim and a flattened, slightly convex base which cannot stand steadily on a flat surface. Many bowls still have intact clay wads on their interior sur-

faces. Guangdong Coastal wares were made chiefly at centres in the Leizhou Peninsula (i.e., at Lianjiang, Suixi and Haikang) and in the Pearl River Delta (i.e., at Gaoming, Sanshui, Foshan, Nanhai, Heshan, and Guanchong--Xue 1985). Few if any of the kilns involved were outside Guangdong province, for such wares are rare at kiln and residential sites elsewhere in China. None are found, for instance, at Yangzhou, which yields examples of all the central and northern Chinese wares known to have been exported from China during the ninth century.

10. Two groups of **green and white splashed ware** occur at Ko Kho Khao and Laem Pho. One is Middle Eastern in origin. The other is apparently Chinese. The two groups are distinguished by the character of their glazes and bodies. The glazes on the Middle Eastern examples are opaque white in colour and applied directly over soft earthenware bodies; the green pigment is on and in the white glaze. The Chinese examples, in contrast, have white slips over hard earthenware or stoneware bodies; a green pigment or glaze is applied over parts of this slip and the whole covered with a clear glaze. The green and white effects on the two groups, though similar in appearance, are therefore produced by quite different technical means.

The green pigment on the Chinese (and the Middle Eastern) examples was often splashed or dripped on, producing a decorative effect much like that of the earlier *sancai* ("three-colour") ware of Gongxian. It is possible that some of the examples found at Ko Kho Khao and Laem Pho could have come from the Gongxian area in Central Henan; glazes of this sort are believed to have continued in use after the decline of *sancai* in the early eighth century. It is also possible that the examples with

stoneware bodies could have been made in Hunan, perhaps at Changsha. Green and white splashed wares similar to those found in Southern Thailand have turned up at Yangzhou in context with ninth to tenth century materials (Yin 1989).

Together, these ten groups of Chinese wares form an important part of the ceramic assemblage at both Ko Kho Khao and Laem Pho: by weight, almost 16 percent of total ceramics at the former and more than 50 percent at the latter. Those percentages are much higher than at any other ninth century site known to us in Southeast Asia or the Indian Ocean area.

Our dating of the assemblages and the sites is based largely on the dates of these Chinese ceramics. Painted and applique Changsha wares like those found at Laem Pho and Ko Kho Khao were made almost entirely in the ninth century. The Ding and Yue wares (and, as far as is known, the Meixian wares) are of ninth century types and are present at both sites in the deepest levels. There are no 10th or 11th century sherds--i.e., Qingbai, Guangdong Xicun or Khmer wares--at either site, although these are common enough elsewhere in Southern Thailand, at sites of the very late Dvaravati and early Lopburi periods. In fact, except for modern objects and a handful of 13th-14th century Chinese sherds found in a small area near the western edge of Laem Pho, there is nothing at either site that appears to be earlier than 800 AD or later than 900 AD.

Other dating evidence comes from Middle Eastern finds and a large reservoir discovered by our team at Ko Kho Khao. All of the Middle Eastern ceramics and glass wares from Ko Kho Khao and Laem Pho are of kinds found at ninth century sites in Iraq and Iran. The reservoir

appears to be the one mentioned in the well-known "Khao Phra Narai" inscription in the Tamil language that was found in the late 19th century at Takuapa, a short distance from Ko Kho Khao. Nilakanta Sastri (1949) has dated the inscription to about 840-850 AD.

Hence, we believe that both Ko Kho Khao and Laem Pho were founded after 800 AD and that they were abandoned before 900 A.D. We also believe that many of the specific types of Chinese ceramics at those sites have a similarly short life span, even though the wares involved may have

a history extending over several centuries. This conclusion should be useful to excavators of other Southeast Asian sites. If the excavator finds sherds of Changsha, Ding, Yue, Meixian, Gulao, Yanggan, Fengkai, Northern White or White and Green Splashed wares at his or her site, and if these have the same shapes as vessels from Ko Kho Khao and Laem Pho, then she or he may presume that the site dates--in part at least--to the ninth century. Moreover, he or she may be sure that it was linked more or less closely with the great international trading networks of that period. ■

#### REFERENCES

- Cameron, H. & Williams, B.V. "Sham Wan Tsuen", *Journal of The Hong Kong Archaeological Society*, Hong Kong, 1984, vol. X: 10-42.
- Gu, Feng. Personal Communications, Yangzhou: Yangzhou Tang City Preservation Institute, 1989.
- Gu, Yunquan. "Reports on Ancient Tombs and Kiln Sites at Meixian". *Kaogu*. Beijing. 3: 207-215 (in Chinese), 1987.
- Guangdong Sheng Cultural Bureau, ed. *Zhongguo Wenwu Dituji: Guangdong* Tianjin: Chinese Cultural Atlas: Guangdong (in Chinese), 1989.
- Mikami, Tsugio. "9th-10th Century Chinese Ceramics Found in Southeast Asia". in C.M.Ho, ed. *Ceramics and Kiln Technology*, Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong (in press), 1990.
- Nilakanta Sastri, K.A. Takuapa and its Tamil Inscription. *Journal of the Malayan Branch. Royal Asiatic Society*, 1949, vol. 22 (1): 25-30
- Shang, Chengzha. "Southern Han burial found at Shimaun, Guangzhou", *Kaogu* Beijing. (in Chinese) 1964, 6:297-309
- Thepchai, Khemachat. "The Excavation at Laem Pho: A Srivijaya Entrepot?", *SPAFA Consultative Workshop on Srivijaya*, Bangkok, 1983, 139-43.
- Whitehouse, David. "Chinese Stoneware from Siraf: the Earliest Finds", *South Asian Archaeology*, N. Hammond ed. London, 1973.
- Xue, Jianhong. "A Preliminary Study of Ceramic Kiln Sites in the Xinhui and Heshan Areas Central Guangdong", *Journal of Oriental Studies*, (in Chinese) 1985, Vol. XXIII,2: 175-181.
- Yang, Hao. "Preliminary Excavation Report on Zhang Jiuling Tomb", *Wenwu* (in Chinese) Beijing. 1966, 1: 45-51.
- Yin, Zhihua. Personal Communications, Yangzhou Museum. 1989.
- Zeng, Guangyi. "A Study of the Characteristics of Tang and Song Ceramics of Guangdong", *Ceramic Finds From Tang and Song Kilns in Guangdong*, Fung Ping Shan Museum, University of Hong Kong. 1985. 63-80.