

Vietnamese Ceramics in Asian Maritime Trade between 14th and 17th centuries

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Abstract

Vietnam is one of many Asian countries that have a long-standing and famous tradition of pottery production. Vietnam is also one of three countries including China, Vietnam, and Japan which exported ceramics developed to other countries. The 14th century was marked by the initial penetration of Vietnamese ceramics for foreign markets. The 15th century was considered as a prosperous period for Vietnamese export ceramics with the largest export quantity and the most abundant types thereof. The 16th century marked as a pause in the export of Vietnamese ceramics. The 17th century was the development period of commodity economy and the renaissance period of ports located in the northern and central parts of Vietnam. The article reviewed the findings regarding Vietnamese ceramics in Japan, West Asia, mainland, and insular Southeast Asia in order to partially reconstruct the historical context and the flow of Vietnamese export ceramics for the international maritime trade routes in the Vietnamese history of international trades from 14th to 17th centuries. Given that, the author pointed out the origin, chronology of the Vietnamese ceramics discovered from the relics as well as market context thereof and the destinations of Vietnamese export ceramics.

Key words: Vietnamese ceramics, Dai Viet (Great Viet), Northern Vietnam, Southeast Asia, Maritime trade routes, Ceramic export

Introduction

Vietnam is located in Southeast Asia or Indo-China, with more than 3,000 km of long and beautiful coastline, and is at a crossroads of the exchange routes of the East to the West. It is considered as the free trade gateway of Southeast Asia occupying an important role in the system of international maritime trade routes. In the 9th century,

with the advent of several commercial ports and participation of Chinese and Arabian traders, the ceramics officially involved in maritime trade system and set up "the Ceramics Road on the Sea". Vietnam is one of many Asian countries having a long-standing and famous tradition of ceramics production. Vietnam also is one of three countries including Vietnam, China and Japan that exported ceramics developed in other countries. The manufacture of Vietnamese ceramics has been formed and developed from the 1st to the 3rd centuries and strongly developed since Vietnam had won their freedom in the early 10th century. Since Ly Dynasty (1010-1225 AD) onwards, the production methods of Vietnamese ceramics developed constantly and made great advances regarding the types of products, as well as decoration patterns used on ceramics. Northern Vietnam is the place where has many well known ceramic manufacturing centers, such as Thang Long and Bat Trang in Hanoi, Van Yen, Chu Dau and Binh Giang in Hai Duong province as well as Tuc Mac and Con Che in Nam Dinh province. It is noted that apart from the production of ceramics serving for the demand of domestic market especially in the 14th century that Vietnam was officially engaged in the ceramics export network through maritime trade route. For the later periods in Later Le (the 15th century) and Restored Le Dynasties (the late 16th and the 17th century), Vietnam exported a large quantity of ceramics to Southeast Asian, Northeast Asian and Western Asian markets. In addition to a few notes scattered in the written historical sources, the ceramic artifacts discovered through excavations in the ancient trading ports, shipwrecks and others in Vietnam as well as in other countries are important evidence that contributes to the knowledge of commercial activities on the maritime trade routes. These sources seem to suggest that contact Vietnam and other countries in Asia (both East and West) were abundant and important. The participation in the international trades from the 14th to the 17th century is clear in the archaeological record, which highlights the role and position of Vietnam in Asia and even in the West.

Vietnamese Ceramics and Its Maritime Trade Routes in Asia during the 14th to the 17th Centuries

After King Ngo Quyen defeated the Nam Han enemy on the Bach Dang River in 938, Vietnam entered officially the new era of independence. During the Ly Dynasty (1010-1225 AD), Vietnamese glazed wares industry had highly developed its technical and artistic aspects. In Tran Dynasty (1225-1400 AD), a lot of ceramics manufacturing centers had been set up and developed such as Thang Long (Hanoi), Bat Trang (Hanoi), Thien Truong (Nam Dinh), Van Yen (Hai Duong) and others. A large quantity of high-quality wares, such as celadon, brown glazed, brown patterned and blue and white wares including white ceramic tiles were produced in many kilns. Archaeological findings in Vietnam and other countries from the 14th century, seem to indicate that ceramics made in the kilns in northern Vietnam were not only sold in the domestic markets but also exported to the foreign markets. During archaeological excavations in the 1980s at Dazaifu, Northern Kyushu in Japan, Vietnamese ceramics associated with the pieces of wood and dated in "Daitoku the 2nd Year (1330)" have been found there. They are considered the earliest evidences on ceramics exported from Vietnam to foreign markets. According to other documentations, the iron-brown and cobalt-blue glazed wares were similar to ceramics discovered in Dazaifu in Japan, Juara on the Tiumen Island, and Babal states of West Malaysia.

Many archaeological sites in East Java and South Sulawesi in Indonesia have also yielded the same types of Vietnamese ceramics. In details, blue and white and monochrome glazed wares produced at the kilns in northern Vietnam have been found there (Cheng and Lammers, 1974: 5-16). The most remarkable object found in these sites is the base of celadon tower decorated skillfully with embossed patterns which are similar to the ones decorated on the tower of Gio Pagoda in Vinh Phuc province, Vietnam dated to the 13th to 14th century. This object is currently preserved at the Adam Malik Museum in Jakarta, Indonesia (Stevenson and Guy, 1997: 270, plate 180). According to Stevenson's and Guy's opinions, the fragments of brown-glazed jars of Tran Dynasty have been found in Trowulan, East Java (Stevenson and Guy, 1997: 286,

plate 209). This is the first evidence mentioned about Vietnamese brown glazed wares in Southeast Asia.

Apart from the ceramics found on the mainland, the Vietnamese ceramics have also been found on the Rang Kwian shipwreck which sank in the Gulf of Thailand and has associated material of Chinese and Thai celadon wares. Vietnamese ceramics comprised of blue and white bowls, plates, and cups (The Fine Arts Department of Thailand) (FAD, 1990: 82-93; Tenazas, 1981: 31-32). Pursuant to the specific characteristics regarding the types and patterns, these types of wares are dated to the mid 14th century.

At the end of 2000, a group of fishermen in Ca Mau province, Vietnam while fishing off the seabed picked up a large number of Vietnamese and Chinese ceramics. The museum staffs assumed that there was a shipwreck and designated the site as the Ca Mau II shipwreck. The characteristics of Vietnamese ceramics are the same with ceramics discovered in the Rang Kwian shipwreck which were considered to have a relationship with the period. The Vietnamese blue and white wares on the Ca Mau II shipwreck include a wide variety of bowls, plates and bottles. The associated Chinese ceramics comprised of Jingdezhen blue and white and Longquan celadon wares of Yuan Dynasty dated in the 14th century.

Along with the Rang Kwian shipwreck, ceramics discovered on the Ca Mau II shipwreck contributed to brighten the picture regarding the Vietnamese export ceramics during the second half of 14th century. Although traces of this ship has not been confirmed, this find is nevertheless very important regarding the Vietnamese ceramics extracted from the area, which can be dated earlier than the Cu Lao Cham shipwreck sank off the coast of Hoi An in Quang Nam province, Vietnam which sank nearly a century later. This is the second ship discovered in the territorial waters of Vietnam that transported Vietnamese export ceramics.

In addition to the findings in Southeast Asia, Northern Vietnamese blue and white wares have also been found in many important monuments in the West Asia. The fragments of blue and white bowl with daisy pattern has been found from the excavation in Fustat,

Cairo, Egypt, whose style is the same with the one contained on the Rang Kwian and Ca Mau II shipwrecks, and the Turiang shipwreck which contains a lot of Vietnamese underglaze iron-decorated ceramics (Sten 2002). This confirms the presence of Vietnamese ceramics in the West Asian market in the same context with the Southeast Asian market. The obvious increasing quantity of the 15th century Vietnamese ceramics in oversea relics showed that there was a significant development on Vietnamese ceramics export sector for the foreign markets during this period. The discovery of the fragments of the 15th century Chu Dau blue and white wares from the commercial port of Hormuz along the coast of Persian Gulf is considered as evidence regarding the Vietnamese ceramics exporting to the West Asia by maritime routes (John Guy, 1984). The most valuable evidence of Vietnamese ceramics exported to the West Asian market is a famous Vietnamese vase which has currently being displayed in the Topkapi Sarayi Museum in Istanbul, Turkey, also known as the "Topkapi vase". This is the beautiful and well-known blue and white vase, on which the information regarding the date and place of production was recorded, such as artisan surname is Bui in Nam Sach, made in the Dai Hoa VIII (1450) (recently called Nam Sach district, Hai Duong province in today).

According to the report of Seiki Kin, there are eight sites in the *Ryukyu* (recently Japan) discovered Vietnamese ceramics especially in Nakijin and Shuri sites. In consideration on the shape and decoration, these ceramics were from the kilns in northern Vietnam dated between the 14th and 15th century (Kin Seiki, 1999). According to the research by Professor Yoji Aoyagi in 1991, Vietnamese ceramics have also been found in 32 sites in Southeast Asia including Indonesia (11 sites), Philippines (10 sites), Malaysia (9 sites) and Brunei (2 sites) (Yoji Aoyagi, 1991: 78-82). Although the findings from this research did not reflect the update thereof and the quantity of relics of Vietnamese ceramics to be found is much less than the ones found in reality, it is enough to show that Southeast Asia is the most important market of the Vietnamese trade ceramics.

A notable discovery is the 1995 excavation of the Pandanan shipwreck sank near the Pandanan Island off the southern tip of Palawan Island in the Philippines. The excavation discovered more than 4,000 ceramics in total, of which the Vietnamese

ceramics occupy 70 percent. Most of them were mainly produced at Binh Dinh province in Vietnam, but a few were ceramics produced at Hai Duong province in Vietnam. Based on the report by Eusebio Dizon (1998), it is assumed that this shipwreck sank in the mid-15th century. Other excavation is the Balanakan or Blanakan shipwreck in Ujung Karawang, West Java, Indonesia there has excavated in 1998 and has also been found Vietnam ceramics, especially blue and white wares made at Hai Duong province, as well as it dated to the 15th to the 16th century (Bui Minh Tri 2001; 2002).

The 1997-2000 excavation of the Cu Lao Cham shipwreck sank off the coast of Quang Nam in Vietnam has recovered more than 240,000 objects and most of them are Vietnamese ceramics dated in the 15th century that demonstrated the Vietnamese ceramics were also supplied on the maritime trade routes. According to historical record, we know that the trade network in Southeast Asia was expanded from Malacca to the northern coast of Java especially in the 15th century together with the sharing of Muslim traders. The Vietnamese historical record also confirmed that Southeast Asian merchant ships were used to make the landfall to the ports in northern Vietnam for trading and exchange of eucalyptus, pearls, and aromas during the 14th to the 15th century.

Although, these notes did not mention about ceramics but they were considered that the quantity of ceramics have been found as many in the trading ports of Vietnam, such as Van Don in Quang Ninh province, Lach Truong in Thanh Hoa province and Hoi Thong in Nghe An province, and have confirmed Vietnamese ceramics were exported during this period. Currently, there is no strong evidence to confirm whether or not this was the case, but there appears to be a continued export on Vietnamese ceramics in the 16th century.

The investigation in Japan has found Vietnamese ceramics dated to the second half of the 16th century especially in Keichou period (1595-1615) (Shinichiro 1999). This evidence showed that the maritime trade between Vietnam and Japan was flourishing. In details, the Vietnamese ceramics found in Japanese town were from Hoi An in Quang Nam province and possibly arrived to Japan before the reign of Tokugawa Shogun had applied the closed-door policy in 1639. The results of archaeological research in Hai

Duong province showed that Vietnam had decreased ceramic productions in the beginning of the 16th century, and several types of 15th century trade ceramics were not produced anymore and this phase seems to be focused on the domestic market mainly (Bui Minh Tri 1995).

In the 17th century, many evidences – especially historical record – clearly confirm that Vietnamese ceramics were exported to foreign markets. A possible reason for this is the international trade policy under the Trinh Lords and Nguyen Lords of the Dai Viet feudal state (Great Viet - Vietnam today). Another possible reason could be the establishment and development of international shipping companies in the early 17th century, especially the Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, VOC). Merchant ships of this company were making long trips to the East to find the local markets, set up trading locations and expand their sales in other countries, especially in Asia (Bui Minh Tri, 2008).

In that context, many trading ports with economic structure as the town were established along the coast of Vietnam during this period, specifically trading ports of Thanh Ha in Hue province, Hoi An in Quang Nam province, Nuoc Man in Binh Dinh province, Pho Hien in Hung Yen province, Kinh Ky-Ke Cho in Thang Long, Hanoi. These were the gateways for trading for the Dai Viet (Vietnam) with both Asia and Europe. At these trading ports, many kinds of goods were purchased and exchanged, including agricultural products, handicrafts and ceramics (Bui Minh Tri 1994, Do Bang 1996).

In this period, the trades between Dai Viet and Japan were developing strongly especially in the first three decades of the 17th century or called Shuisen (the red seal ships) that Japanese historian called. The numbers of licensed Japanese ships traded in Dai Viet from 1604 to 1635 have 124 ships in total, including 37 boats in northern Vietnam and 87 ships in central Vietnam (Seiichi 1941). Generally, the Japanese shipped commodities, specifically silver, copper, and weapons, to Dai Viet and then they purchased mainly silk, spices, sugar and ceramics back to their country. Even after the Bakufu Shogun had issued the order of “Sakoku” to limit the foreign trades in 1636,

Japan still continued to trade with Dai Viet merchant ships through China and the Netherlands (Bui Minh Tri and Pham Quoc Quan 1994: 34-51).

It is worth mentioning that the Trinh Lords and Nguyen Lords did not allow Chinese and Japanese traders to reside in trading ports, but they allowed Western traders to open their trading stores. Particularly, Nguyen Lords allowed the Dutch to open their trading stores in Hoi An, Quang Nam province in 1636. A year later, Trinh Lords also allowed the Dutch to open their trading store in Pho Hien, Hung Yen province and then open a second trading store in Thang Long (recently Hanoi) in 1645. Such events were good opportunities for trade in the developing regions.

The VOC sponsored by the Dutch government had many priority rights including the exclusive trading right in the region East of Cape of Good Hope. For Dai Viet, after having set up trading stores in Pho Hien (Hung Yen) and Thang Long (Hanoi), the business of VOC had prospered because they enjoyed preferential treatment from the Trinh Lords. During this time, many kilns in northern Vietnam had competed to produce ceramics to export to foreign markets and also competed with Chinese and Japanese ceramics trade. The evidence of this can be seen through the abundant quantity of the 17th century Vietnamese ceramics found on many archaeological sites in Japan and insular Southeast Asia as well as the documentation of the VOC Company (Volker, T. 1971).

In Southeast Asia, Vietnamese ceramics have been found in Pukissutosanion in Malaysia, and some in Indonesia, specifically Trowulan on East Java, Banten Girang and Banten Lama on West Java, Selayar on South Sulawesi, Warloka on Flores and Bengkulu on Sumatra (Naniek, H.W 1993). Very few of them have been found in Banten Girang and Banten Lama which were famous trading ports operated by Banten Sultan during the 16th to the 17th century. Their material can be dated to the same dates as the Hizen ceramics from Japan dated in the late 17th century (Koji Ohashi and Takashi Sakai 1999).

By comparative study, I assumed that the Vietnamese ceramics exported to foreign markets during this period were mainly made at the kilns in Hai Duong province on

northern Vietnam. These ceramics were exported and transported by merchant ships of Chinese traders and VOC for consumption in Southeast Asia and Japan from 1625 to 1689 (Bui Minh Tri 2001).

The findings of the Vietnamese ceramics in Japan, West Asia, mainland and insular Southeast Asia partly assisted us to deconstruct the historical contexts and analyze export flows of Vietnamese ceramics through international maritime trade routes. Noticeably, Vietnamese ceramics have often been found together with Chinese and Thai ceramics in many sites, which showed that they were shared and exported in the same trade flow.

Conclusion

Based on historical record and archaeological evidences of the trade ceramics, it appeared that the 14th century was the period for the penetration of Vietnamese ceramics into the Asian market. The 15th century was the flourishing period of Vietnamese export ceramics with the largest shipments and most complexity of export ceramics. The 16th century was marked by a pause in the export of Vietnamese ceramics. The 17th century was the development period of commodity and a prosperous period of trading ports in northern and central Vietnam. The international maritime trades by Vietnam had expanded around Asia with great opportunities to establish foreign relations with other countries in the region as well as Western countries that were based in the East. The impact of international trade had also expanded and developed on other ceramics production centers that were prospering proportionality to that of Vietnam and shared of the same Asian maritime trade routes.

During the late 17th century to the early 18th century, the gradual decline of the Dai Viet's economy associated with the decline of foreign trading stores in Thang Long in Hanoi, Pho Hien in Hung Yen province, affected the foreign economic system of the Dai Viet. The decline of Dai Viet's trading port system originated from different causes but it was affected directly by the general downturn of Asia and the world trade system. It appears to indicate that the 17th century was experienced a return to prosperity and

development on the international maritime trades, but afterward Vietnamese ceramics production stopped even to supply international maritime trade routes.



Fig. 1. Bottle, cobalt glazed ceramic, 15th ceramics, in Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul



Fig.2. Status of an aristocratic lady, blue and white ceramic, 15th century, from Treasures from the Hoi An Hoard (Cu Lao Cham shipwreck, Quang Nam, Vietnam)



Fig.3. Incense burner, blue and white ceramic, 15th century, from Treasures from the Hoi An Hoard (Cu Lao Cham shipwreck, Quang Nam, Vietnam)



Fig.4. Bowls with high feet, iron black ceramic, 15th century, at Puerto Galera (Philippines)



Fig. 5. Jar, iron black ceramic, 16th-17th centuries, in the Kyushu Ceramics Museum (Japan)



Fig.6. A covered jar with applied dragon embossment and painting in underglaze cobalt. In the possession of the Ozawa family, 17th century (Kyoto National Museum)



Fig.7. A large dish painted with VOC trademark, Hizen ware, 17th century. Found in Dejima port (Nagasaki, Japan)

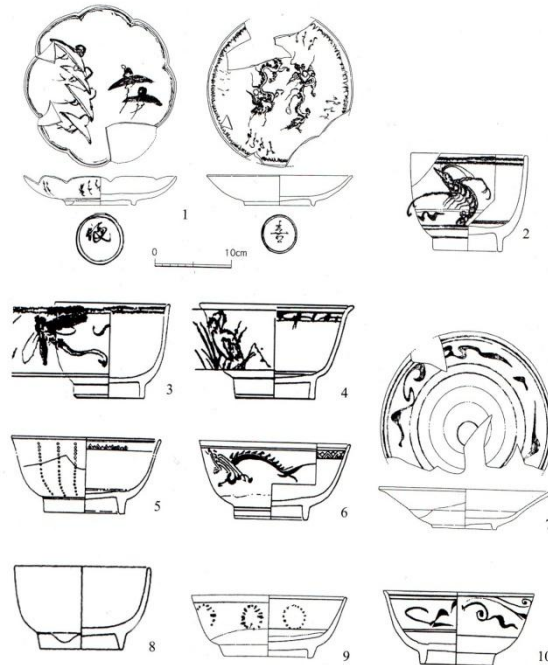


Fig.8. Types and designs of Vietnamese ceramics trade ware to Japan in the 17th century

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