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# **TRADE CERAMICS FROM ANCIENT MALAYSIAN PORTS\***

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Most historians of Malaysian history believed that the history of Malaya only began with the founding of Melaka in the 1400 A.D. They argued that no concrete historical evidences dated prior to the formation of Melaka had ever been found. However, they seemed to overlook the contribution of ceramics in dating. Indeed, there are a number of ceramics dated back to the seventh century have been found on Peninsular Malaysian soil.

Although literary sources made only vague references to this region and their accuracy has been challenged, Peninsular Malaysian archeological sites have yielded finds of ceramic in modest numbers. Ceramics, a category of artifact which is least perishable in tropical climate and corrosive soil, presents an invaluable form of evidence. The typological study of ceramic finds can provide vital evidence for the dating of archaeological sites and for the study of the nature of habitation and trading patterns in the early centuries, and the cross cultural influences that existed between the countries involved.

This paper presents evidence for early trade and cultural relations between maritime countries in East-West trade routes, including Peninsular Malaysia. The archaeology of Peninsular Malaysia is still not sufficiently documented in order to explore fully the potential of typological studies of trade ceramics discovered in Peninsular Malaysia, particularly those from ancient ports. The available data from previous excavations suggest, even after very careful consideration, that Peninsular Malaysia played only an intermediary role in the entrepot trade of East-West maritime activities and utilized available inland river routes on a limited scale. Although not comparable to the importance of the Mekong, Menam and other major rivers of Peninsular South-east Asia, the Peninsular Malaysian river routes still carried most of the ware mentioned in this paper (see Table 1).

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\*The substance of this paper has been discussed and published elsewhere.

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They reached this part of Southeast Asia in transit, destined towards other places and countries. On the evidence of the Pengkalan Bujang, a port which in the Sung and Yuan times was engaged in the handling of wares from both the Middle East and Far East (of which the Far East played an ever increasing role from T'ang, Sung and Yuan times), this role can be seen very clearly.

The pioneer antiquarian work in Peninsular Malaysia was carried out by Col. James Low at 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 Chai 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 and also 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 this, sporadic archaeological excavations and investigations were undertaken and the field of interest shifted to the ancient Hindu-Buddhist remains of shrines and temples situated in the Bujang Valley in Kedah, by Sullivan and student members of the archaeological society of the University of Malaya. The research was followed by that of A. Lamb in 1954 (1960) which 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 ceramic, earthenware, stoneware and porcelain fragments.

The wares found in Malacca as one would expect are of somewhat earlier date than those found at Johore Lama, and include many Chinese blue and white pieces of the middle

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Matthews, John, (1961), pp. 237- 242; Jack-Hinton, Colin (1963a:24-30), Solheim W.G. II and Green, E., (1963), pp: 1-75.

fifteenth century, the period when the Melaka Sultanate was at the height of its power and prosperity. The wares found in Johore Lama were mainly from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and among them were 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 South-east Asian countries.

It is interesting to note that among the sherds discovered at Kota Tinggi, Johore, there is one sherd which bore six-character mark of Ch'eng-hua reign period (1465-1487) as reported by Colin Jack-Hinton. He argues that according to John Pope (Jack-Hinton, 1963:33, Pope (1956:107-108) there are only some thirty odd pieces of blue and white made in the Ch'eng-hua reign and marked with nien-hao are known to exist. Other examples of fragments bearing the Ch'eng-hua nien-hao have been found in Ceylon and Jack-Hinton further argues that John Pope himself has noticed two examples from Kota Batu, Brunei (Pope 1958:267-269).

Although the fragment from Kota Tinggi is not perhaps one of the finest examples of a period when Chinese pottery reached a level of particular perfection, Jack-Hinton (1963b:33) believed that the nature of the clay, the pale shade of the underglaze blue, and the calligraphic style of the nien-hao all point to its authenticity.

As a result of his investigation in 1959, A. Lamb carried out another excavation and unearthed several thousand fragments of Chinese porcelains, mainly green glazed celadon of Sung and Yuan dates. These wares were mixed up with the products of other ceramic manufacturing regions in Thailand and Indo-China. Also found were fragments of Islamic glass, parts of small bottles of a kind which at one time were widely exported from the Middle East (Egypt and Syria) to South-east Asia. There were also significant finds of beads. A Lamb believes that at 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 to Pulau Tioman headed by Lord Medway<sup>4</sup>. The aims of the expedition were purely zoological – but in the course of their investigation of the fauna of the area they came across archaeological remains and fragments of ceramics of Chinese and non-Chinese origins. The finds include gritty micaceous earthenware, celadon and non-micaceous earthenware, grit free brown-buff and green-glazed stone wares and Due to their fragmentary nature these sherds regrettably do not yield enough information to re-construct the shapes of

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Medway, Lord, (1962), pp. 56-63, For a recent study, see South-east Asian Ceramics Society, West Malaysia Chapter (1985).

these vessels. However, it appears that the majority of sherds represent small rounded bowls. Among them, Tom Harrison identified Yueh type green-ware with folded rim, white Ch'ing pai porcelain of export types and a fine celadon fragment of Lung-Che'un type. A sherd among the finds was also identified by Tom Harrison as Sawankhalok, which he dated as late as the fifteenth century. In 1981 Adi Haji Taha (1983) and staff of the Muzium Negara carried out archaeological survey at pulau Tioman and in January 1990 the author together with a group of Japanese ceramic experts had the opportunity to visit sites reported to have yielded trade ceramics in Tioman.

Was Kedah in the Pengkalan Bujang era only concerned with entrepot trade, or was it also a centre for supply of foreign wares to the inhabitants of the interior? Excavation sites at Calatagan in the Philippines, and sites in Sarawak, indicate that the interior (inhabitants in those countries sought Chinese and other refined ceramic for use as grave furniture. Probably some of the Pengkalan Bujang ceramics might have been destined for the same purpose. It appears that some Orang Asli tribes (Aboriginal) like the Senoi are still using imported ceramics for their burial ceremony even today<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. It is true that our archaeological knowledge of the culturally conservative part of interior Peninsular Malaysia, in comparison with the coastal plains: is very slight and future archaeological work will have to explore these areas as well. Moreover, it should also be emphasized that virtually all earlier excavations were far too restricted and conclusive enough. A number of ceramics brought ashore by coastal fishing or accidentally unearthed by the villagers provides additional proof of this.

In the late 1930s, 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 proved indisputably to be of Chinese origin. They were well-fired and heavily potted; the colour of the dishes is of an attractive and characteristic celadon grey-green. The glaze of both vessels is of the hard felspathic variety and is remarkably thick and glossy, with no traces of cracks.

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<sup>5</sup> General information obtained from the Director-General of the Department of Orang Asli Affairs.

<sup>6</sup> 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 Kualamuda District. They are now displayed in the Kedah State Museum, Alor Star. The writer wishes to thank the late 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.

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 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 by a party of Malay workmen 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 unglazed and glazed stone wares among the finds. Among the many export wares found in South-east Asia there is one large group to which many of these Kerubong pieces belong, the group that is now recognized as Annamese or Vietnamese blue and white porcelain. The Vietnamese blue and white wares were made and exported for a long period right through the Ming Dynasty and probably until the end of the seventeenth century.

In 1974 a farmer in Kemaman, Terengganu, 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 Sawankhalok brown bottles. This discovery was first reported to the Muzium Negara in early 1976. Mr. Oswald A. Theseira, the then Curator of Pre-history of the Museum, investigated the site. The result of his investigations has been published in the *Federation Museums Journal* (1976).

How did these ceramics from distant countries of from 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 South-east Asia, and as far west as the east coast

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<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

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 South-east 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 represented a by-product of these excavations. Even at Pengkalan Bujang, ceramics remained secondary importance. Although H.G.Q. Wales had visited the site in 1936, and A. Lamb in 1953, the excavation took place only in 1961, after A. Lamb had completed excavations there (which he started in 1959) -and reconstructed the Chandi Bukit Batu Pahat.

The 1970s saw the increase 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 the types of ceramics found at Lembah Bujang which she excavated with B.A.V. Peacock in 1970's for her M.A. thesis. In the late 1970's and early 1980's Nik Hassan Shuhaimi of the University Kabangsaan Malaysia together with his students, carried out excavations at a number of sites also in Lembah Bujang, where among other artefacts they discovered were ceramics. In the author's M.A. thesis submitted to the University of Durham in 1978 he also analyzed ceramics from Lembah Bujang and other sites in the Peninsular Malaysia.

The 1980s saw a close cooperation among ASEAN museums in the field of archaeological research and excavations. The last such project was carried out at Sungai Mas in Kedah. The team comprises of museum personnel from the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore and Thailand together with their counterparts in Malaysia has discovered Chinese as well as Middle Eastern ceramics. Nik Hassan Shuhaimi (1986:288) reports that Chinese ceramics fragments found in Sungai Mas dated back to T'ang and Sung times. The author discovered that some of the fragments from Sungai Mas are very similar with the one discovered at Tieman.

"The ceramics found during controlled excavations or by chance discoveries were still are, being reported in various learned journals<sup>9</sup>. But no attempt has so far been made to study

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<sup>9</sup> 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 their present whereabouts is unknown.

them comprehensively and in relation to ceramic finds in other part of South-east Asia and the Far East. Although Michael Sullivan (1962:61-75) produced a summary survey of the ceramic finds in Peninsular Malaysia, it took the form of a brief report only. The typological approach was sadly neglected, if not overlooked.

A survey of currently available publications relating to ceramics in Peninsular Malaysia leaves with the superficial impression that the natives of Peninsular Malaysia did not know how to appreciate the use of porcelain in their daily life. This also explains why in terms of export ceramic finds of both Chinese and South-east Asian origins, Peninsular Malaysia is not mentioned in the same league as those of the Philippine and Indonesian Island. The only explanation for this, is that no major excavations have thus far been conducted in Peninsular Malaysia comparable in important to those at some celebrated sites, for example the Calatagan in the Philippines and Kota China in North Sumatra and no thorough archaeological investigations have yet been undertaken in the interior parts of Peninsular Malaysia. It is highly desirable that more investigation in this area should be undertaken in the near future to ascertain the rightful place of Peninsular Malaysia in term 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 South-east 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 Malacca and South China Sea can be just as high.

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

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<sup>10</sup> For more detail about the ceramics found on board the Sunken ship near the Gulf of Siam, see Roxanna, Brown, 1975, pp. 356-370.

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Table 1

**SUMMARY OF TRADE CERAMICS DISCOVERED IN MALAYSIA**

<b>Sites</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Dating</b>	<b>Classification</b>
1. Kedah a. Lembah Bujang	Celadon	11-13th centuries	Mostly fragments from bowls, saucers, dishes, plates, small jarlets.
	Ching-pai	11- 13th	Fragments from bowls and small jarlets.
	Temmoku type	11-13 th	Too few and small for reconstruction.
	Brown-glazed	11-13 th	Mostly fragments consisting of jugs, mouth rims etc. of big jars.
b. Serokam	Celadon	12-14 <sup>th</sup>	Two plates, centuries chance find, stocked to the net of the Malay fishermen in the 1930s.
c. Tanjung Dawai	Celadon	11-13 <sup>th</sup>	Bowl, discovered when it stucked to the net of a Malay fisherman in the early 1981.
d. Kampung Siputih	Blue and white	16-18 <sup>th</sup>	Mostly fragments, of plates, saucers, dishes etc.
e. Kubang Pasu	Blanc-de-Chine	18 <sup>th</sup>	Rhinoceros cup.
f. Sg. Mas	Brown-glazed celadon	9-14 <sup>th</sup>	Fragments of jars, plates, bowls, and saucers.
2. Perak a. Kuala	Green-ware, Sawan khalok	14-15 <sup>th</sup>	Parts of small bowl
3. Selangor a. Dengkil	Celadon	11-13 <sup>th</sup>	Plate, similar to the one discovered at Lembah Bujang.
4. Melaka	Blue and white	15-18 <sup>th</sup>	Plates, saucers, dishes, etc.

a. Kerubong and Melaka Town	(Chinese)		
	Blue and white (Annamese)	15 <sup>th</sup>	Plates, dishes, saucers and water dropper.
	Greenware Swankhalok	14-15 <sup>th</sup>	Part of a bowl.
5. Johor a. Johor Lama, Parit Yaani	Brown-glazed Sawan-khalok	14-15 <sup>th</sup>	Part of a small jarlet with two loop handles.
	Ching-pai	13-14 <sup>th</sup>	Fragments of a covered box.
	Blue and White	15-18 <sup>th</sup>	Plates, bowls, dishes, saucers, kendis and big bowls.
	Blance-de-Chine	18 <sup>th</sup>	Part of a bowl.
6. Pahan a. Pulau Tioman  b. Pekan c. Tasik Chini	Yueh-brown , with applique design, green ware and celadon	10-13 <sup>th</sup>	Fragments of Jar Alm-bowl, bowls and dishes
	Ching-pai & white ware	11-13 <sup>th</sup>	Fragments of a bowl, covered boxes.
	Iron black glazed	14-15 <sup>th</sup>	Bowl
	Sawan-khalok	14-15 <sup>th</sup>	Part of a small jarlet
	Brown Blue and White	15-16 <sup>th</sup> 16-17 <sup>th</sup>	Jar (Tempayan) Fragments of plates and saucers.
7. Terengganu	Celadon	11-13 <sup>th</sup>	Saucer, small carlets
	Green, black or	14-15 <sup>th</sup>	Small jarlet, plate (greenware)

	<p>brown glazed Sawankhalok</p> <p>Black or brown glazed Sawankhalok</p> <p>Kalong</p>	<p>14-15<sup>th</sup></p> <p>14-15th</p>	<p>Small jarlet, plate (greenware)</p> <p>Plate</p>
8. Kelaton	<p>Celadon</p> <p>Blue and white</p>	18-19 <sup>th</sup>	Fragments of plates, dishes and bowls.