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The Manila Trade Pottery Seminar

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Special Report

The Manila Trade Pottery Seminar

ELEANOR VON ERDBERG-CONSTEN

THE ceramic unearthed in the Philippines—many of them in perfect condition—are so numerous and so varied, that scholars must be acquainted with them in order to assess the ceramic output of China, especially from the late Sung to the early Ming period. The Director of the Freer Gallery thus conceived the idea of a Seminar to be held in Manila; and, together, the UNESCO, the Philippine National Museum, the Research Foundation in Philippine Archaeology and Anthropology, the Seattle Art Museum and the Old Dominion Foundation took up the idea, and realized it in the Manila Trade Pottery Seminar of March 18-24, 1968.

A Seminar is by nature an exclusive affair. It was thus inevitable and to be expected that discussions would be held at the highest scholastic level. What the public or the layman gains from attending such a seminar, if observers or auditors are allowed, depends on the individual's interest and on prior knowledge acquired by him on the basis of this interest, or to put it simply—his familiarity with the idioms and problems of the topic at hand.

As a result of the understandable preoccupation with Philippine excavated trade potteries and its implications, the organizing institutions received from the lay sector innume-

rable requests for admittance to the Manila Trade Pottery Seminar. Arrangements were therefore made for a limited number of "observers" only upon request. Many of those who attended the Seminar as "observers" had the necessary basic knowledge or at least knew the Philippine side of the subject well. Those who chose to attend the sessions and were prepared, were stimulated and could partake of the atmosphere of intellectual excitement which permeated the discussions. It was not surprising that just this excitement, which seized every participant, would often pull the discussions into unexpected channels. But none of the participants ever lost sight of the goal: to bring order into the classification of Asian porcelains. That the Philippines was chosen as the center was due to the fact that here, more than in any other place, so many types from East and Southeast Asia were found together in controlled excavations. Questions of purely Philippine culture were not on the agenda, but the pottery trade and the dating of wares and therefore that of Philippine burial sites would certainly affect the Philippine archaeological record and subsequently Philippine cultural history.

Scholarship is not acquired in one day, and it never covers even a single field to the last detail. It changes constantly, but a change must be accepted gradually so as to be well-founded. Changes are caused and helped along by new data, new sources of information, and the exchange of such information among scholars. Every Seminar leaves many questions unsolved—and it usually adds new ones.

The Manila Trade Pottery Seminar was exactly what its name implied—not more, not less—; it dealt with the ceramic wares which were brought to the Philippines by traders, mainly from China, but also from Annam and Siam. These wares included not only—as has been suggested—the coarsest, least valuable types, or even wasters and kiln-failures, but also some of the finest porcelains the Chinese could produce.

Two distinct and well-defined goals had been set for the Manila Trade Pottery Seminar: (1) To acquaint the scho-

lars in the field of Chinese and Southeast Asian ceramics with the vast amount of material unearthed in the Philippines in the last decade. They could see and handle all types in the Manila collections. By sheer weight of numbers alone, the Philippine finds were bound to shift some of the basic concepts in the mind of every visiting scholar. The wide range of quality was also revealing; it probably helped to impart a better balanced view of Chinese ceramic production than one can gain from the Imperial Collection with its exclusively top quality specimens, or from any museum in the West, or even the curio market in Peking, Shanghai, Hong-kong up to the Communist take-over. (2) To give scholars an opportunity to discuss—in the presence of those archaeologists and collectors in the Philippines who were instrumental in bringing these ceramics out of the ground and preserving them—what was once brought here by the trading ships, and speculate on their origin. The topics of the discussions were, to a certain degree, set by the papers presented. These served the important function of focusing on particular Philippine problems—of attacking an unknown center from known peripheral positions. On the other hand, chance played its part in the choice of subjects that received particular attention. A certain piece in a collection, for example, attracted attention and curiosity, or one question gave a new turn to the discussion. But by and large, all participants were in agreement about the importance of certain points, which therefore, were given precedence.

This meant there was no time wasted on what was by now well-established knowledge—the emphasis was on those points which were *not* established facts. The outcome could not be all the answers to all questions, but the sorting out of problems, providing those who will some day furnish some of the answers, with the material for their work. This may seem like a narrow path to a small goal—when the Filipino public is eager to know so much more about the past of their country. They look to the archaeologist for guidance and they think—and have every right to think—that the thousands of pots unearthed in recent years will be a great help in lighting up their past. But most of the participants saw

the wealth of ceramic material here for the first time; they had to evaluate it carefully in the light of their previous experience—it would be most unscholarly to jump at conclusions.

The participants were continuously faced with two main issues: provenance and dating. The task could hardly be given wider scope! The two problems were closely interrelated and could not, therefore, be taken up one after the other, nor could one of them, once settled, always solve the other. For example: Lead-glazed wares found in the Philippines might, at first glance, be taken for T'ang products, but it will quickly become evident, that they exhibit Sung characteristics. We know that the tradition of T'ang lead-glazes lived on in North China under the Liao—but this is not the ware exported to the Philippines. The specimens found here attest to a continuation of the T'ang tradition in South China—in the taste of the Southern Chinese, and also in the taste of foreign customers, as illustrated by the kendi. Thus, there was in most discussions some foothold and starting point, but many points still had to be discussed and considered. A great help were the reports of those participants who had visited kiln-sites and could tell about and show sherds they had found and could compare them with what faced them here. Tentative dating—in many cases—of these kiln sites had to be aligned to such stratification and its results as had been made possible by scientific excavations here. Furthermore, the finds in other countries of Southeast Asia, notably Borneo and Java, added to the facts that could be used in determining provenances and dates. But it must be kept in mind that practically all the facts brought together were of a relative rather than an absolute nature. Exceptions, like the David vases dated 1351, form rare milestones in porcelain history; their value can hardly be overestimated. Where no such help was forthcoming, a paper on stylistic evolution introduced a different approach to the dating of e.g. celadons, which are found in such great numbers and confusing variety of qualities, types, and shades.

The discussions and some of the findings during the Seminar were thus mainly concerned with broadening and

imparting knowledge of what was actually made at a specific time in China, and secondly, with determining the known wares which could have been made—and according to the latest archaeological evidence were actually made — in the South China coastal provinces, i.e., close enough to the ports, notably Canton and Ch'uan-chou. Eventually all discussions had to be narrowed down to the wares found in the Philippines, but first these had to be viewed from the mainland, i.e., their places of origin. This fixed their position in the ceramic industry of China as a whole. Then the porcelains actually found in the Philippines, especially those obtained through scientific excavation, had to be compared with sherds and specimens picked up at the mainland kiln-sites. This was possible in the case of some types of celadons and impossible for spotted wares. The kilns of Te-hua in Fukien assumed a greater importance for Sung production than had heretofore been surmised, and the pre-Ming production of Ching-te-chen, known from earlier investigations, had to be accorded a wider scope. On the other hand, it became doubtful, whether all pre-Ming blue-and-white was made at Ching-te-chen. Again the Fukien kilns had to be given greater credit, notably for Shu-fu type wares and blue-and-white. Annamese pottery, as presented by a scholar who had studied it in Annam, underwent some modification prompted by its appearance in certain contexts, for example, in the Calatagan sites.

If there was one unrefutable fact that came out clearly as a result of the Seminar, it would be this: we have known that there were many kilns in the South China coastal provinces, which made a variety of wares, some akin to the traditional ones, some of purely local kind; but the quality and scope in the variety of porcelains, indigenous or copying wares of other regions, that was produced in South China has only now assumed its real proportions in our knowledge.

The following paragraphs attempt a short summary of the Seminar discussions—not verbatim and not arranged according to the actual sequence of the different comments in the morning and afternoon sessions. Several problems which

were discussed on more than one occasion and in different contexts are taken up one by one.

The problem of the Chinese porcelain trade was given the widest possible geographical scope: Fostat in Egypt, the West African coast, the overland and sea routes to the Near East and India, the exports to Japan. Generally speaking, their importance was of a negative nature; they showed in which respects and how far Chinese trade to the Philippines differed from that to other regions, e.g., one significant fact was that no early underglaze red had reached Fostat. There were of course, also aspects of this trade which applied to all regions—like the preference for celadon.

Finds in Java and Borneo bore out the general impression gained from the more remote sites, namely that the Chinese not only “dumped” their inferior wares, but also exported porcelains of the finest quality. That the ceramics found in Southeast Asia do not generally conform to what we have come to regard as Imperial Chinese porcelain, does not necessarily mean that they were inferior, but rather that they reflected the tastes of the Southern Chinese. Chinese traders apparently discovered the potentialities of the Philippine market later than that of Borneo, because early Yueh wares are rare here. Purely economical reasons must be taken into account; Borneo for example had iron to offer in exchange; the Philippines probably luxury goods. But when the Chinese traders found it profitable to trade with the Filipinos, they brought them much the same wares that had been found salable in Borneo. There are exceptions, as is to be expected; some may have been due to chance, e.g., the supply available to a trader in a Chinese port at the time he was ready to load his ship. It seems that wherever Chinese merchants took a cargo of porcelains, the celadons—any kind of celadon—would find the best market. This is true in the Near East and in Africa as well as in the Philippines—until blue-and-white was offered and outshone the celadons; this seems to have been the case in all the places where Chinese porcelains were traded, from Africa to Japan. When celadons were about to lose their

markets, their makers borrowed designs from all the wares which were successful in the 14th century.

Celadon is a conveniently vague term, coined and used by Westerners. It covers a variety of wares, different in color of body and glaze, and widely differing as to place of origin. The finest was doubtlessly made during Southern Sung at Lung-ch'uan, but that does not mean that excellent celadons with beautiful green glazes, with and without decoration—the latter incised, carved, or moulded—were not made in many kilns south of Chekiang, in Fukien and Kuangtung, i.e. closer to the ports. Celadons, though less refined than those of Lung-ch'uan, seem to have been made at Ch'uan-chou, the port from which many of the ships must have set sail for the journey to the Philippines. The shapes of vessels found at Ch'uan-chou closely resemble those unearthed here.

It is interesting to note that the so-called Northern Chinese Celadons, which, as we now know, were made in many places in China—from Kansu and Shensi to Hsi-ts'un near Canton—were not exported in *large* numbers to the Philippines. Some red-bodied celadons, which seem to belong to the 13th century or later, are found in the Philippines, but they are far outnumbered by those with a light grey body.

The grey wares form a large group among the finds in the Philippines—in the Laguna area as well as in the collection which the University of Michigan gathered from Palawan coastal sites. This was never an elegant or sophisticated porcelain and must be relegated to those wares which the traders could buy cheaply in Fukien, where they were probably made from Sung times to early Ming.

Curiously enough, the Chien-yao of Fukien was not among the wares exported in great numbers; perhaps the distance from the kilns to the ports was already too great for profit. There are several types belonging to the Temmoku group found here, but those with a light or a grey body far outnumber the true Chien-yao with its blackish body and hare's fur glaze. The numerous jarlets and bowls with brown glazes in every variety of color from bluish-black to red-brown cannot

be called Temmoku outright, just as the coarse buff-bodied jars and small cups with an olive, splotchy glaze are not counted among the celadons.

The kilns around Te-hua in Fukien, which had been known chiefly as the source of the glassy white ware of Ming and Ch'ing called Blanc-de-Chine, assumed a new importance. A whole group of creamy white wares of the Sung Dynasty now goes under the name of Te-hua. In sites at Angkor the Te-hua type wares can be dated as belonging to the 13th century; in Sarawak they appear with Sung and Yuan wares. In the Philippines they are not found in Ming sites — which are dated as such by their blue-and-white and Sawankhalok. In Laguna they are even found to be more plentiful on the lower and presumably earlier level than on the upper and late Sung-Yuan level. Thus Te-hua must now be considered as having been made from the beginnings of Southern Sung at the latest, if not earlier. White wares of the 12th century found their way to Japan. The Te-hua in the Philippines may be dated, conservatively, as 12th to 14th century. The lower the temperature of firing the creamier the color and the less hard the body. Since both kinds, creamy and soft as well as hard and white, seem to be contemporary, the suggestion was made that they might have been fired together, but in different sections of the big kilns. The great variety of Te-hua types attests to a large number of kilns in the area. Notable among the variants are the vases, bowls and boxes termed Marco-Polo-ware, after the vase in San Marco in Venice, which has the moulded thread decoration, that is found on so many of the creamy Te-hua pieces, in Borneo and Celebes as well as in the Philippines. It was made and exported from the 12th to the 14th century. In spite of its coarseness, it is obviously indebted to the creamy white wares of Ting, which in Southern Sung were made at Ching-te-chen. Like the delicate variants of Ch'ing-pai, the large, thin Ting-yao bowls were apparently not considered suitable for export. Only a few pieces, which have a close affinity to Ting have been found in the Philippines. Chao-chou near Canton was named as an important site for white trade porcelains.

Another ware which occurs frequently in Philippine sites and does not fall easily into the traditional categories of Chinese porcelains, is the Ch'ing-pai, formerly called Ying-ch'ing because of its shadowy blue glaze on a white body. While in China it is usually fine and thin, with delicately incised decoration, the moulded types are more common in the Philippines. In China even thick-walled Ch'ing-pai is surprisingly light, whereas here even small pieces have considerable weight. It must, therefore, for more than one reason, have been made at a different place or kiln from the Ch'ing-pai known in China, which was a Ching-te-chen product. Another suggestion made was that since the harder wares have a greater iron content, a different clay containing more iron yielded the sturdier pieces and that these were designated for export.

The problem of Shu-fu has several aspects. We do not really know what Shu-fu, named after two characters found in some dishes, actually is. It seems to be an offshot of Ch'ing-pai, i.e., made at Ching-te-chen and contemporary with Sung Ch'ing-pai, but carrying on into the Yuan dynasty. The glaze is softly opaque and often obscures to a considerable degree the moulded design; the footrim is cut in a special way. While it is not among the most frequent wares found in mainland China and in Western collections, Shu-fu seems to have found great favor with the Philippine buyers.

The discussions on Shu-fu were given added importance by the fact that dishes obviously of Shu-fu body, glaze, and foot were decorated with underglaze blue. This was one of the starting-points for discussions, which took up a great part of the Seminar time: the origin of blue-and-white. So important and controversial a question could not possibly be settled on this occasion, but a few facts were sorted out, and some data emerged as basis for future research. The points brought up in favor of an early origin of blue-and-white were the "rapid-style of painting" found on Shu-fu dishes and on jarlets with few Shu-fu characteristics but with the soft opaque glaze; beading occurred on Shu-fu, on Ch'ing-pai, as well as on the earliest types of blue-and-white. The close connection between the three is obvious, but this does not suffice to establish a date

for the beginning of blue-and-white, nor the place where it was first made. In the Philippines these quite distinctive types of blue-and-white, which must be considered early, are found together with Sung wares, especially in the Laguna sites. Some scholars remained firmly in favor of Ching-te-chen and a Yuan date. The total absence of the early blue-and-whites in the Imperial collections in Taipei prove that there was no interest among the educated Chinese for this new decoration before the 15th century. Texts on Ching-te-chen referring to the early 14th century do not mention blue-and-white. Sung capitals in Manchuria and Mongolia show no evidence of its existence, but it does appear in the Yuan sites in these northern regions. Enough evidence for Yuan blue-and-white, notably the vases in the Sir Percival David Foundation, dated 1351, has been known for some time; the question now was: Could blue-and-white have originated in the Sung Dynasty? If that was the case, not Ching-te-chen, but some other place of origin seems quite likely and possible, especially since it is linked to Ch'ing-pai, the manufacture of which was wide-spread. If the distance of the kiln to the port of shipping was an important factor, the Fukien-theory gains in importance. It was suggested that since for a while only the Fukien people were allowed to trade overseas: a ware which was locally made may have gone straight on board the merchant ships, and only a generation later found its way inland and north. The early blue-and-whites were not sophisticated, but made quickly by moulding; they were not carefully finished, and painted in a rapid style, which would enable an artisan to finish a great number per day, without having to bother with a large variety of designs. The key to the riddle of blue-and-white seems to lie in the Philippines. The observations made in the controlled excavations in Santa Ana and Pinagbayanan in Laguna where the early blue-and-whites were found consistently with Sung wares — to the exclusion of better-known Ming porcelains and Siamese and Annamese wares — would carry a good deal of weight. No unrefutable Sung date went with whatever proof could be given for the existence of Fukien kilns that made blue-and-white.

The so-called hole-bottom dishes must be mid-15th century rather than second half of 14th century. There is a curious gap: no early 15th century pieces are found in Philippine graves. This is the more astonishing because there is no such gap in the native pottery, e.g., of the Calatagan sites. Was the Chinese trade diverted to other destinations, or is it simply our ignorance of provincial Hsuan-te that makes us notice such a gap?

The finds from Calatagan differ in many respects from those of Santa Ana and Laguna, where Sung wares prevail. It seems that the Filipino customers in the period corresponding to early Ming were less exacting in their demands for quality; they were even satisfied with wasters. The blue-and-whites are coarse; the blue is often of an inferior quality. The composition of, for example, the plates with a big chrysanthemum in the center, placed in a vase or by a rock, shows little concern for delicate drawing.

Connected with these Ming dynasty sites were the observations on Annamese and Siamese wares, of which the Santa Ana and Laguna sites have yielded only a very small number, but the Calatagan and Puerto Galera diggings a great variety. An important point was made regarding the term "Annamese"; actually in T'ang and early Sung, Annam included Kuangtung and Kuangshi. This means that the wares found at Hsi-ts'un, Canton, which so closely resemble the Annamese in their grittish, brownish body, actually were Annamese—the other alternative being that iron-black underglaze painted wares, which so far have been called Annamese, must all be labelled as coming from Kuangtung. The "chocolate bottom" is no longer among the safe criteria for Annamese wares; in the Philippines, among other places, Annamese dishes with and without this brown bottom have been found. Since the painted Annamese copied Chinese designs, the drawing is rarely sure and vigorous.

Siamese wares of Sukothai were not made after the early 15th century; Sawankhalok output ended with the Burmese invasion between 1515 and 1560. Cambodian wares

should rather be termed Khmer, since they were made and exported during that time when the realm of the Khmer extended beyond today's Cambodia.

The larger jars called Martabani came mostly from Kuangtung and were the Arabs' stock in trade from the 14th to the 17th century. Originally water-jars, they became important ritual objects in Borneo and in the Philippines. In the latter islands they were used extensively for burials, as proven above all by the Puerto Galera finds. They also appear in quantities in Indonesia. The so-called Borobudur jars may be divided into an earlier, broader type—earlier than those found in the Philippines—and a younger group, which is more slender with a smaller bottom and opening. Aside from this relative dating, the big jars, predominantly glazed brown or olive, are not very helpful in matters of dating, although pre-Ming types may be recognized.

Several problems, which were important to the collectors in the Philippines did not receive as much attention—not because they were not thought worthy of it, but because what had been worked out in the discussions still did not provide a basis secure enough for conclusions. Thus the underglaze red was often mentioned, but not discussed with the same thoroughness as the blue-and-white. The dating of the early underglaze reds as Sung will stand or fall with the dates for the first blue-and-whites, of which some of them are exact counterparts. The uncertainties of early blue-and-white seeped into many other subjects and joined other factors as yet unknown, thus creating new problems, e.g., the connection with the celadons, with which they are sometimes found, and their affinities in decoration. The spotted wares could hardly expect to have their problems solved; not one of the many kiln sites now known in China has yielded spotted white wares. No more could be said about them than that they resemble known Sung porcelains in body and glaze, and that their shapes correspond to some of the white or early blue-and-white wares.

Thus there was a constant going back and forth in traditional ceramic history, and among facts known from historical

records, or finds from Borneo, Java, the Near East and Africa, to the actual problem at hand: Philippine trade pottery. What often sounded like digression served to close in on the main subject, by retaining what was pertinent, and counting out what led into a dead-end alley. To the observer this was confusing, and the pattern of the working method anything but obvious and it seemed in the end as if no momentous conclusions had been reached. This is, to some extent, true, and it is by no means disappointing or even surprising. Symposia and Seminars are not held in order to decide questions and find final answers, but to give the scholars working on the subject a chance to test the validity of their views when confronted with the knowledge that his colleagues have acquired. The give-and-take of thoughts coined in a currency that is only valid among scholars in one field, but thoroughly familiar to each of them, must sound like a mysterious, almost secretive bartering system to the layman. But it does save a lot of valuable time and minimizes unnecessary explanations. The preoccupation with a footrim may seem beside the point, when shape, color, glaze are much more obvious features of a bowl; but if time was spent on a footrim alone, or on beading, it meant that here was a significant point, by which a ware could be attributed or recognized, in spite of the fact that it shared some of its most obvious qualities with several other wares—e.g., the Shu-fu foot, or the slip decoration in raised lines.

Each participant went away with a different set of facts in his mental luggage—depending upon what he had brought with him and what had been added and modified in the discussions. Each will now go back to work on the problems with a better understanding of their position in a wider context. And when the results of such studies, for which the ground was prepared at the Seminar, are published, then—and only then—will the trees planted during the week in Manila bear rich fruit for all to pick.