

Ray Hearn

Thai Ceramics, Lan Na and Sawankalok: An Interview with John Shaw

Ray Hearn is currently completing his PhD on Thai ceramics at the Northern Territory University in Darwin, Australia, and recorded this interview to revisit and update some of the author's central concerns about Lan Na (and Sawankalok) ceramics.

John Shaw is an authority on northern Thai ceramics who lives in Chiang Mai. One of his books, "*Northern Thai Ceramics*" remains the most significant of the writings on Lan Na ceramics, particularly due to the author's records of first hand observations of shards, wares and actual kiln sites. There has not been much in the way of significant developments since the second edition of the book was published in 1989. If anything, there has been a decline in information. Disturbingly, many of the sites, since being discovered and surveyed or otherwise examined 20 or 30 years ago, now have deteriorated due to farming and lack of official preservation of most kilns has allowed unauthorised diggings.

Ray: The Chinese influence. This varies from non-existent to absolute amongst the various writers. Both yourself and Roxanna Brown (1) point out the unlikely coincidence of independent discovery in countries so close to China, where stoneware had already been produced for centuries, but over the years I suspect that you find there's less and less evidence to indicate a direct Chinese input?

John: The traditionally held view has been the Ramkhamhaeng legend where actual Chinese potters were brought in to start the stoneware industry at Sukhothai in the late 13th century, and ceramics spread from there around Thailand. Clearly there was no such direct transfer, and "Mon" ceramics sites had already been established producing wares unlike the Chinese ceramics of the time. There is a Chinese influence in so far as Chinese designs and styles

were copied. Ming shards are often found at later kiln sites.

An indirect, rather than direct influence is indicated by for example the northern version of the kylin, where the flaming attributes (smoke and flame rising from the hot skin surface of the mythical beast) are brushed on as wings so that the beast looks more like a winged horse (2).

The cultural influences from India or from other Hindu sources did have representations of winged animals such as the garuda. At Kalong a potter who had no first-hand awareness of Chinese culture can only have done the brushed rendering of the kylin. Perhaps the decorator simply tried to copy a Chinese plate. Much of the northern decoration has a home grown 'folksy' feel.

Ray: If potters did not come, it is suggested that freelance potters came. Gordon V Childe's (problematic) model for metal smiths in Europe suggests that there, craft workers were itinerant (3). In South East Asia craft workers do not seem to have travelled, but were family/kin and community/village based (4).

John: There may have been itinerant foreign ceramics workers. Certainly there were merchants, many Chinese, who travelled the extensive northern land trade routes from very early times. Demand for a particular form led to 'influence'—copying or just plain business competition to fill a client's orders.

Potters are typically open to stylistic change, but much more conservative about technical change. We don't see Chinese kilns being built in Thailand, and there is no cobalt or porcelain produced, so if direct exchange of knowledge happened it seems to have been at a generally low level.

Ray: Interestingly, Don Hein in his recent paper (5) suggests that at Ko Noi (Sawankalok) the sudden appearance of the white primary

clay body, celadon, and brushed underglaze decoration may indicate a significant foreign presence after all, since these changes occur simultaneously.

John: But the knowledge of kiln construction and operation for high fired stoneware is too widely spread I think, for it to have originated intact from one Chinese source. And certainly, much of the kiln developments at Sawankalok and in the North seem to reflect localised development phases of potters working things through, rather than having information passed on to them.

We see a much more direct Chinese influence in those countries closer to China—Japan and Vietnam, which did come to make porcelain and use cobalt blue, and a more second hand influence in South East Asia—Thailand/Laos/Burma/Cambodia.

It seems to me highly unlikely that the stoneware could have had a sudden complete appearance with no developmental phase: In fact Northern sites suggest localised growth—they are complex, occur so widely (in isolation) and are often very different to each other.

Ray: But there does seem in the last couple of years to be a consensus that Thais populated Thailand for a long time, rather than a sudden late migration where the ‘Tais’ filtered in from southern China and brought the ceramics knowledge with them?

John: I don’t think the theories of stoneware ceramics originating from the earthenware of bronze age cultures such as Ban Chiang has been convincingly demonstrated. The village/chieftdom level societies do seem to fade away as stronger polities—the Mon and the Khmer arrive.

Certainly there were people living in what is now Thailand for centuries, but there seems to be evidence of Tai people moving into the northern areas well before the 13th century, so surely as they spread into Thailand they could have spread their ceramic technology.

Phayao is one of the oldest of these northern muangs, or city/ mountain valley kingdoms, thought to originate from the 11th century AD and is on the Mekong/Chiang Saen trade route.

Ray: When you asked (rhetorically)—“which then was the father of all kilns working in this tradition?” Do you still hold to your

belief that stoneware developed first in the North?

John: Phayao was most likely the earliest muang (records show founded in the late 11th century); a central, powerful and important kingdom, the logical starting point for ceramics. Note that annals describe visits north to Phayao by southern rulers; Mengrai was called there to adjudicate with Ramkamaeng, though otherwise as a matter of protocol Phayao would normally come to Chiang Mai.

If you look at a map of where the Thai people were and where the states they created were situated and then plot kilns on it, it becomes clear that Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai (Sawankalok) are on the southern periphery of a concentration of northern kiln sites.

The early Sawankalok wares are called Mon and may have been, but it is highly doubtful that northern wares were in fact Mon. There are common properties between early Sawankalok (Mon) and northern kiln wares particularly Phayao and Sankampaeng:

- The incised, engraved, carved, and sometimes stamped decoration is not formally geometric but freely executed;
- Usually a white slip was applied over a black body. Over the white slip the glaze could give a range of celadon-like colours;
- Bowls were produced at all three sites in standardised sizes so they could be fired in stacks foot to foot and rim to rim, the rims wiped clear of glaze.

While all these characteristics are common to both Northern and Southern sites, Phayao produced a wider range of more sophisticated wares not seen at Sawankalok, such as footed offering bowls (phan), oil lamps and jars. Phayao jars are more graceful, delicately potted and were sometimes glazed in two colours.

I am still of the feeling, and still unable to prove it conclusively, but Phayao seems to me the logical kingdom for the first northern stonewares. Phayao itself still has an atmosphere—the lake, its isolation but good farming land, and was close to early trade but not warfare routes.

Ray: Mon ceramics: The Mon do appear to have been present in the early days of stoneware at Ko Noi, and Vickery has found Mon origins

for some of the surviving ceramic terms. Vickery carefully investigates a phrase in an ancient Mon script where a religious object flies through the air with a blazing light like that from a *sruin*, hole in the ground with *kok*, a later Mon word for kiln; that is *Sruin / kok* (6). So Sawankalok in modern Mon literally means an in-ground kiln. But the Mon themselves had no stoneware tradition to import?

John: Vickery may have identified Mon words to describe ceramic terms, but a few words can't be conclusive one way or the other, in my opinion. Whether the Mon established or merely gave names to an already existing production isn't clear. The term Sawankalok is made confusing, not the least by its application to any Thai or indeed other glazed ceramics, and the later term Sangkalok which does have a separate Sanskrit meaning of 'heaven on earth'.

There are some indications that proto-stoneware was made at Hariphunchai before the 13th century, begging the question of its origins and 'primitive' state. Shards and wares are found at Lamphun for example, which do not have the sophistication of Sawankalok Mon.

Did the early Mon in Burma make stoneware?

Ray: The Khmer also occupied much of central and northern Thailand, or what is now Thailand, and there is a thesis that argues the attractiveness of the idea that the Khmer were responsible for the dissemination of stoneware as their presence is early, certainly before the 10th century (7). Kilns and wares were different, but you do see some common features, for example the two-glazed ware of Samkamphaeng?

John: While the Khmer did occupy much of what is now north eastern Thailand, and there are architectural remnants of Khmer buildings at both Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai, the ceramics traditions and kilns particularly seem very different. I don't know of any Khmer shards found at any of the northern or central northern (Sawankalok) sites.

I don't see any evidence to connect Khmer and Thai kiln sites.

Ray: The wide range of Lan Na ware, kilns and kiln furniture suggests a very confident group of potters open to experiment and to new ideas, perhaps more so than at Ko Noi for

example, where changes are more linear, such as logical adaptations to kiln design.

John: I don't know if Don (Hein) agrees, but I tend to think of Ko Noi (Sawankalok) as being identified with the early Lan Na kilns in the early stage. Increasing pressure, first for building materials and related sculpture (to be used with laterite and stucco temples; northern buildings were wood) at Pa Yang and Sukhothai and then exports altered the whole operation into one for mass production, particularly from Ko Noi under control from Ayutthaya. This of course never happened in the North.

Specialised production geared for large quantities lacked the quality of prestige Lan Na ware. The fine black and white decorated ware was elegant and time consuming, and the carefully prepared white body extremely thin and delicate, and often carved further thinner after throwing, unlike Ko Noi where rapid, heavy throwing is a characteristic, perhaps needed for the strength to survive long distance exports.

If the Ming were able to restrict export trade early in their dynasty—from late 14th century—the demand for alternative ceramics production would have been enormous. By the 1350s Ayutthaya would have been able to take advantage of the export potential, and the trade flourished from this time on, perhaps for a couple of hundred years, with a fairly standardised range; celadon plates, the fish decoration, covered boxes.

In the north, variety is a characteristic. Wang Nua kilns only produced green celadons, usually finely crazed, Tung Hua the rain cloud celadon, Phan sometimes a more olive celadon, with short lived green lead based glaze at Thung Man. The range of kiln supports is indicative too of northern variety—dumb-bell shaped short supports, small discs, wide flared supports, even saggars and shelves as well as the taller tubular supports typical of Sawankalok.

Ray: Lead, and copper/lead/tin glaze. The curious appearance of wares with in glaze copper green designs in a tin/lead base glaze, especially those from Tak, are now generally accepted as Burmese. The mostly green lead glazed Kalong wares were different?

John: I do not think that the Kalong lead glazed wares were connected in any way with the tin/lead low-fired wares from Burma.

The Kalong lead glazed wares are very closely related to the similar Chinese Ming wares (the small round 'gourd' form with hollowed concave foot but no foot ring), and to 'ordinary' Kalong wares.

One must suspect the direct involvement of an itinerant Chinese family of potters working for a short (and not very successful) time. Apart from the chemistry—lead glazes tend to be fluid very suddenly, there is complex kiln furniture; shelves, props and supports, though the same kiln. This suggests to me the presence of actual potters rather than knowledgeable merchants.

Ray: The Tak diggings of the mid eighties: More than 15 years later, do you still see the Tak finds as the most significant of the Lan Na ceramics? Have Tak wares dried up completely? Who were the hill people?

John: The Tak hilltop burial site finds were of extraordinary importance. Roxanna Brown has estimated between 500,000 and a million pieces (8) were recovered: Chinese, Lan Na, and Sawankalok, including some Mon and a few Vietnamese pieces all buried together in the hills. The wares, many pristine examples of superb quality, went from the diggers (looters) directly into private hands and were dispersed largely undocumented and so we have lost a golden opportunity to study them.

There are still occasional finds, for example, from construction site excavations, but mostly finds have dried up since the late eighties. A note of caution: many 'Tak' attributed pieces were not actually found there, but brought in from outside for 'provenance'. There are too many fakes that turned up as supposedly Tak finds.

The original people were probably Lua who traded forest products for ceramics. Not on any major trade route, so they may have been special customers, though they also traded Vietnamese and Chinese ceramics as well as Thai. Many of the Thai wares discovered at Tak have not so far been found at any export site.

Ray: In your book you briefly discuss the lack of cobalt. With hindsight—blue and white so dominates our 20th century vision—do we overrate cobalt in a 14th century and 15th century context? You mention the mastery of black and white Kalong dishes for example.

John: There would have been no technical problem for the Thai potters to be able to use

cobalt, think of the mastery of black and white Kalong wares, if cobalt had been available, for example if there were Chinese potters who knew the secret to pass it on. I can only conclude that the secret was never passed on to the Thais. Remember that the European potter struggled for years until Meissen in the early 18th century, to produce porcelain. Again, only countries close to China—Vietnam and Japan—also used cobalt. The secret was kept from South East Asia.

Presumably the Lan Na people were happy with black and white. People in Indonesia claim that the richer burials contained blue and white, the poorer Sawankalok, so there may have been no export conflict. Certainly however, once cobalt is introduced, in the Yuan dynasty most likely from Persian sources it soon becomes a major production, and Ming blue and white shards appear widely at kiln sites in Thailand.

Ray: Why weren't such quality Lan Na wares exported more widely? If Kalong was on major internal trade routes, which extended through the passes to the coast of Burma, and Kalong wares are common at Tak, why not export? Were exports already controlled through Ayutthaya (you suggest about 1350 for this).

John: I am sure that Ayutthaya blocked the southern trade route. The North and the South were not on good diplomatic relations trade or otherwise, remember, and were often at war.

Did Ayutthaya gain control of Sukhothai in order to control ceramics and other trade items for export? If Sukhothai and Lan Na were basically domestic and agrarian, Ayutthaya was certainly more interested in regional external trade.

Probably the Lan Na potters were not clever traders, did not have the infrastructure, the merchants, and sea trade was increasingly more important than land based trade. Certainly the finest black and white ware could have been a valuable prestige trade item, but small scale isolated production probably didn't (or couldn't) produce a surplus for trade beyond domestic demand.

There is no indication that Lan Na wares at Tak were acquired through any trade infrastructure, and were in fact probably sourced directly from travel to the (local) markets at Chiang Mai and Sukhothai. Sukhothai today is only 90 kms by road from Tak. Chiang Mai did trade to the Burmese coast (Moulmein).

Ray: Could you elaborate on your belief that the Northern wares are the finest wares ever produced in Thailand—not contaminated by export demand geared to quantity—the rain cloud celadon, fine potting, elegant black designs, variety, and so on. Were Northern wares produced for essentially prestige consumption?

John: The rain cloud celadon, finely crazed, an elegant light grey with infinite depth almost seems to float the form, itself elegant, often very thinly thrown and carved even thinner. The distinctive floral underglaze brushed designs and exuberant deer and other decorations animal I believe, support my claim in the book that these are the finest wares ever made in Thailand.

Most Lan Na wares do not seem to have been made for daily use. Plates must have been made in association with funeral ritual, but the purpose is unsure as in the North food was eaten—and often still is—with sticky rice using fingers dipped either directly from the pot or into sauces or on banana leaf. There would have been little domestic demand except for traditional earthenware vessels and unglazed stoneware such as jars and mortars and pestles.

Many of the glazed stoneware vases and paan etc must have been used for Buddhist ceremony and for merit making, such as prestige wares used to display gifts or offerings.

Kalong shards are found throughout the Lan Na region, and the elegant black and white wares were probably the top end of the market. Sampkamhaeng found everywhere is also more the basic incised or stamped celadons was probably for the bottom end of the market.

Other than priests or royalty (the district chief or *chao*) there was no elite class. The upper class of Europe—the merchants, industrialists or landed gentry—is missing in Thailand. There are no collectors or other accumulators, and concern for material possessions is not the Buddhist way, begging the question of where the recently discovered antique ceramic has been for 500 or so years.

Ray: The End: Because of the absence of potters' marks, dates and records, the true story of Thai ceramics will probably never be known: in your book you seem to favour social and political decline—'sadder and more gradual'.

The last of the Ko Noi kilns, as Don Hein points out, are worn out old kilns fired to the end of their working life, also suggesting an industry that faded away, not a sudden catastrophe (the theory inspired by piles of wasters). Suggestions of intense and global competition may suit the export trade (Sawankalok) decline, but both north (non-export) and Ko Noi faded at the same time. There has emerged a range of theories; how do you see the end? The Lan Na kingdom itself ended in 1558 when it came under Burmese control. Did the Burmese do away with ceramics production?

John: As you say, the trade downturn theory does not stand up because of the simultaneous decline in non-export wares. The main changes in the middle of the 16th century must be:

- The destruction of the Thai world by the Burmese;
- The arrival of Islam in island South East Asia (no more animistic ritual burials) which occurred about this time, though entrenched customs would hardly disappear overnight;
- and the arrival of the Europeans. The Portuguese took Malacca in 1511 and European traders were present soon after in great numbers at Ayutthaya. Trade between them and India and China as well as South East Asia must have been huge and of great variety. If Thai pottery was still reaching Ayutthaya, it must have been able to be traded, but there is no evidence of this trade in Dutch and English manifests.

Don't forget that the Thai feudal system was based on people not land (*Sakdina*). The civilian population was regarded as spoils of war. There is some indication that the Burmese relocated and resettled great numbers of people, but the ceramics industry did not resurface in Burma as one might expect if the potters were relocated, and there is evidence that crafts, such as temple building still continued in Lan Na under Burmese rule.

Ray: The Burmese attacks culminated in a long and bitter campaign against Ayutthaya, which fell in 1569. Although Ayutthaya's golden era was still to come, it was not till the turn of the century that some strength returned to the Thais.

John: There are a number of factors that must have affected the ceramics production at the source, disruption occurring at the kiln sites. The Burmese invasion together with other social and

political factors so weakened Thai civilisation that it took many years to recover, and probably saw the ceramics industry gradually fade away—“the kiln fires went out one by one”.

Notes

1. Brown, R. 1977, revised 1988. *The ceramics of South East Asia, their dating & identification*. Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur. The Chinese influence is discussed pp. 74-75.

2. Shaw, J. C. 1989 *Northern Thai Ceramics*. Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur. The ‘kylin’ motif photo is on p. 54.

3. Gibson, D.B. 1996 *Death of a salesman*. In *Craft Specialisation and Social Evolution* Ed B. Wailes. University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia USA. , pp109-119.

4. White J. and Pigott V. 1996 From Community Craft to regional specialisation: intensification of copper production in pre-state Thailand. In *Craft Specialisation and Social Evolution*, Ed B. Wailes.

University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia USA. pp 151-175.

5. Hein, D.L. 1999 The first underglaze decoration at Sawankalok – identification of a key influence? *Taida Journal Vol 7*, University of Taiwan, pp 138-158.

6. Vickery, M. 1986 Some New Evidence for the Cultural History of Central Thailand. *Siam Society Newsletter*, The Siam Society, Thailand, Vol 3:2, pp 4-6.

7. Grave P. R. 1995. *The shift to commodity: a study of ceramic production and upland- lowland interaction in northwestern Thailand 1000-1650AD*. PhD Thesis, University of Sydney. Sydney, Australia.

8. Brown, R. *ibid.* p.9. Footnote 4.