CHINESE CERAMICS AT ANGKOR

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ABSTRACT

This paper gives a brief account of the current state of knowledge about Chinese wares discovered during the course of recent excavations in the Angkor Archaeological Park. It goes on to suggest that the ceramic sequence established by Bernard-Philippe Groslier in the 1950s and 1960s should be revised and extended well into the Yuan period (1260-1368).

The magnitude and variety of China's ceramic trade are becoming increasingly clear through the meticulous work of archaeologists in China and Southeast Asia (summarised in Needham 2004). At Angkor, around 1300, Zhou Daguan had noted that the Chinese goods most in demand were 'gold and silver, then light-mottled double-threaded silks. After these come tin goods from Zhenzhu, lacquered trays from Wenzhu, green porcelain from Quanzhou and Chuzhu' (section 21, Smithies 2001: 63). Archaeology confirms the popularity of Chinese imports: during a quarter-century of fieldwork, from 1949 to 1974, Bernard Philippe Groslier, the last French Conservateur at Angkor, said he had excavated 'literally thousands' of Chinese sherds (1981: 225).

Groslier distinguished four categories of Chinese imports, dating from the Northern Song through to the Ming periods (1981: 230-231):

> High-quality unique vases, concentrated in the Palace area, which he thought could have been 'embassy gifts' (starting in the Northern Song, 960-1226).
>
> Good-quality pieces, found either around temples or as caches in tombs; starting in the Southern Song (1127-1279) and increasing in the later Angkorian period.
>
> A considerable quantity of mass-produced objects (bowls, boxes, globular vases), almost always from domestic sites.
>
> Narrow-neck jars, unglazed but well-fired, sometimes re-used and always in domestic sites.

He thought the unglazed jars (d) were 'discarded packing', that is to say that they had been imported for their contents, whereas the other types (a-c) may have had a variety of uses; the circular boxes, for instance, could have held betel leaves. In his view most of the glazed Khmer wares at the kilns of the Kulen Mountain, north of Angkor, were local copies of Chinese models, particularly boxes and flasks. He accordingly dated them to not earlier than the Northern Song.

Groslier created a chronology for Khmer ceramics (Table 1) by combining the finds from his work on the temples with the only stratified site available to him: the Srah Srang two-phase cemetery (Courbin 1988). As he was well aware, there were several problems with this chronology: firstly most of the ceramics were found incidentally during conservation work on the monuments, and had to be dated relative to the structures, which in turn were dated in regnal years by inscriptions—not all of which were reliable. The Chinese ceramics might perhaps be used for independent dating, but on reflection their dating was not precise either. Some might be younger than they looked, for manufacturers might very well have produced 'archaising' models to please their foreign customers. Conversely, genuinely old pieces might have been kept as heirlooms; thus the date of manufacture might be far removed from the date of deposition. Groslier gives some telling instances from the Srah Srang site: in one case, early-looking Chinese pieces were associated with 11th to 12th century Khmer bronzes, while there was the reverse case of a cache containing 12th century Khmer jars, Yuan ceramics (1260-1368) and 16th to 17th century bronze Buddhas (Groslier 1981: 233).

Normally, the chronology would have been refined by re-examination of the material. In Cambodia, however, most of the ceramic material stored in Siem Reap was destroyed during the Democratic Kampuchea regime, as were many of the excavation records. Groslier's premature death, in France in 1986, prevented him from writing up his results as fully as he had intended. Researchers since the 1980s have therefore had to start anew in terms of typologies and chronologies.

Preliminary results suggest that Groslier may have overestimated the quantity of Chinese pottery: Table 2 does not indicate anything like the 80% he is said to have found at the Royal Palace (Brown 1977: 35). His statement can only make sense if he meant 80% of the *glazed* wares, still a very high proportion, but possible in a place where, Zhou Daguan tells us, vessels were of gold or silver (section 30, Smithies 2001: 81). In all of the recently published Ankgorian sites there is certainly a consistent presence of Chinese wares. Many have been illustrated in *Udaya* 1 (2000) and it can be seen that they would fall into Groslier's categories (b) and (c). I have seen no recent discussion of his category (d), 'discarded

packing', but it offers a fruitful avenue for research: with constantly improving techniques of residue analysis it may be possible to determine whether there were imports of specific contents as well as containers.

Of the recently-excavated sites in the Angkor Archaeological Park, including the Royal Palace, all but two are unstratified, with ceramics turning up as fill or in building platforms. The exceptions are Tumnup Barang and Trapeang Thlok.

Tumnup Barang, south of Preah Khan, is an 18 x 1m trench, excavated by the Sydney-based Greater Angkor Project down to the ancient ground surface at a depth of c. 3m. The site is on the edge of an ancient water-channel and was probably domestic; below post-occupation fill is a layer of paving (on which sat a slightly damaged stone *yoni*) Below the paving level was found part of a Chinese green-glazed bowl, identified by Sharon Wai Yee Wong of the University of Singapore, as from a Yuan-system kiln, i.e. 13th to 14th century (pers. comm. 2006); below this sherd the Khmer glazed ware is mostly of ash-glazed Kulen type, while, above it but still beneath the paving, it is mostly of brown-glaze type. With the brown-glaze wares are also several fragments of Dehua moulded bowls and boxes, of types well known from the Philippines and Malaysia (e.g. OCSP 1993: figs 119, 125-6 and SACS 1985: figs 247-9). Similar pieces have been found at the Royal Palace and are dated by Dupoizat to the 13th and 14th centuries (1999: figs 12-13, 16).

Trapeang Thlok was excavated in 2004 by a French salvage archaeology team (INRAP), on the southern edge of Siem Reap airport, i.e. south of the West Baray. It is a very large site —c. 300 x 200 m, 6 hectares—which appears to have been a moated wooden temple with an associated domestic site (c. 1500 sq m). The excavators date it to the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries and note the paucity of Chinese wares, which they are inclined to attribute to the relatively early date of occupation.

The results from these two sites can be seen to broadly confirm Groslier's initial model of relatively few Chinese imports in the 10th century, increasing significantly over time. No new Chinese types have been found to modify his general typology. An interesting aspect of the Tumnup Barang excavation, however, is the general association of brown-glazed wares with Dehua sherds of the 13th and 14th centuries. The Kulen-type ware seems to be stratigraphically earlier than this Chinese material; there may have been a break in occupation. The presence of Yuan-date Chinese wares alongside 'Bayon-style' pots would fit well with the later date now given for the building of the Bayon, through Claude Jacques' re-dating of the death of Indravarman II to 1270 (GAP forthcoming).

Questions about the dating of Kulen ware and other such questions about Khmer ceramics will certainly be answered through APSARA's current research on kiln-sites north and west of Angkor (Ea Darith, pers. comm. 2006). In addition, the newly-created Ceramic Conservation Centre will enable APSARA to refine the research questions and analyses which are at present being carried out independently by different teams. Better research and better resource management will mean better results and it is safe to predict that Cambodian archaeology will soon provide a greater understanding of the economic and cultural relations between China, the Khmer Empire and South East Asia generally.

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Table 1. Bernard-Philippe Groslier's chronology for Khmer ceramics (Brown 1977: 34-53, Mourer 1986: chapter 2)

	Indravarman Yasovarman	Rajendravarman Jayavarman V	Suryavarman I	Udayadityarman Jayavar. VI	Suryavarman II	'Bayon' Jayav.VII	Post-JVII
	880s-940s	950s-1000	1002-1050	1050-1107	1113-1177	After 1177	13th - 15th
Low-fired, unglazed domestic wares							
Celadon-coloured 'Kulen' glaze							
'lie-de-vin' glaze							
Baluster jars							
Glossy brown glazes							
Zoomorphic pots							
Two-colour glazes							
Bowls with inner-foot							?
Applied ornament							?
Matte brown and black glazes							
Dark green glazes							

Table 2. Proportion of Chinese imports in recently excavated sites at Angkor.

Site	Date of excavation	Khmer Unglazed	Khmer Glazed	Chinese	Total sherds	Source
Bayon, North'Library'	1995-1999	822 71.1%	274 23.7%	60 5.1%	1156	JSA 2000: 207
Chau Say Tevoda	1998-1999	17	3	7	27	CSA 2000: 275
Preah Khan	1989-1999	31	34	9	74	WMF2000: 297-299
Royal Palace	1995-1998			5425 10.8%	c.50,000	Franiatte 2000: 92, Dupoizat 1999: 103
Trapeang Thlok, zone 2	2004	90%	8.8%	0.3%	8765	INRAP 2004: 150-153, Bâty and Bolle 2005: 22
Tumnup Barang	2001-2005	5715 88.1%	575 8.8%	190 2.9%	6480	GAP (forthcoming)