

# A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON THE DISTRIBUTION AND CONSUMPTION OF CERAMICS IN HONG KONG DURING THE SONG-YUAN PERIOD

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## ABSTRACT

*Preliminary study of unearthened Song-Yuan ceramics (AD 907-1368) from controlled excavations in Hong Kong suggests that celadon and brown ware are the largest categories of ceramic types. Bowls, dishes and utilitarian storage vessels such as jars and basins are the major forms of ceramics. Export ceramics from Guangdong Province, such as Xicun, Chaozhou and Qishi wares, were popular in Hong Kong. Inhabitants also acquired ceramics from other provinces such as Fujian, Jiangxi and Zhejiang for daily use. Most of the ceramics were distributed as ordinary commodities in the local market.*

Historians usually portray Hong Kong as the outer port of Guangzhou or as a strategic point on ancient China's maritime route to Southeast Asia. Their interpretation is mainly based on information in the *Xin Tang Shu* (New History of Tang Dynasty) which states that Tuen Mun held a strategic position for maritime trade and coastal defense in the the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907) (Ouyang 1975:1153; Lo 1963:17-19). In the Song-Yuan records, there is mention of a salt-producing establishment, the *Guanfuchang*, on the northwest shore of Kowloon Bay, directed by a salt-commissioner and guarded by an imperial garrison during the Song Period (AD 960-1279) (Lo 1963:3). The records state that a shoreline with shelf-like banks is desirable for salt-making and that Hong Kong, which has this type of coast, was a very important salt-producing area. The legend of the escape of the Song Emperors from Fuzhou to Kowloon at the end of Southern Song Dynasty (AD 1127-1279) is further evidence of a South China Sea route (Lo 1963:61-65). Since Hong Kong consists of the Kowloon Peninsula and surrounding islands, there are several good harbors for shipping. Local inhabitants engaged in fishing, salt-producing and pearl-fishing (Lo 1963:3-7; Siu 1995:59,74). From archaeology, ceramics unearthened from controlled excavations offer new information for interpreting the economic activities in Hong Kong during the Song-Yuan Period.

Since Hong Kong has experienced rapid development in recent decades, there have been many land reclamation projects which involve dredging the harbor. These infra-

structure projects affect the potential areas of ancient cultural remains. More and more archaeological investigations and excavations have been conducted since the beginning of the enforcement of Environmental Impact Assessment legislation in 1998. Though a large amount of archaeological data from different kinds of sites such as tombs and dwelling areas have been accumulated under the enactment of this ordinance, and some important archaeological sites have been recovered in Hong Kong since the 1930s, the distribution and consumption of ceramics have not been systematically analyzed by researchers. A preliminary study of ceramics types and forms controlled excavations will give us a picture of distribution and consumption of ceramics in Hong Kong during the Song-Yuan Period.

## DISTRIBUTION OF CERAMICS

In Hong Kong, most ceramics are unearthened from small scale excavations (usually less than 50 square metres). With the overwhelming speed of infrastructure development projects since 1998, time and funding for contract excavations of ceramic sites have been limited. Nevertheless, at least 9 sites have yielded Song-Yuan ceramics in which more than 500 square metres have been excavated. These are Tai Hum Tsuen (Au 2002a), Sha Ha (Antiquities and Monuments Office 2005), Ho Chung (Sun 2005), Lung Kwu Sheung Tan (Meacham 1989-92a), So Kwun Wat (Au 2000), Ngan Hom Shek (Au 2003), Penny's Bay (Environmental Resources Management 2002a; Hong Kong Institute of Archaeology 2002a), Sham Wan Tsuen (Cameron and Williams 1984; Meacham 1994c) and Ha Law Wan (Meacham 1994b). From my rough calculations, about 40 sites yielding Song-Yuan ceramics have undergone controlled excavation. They are mostly distributed on the islands and the New Territories, and are almost absent on Hong Kong Island (Figure 1).

## CERAMIC TYPES, FORMS AND PROVENANCES

There are at least 6000 Song-Yuan sherds (including at least 10 intact vessels) from controlled excavations in Hong Kong. Despite the fact that the bluish-white (*qingbai*) production centre in Jiangxi Province was adjacent to Guangdong Province, and the Chaozhou kiln in Guangdong was the second largest production centre

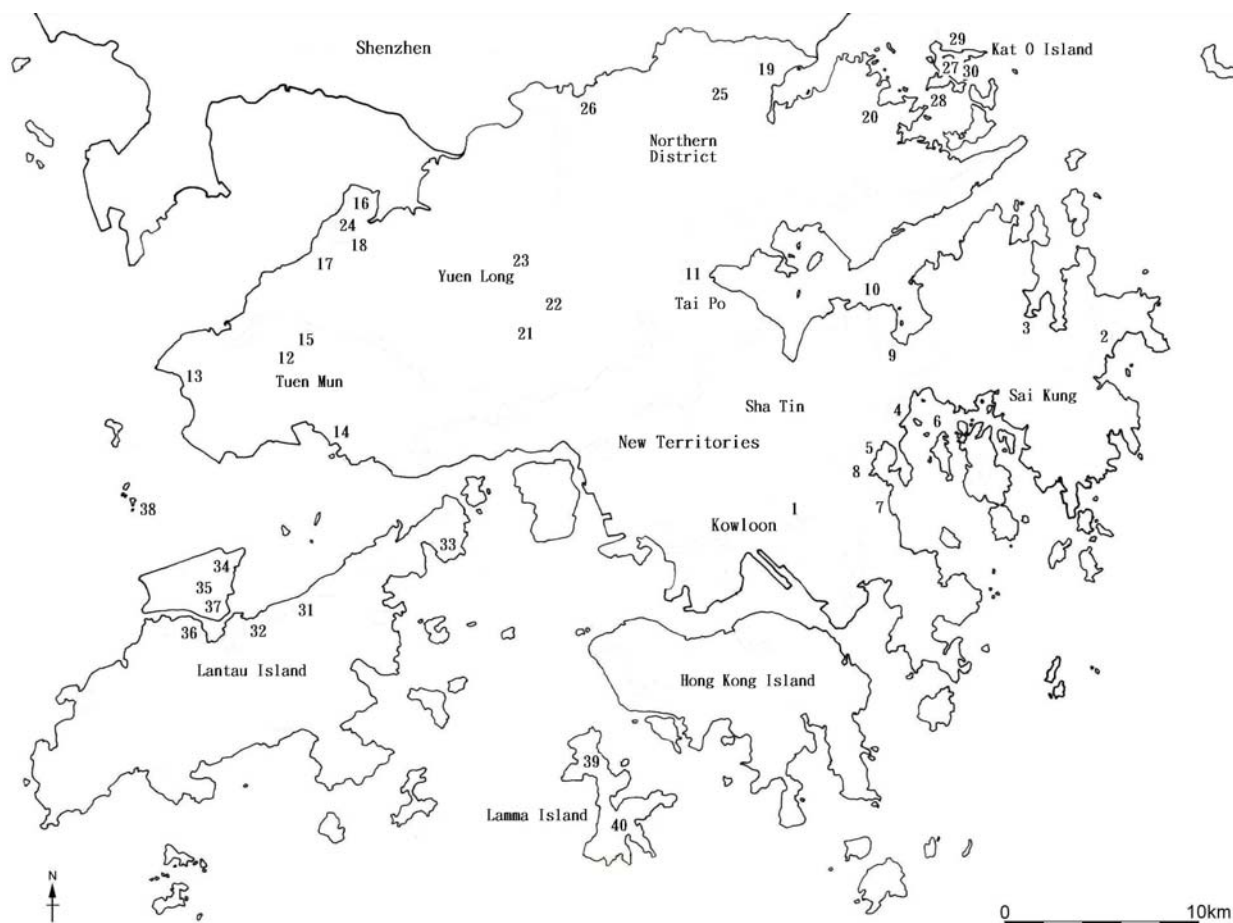


Figure 1: Distribution of the unearthened ceramics from Song-Yuan Period under controlled excavations. 1. Tai Hum Tsuen (Au 2002a, Archaeo-Environments Ltd 2002) 2. Yim Tin Tsai (Mo 2001, ERM 2002b) 3. To Gwa Ping (Mo 2001) 4. Sha Ha (AMO 2002, 2005, AMO and Henan 2004) 5. Pak Sha Wan (Mo 2002) 6. Pak Sha Chau (HKAS 2002) 7. Pak Shui Wun (Hunan 1998) 8. Ho Chung (Zhongshan 2001, Hunan 1998, Sun 2005) 9. Tai Tung (HKAS 2000) 10. Che Ha (HKAS 2000) 11. Shek Kwu Lung Tsuen (Hong Kong Wenwu Kaogudui 2000) 12. Siu Hang Tsuen (Liu 1999-2002) 13. Lung Kwu Sheung Tan (Meacham 1989-1992a) 14. So Kwun Wat (Au 2000) 15. Tsing Chuen Wai (Wong 2003) 16. Mong Tseng Wai (Au et al 1999, HKAS 1999-2002) 17. Ho Ka Yuen, Sheung Pak Nai (Au et al 1999) 18. Tung Tau Tsuen (Au 2002b) 19. Shek Chung (Mo and Lee 2000) 20. Lai Chi Wo (AMO 2000) 21. Lin Fa Tei (HKIA 1999a) 22. Pat Heung Kwu Miu (HKIA 1999b) 23. Tin Tak Kung (HKIA 2002c) 24. Ngau Hom Shek (Au 2003) 25. Wang Hau Shan (AMO 2001) 26. Yuen Ling Tsai (HKIA 2002b) 27. Sheung Wai Tsuen (AMO 2000) 28. Pak Sha Tau (AMO 2000) 29. Tung O Wan (Shenzhen 1998, AMO 2000) 30. Au Pui Tang Tsuen (Shenzhen 1998, AMO 2000) 31. Mei Wan Tsai (CCAA 1992a) 32. Lau Fau Sha (CCAA 1992b) 33. Penny's Bay (ERM 2002a, HKIA 2002a) 34. Sham Wan Tsuen (Cameron and Williams 1984, Meacham 1994c) 35. Fu Tei Wan (Meacham 1994a) 36. San Tau Tsuen (Institute of Culture Relics and Archaeology of Guangzhou 1998) 37. Ha Law Wan (Meacham 1994b) 38. Sha Chau (Frost 1975) 39. Sha Po Tsuen, Yung Shue Wan (Meacham 1989-1992b, Spry 1986-1988) 40. Sham Wan (Meacham 1978)

for this ware in the Northern Song Period (AD 960-1127), the largest category of ceramics by quantity in Hong Kong are celadons, while brown and unglazed wares make up the second largest category. *Qingbai* and white ware fall into the third group, but the quantity of celadon sherds far exceeds the amount of *qingbai* ware. A certain quantity of oil spot glazed wares (*jian* or *temmoku*) wares are also found in the sites.

It is difficult to identify all the ceramic forms from the sites because most sherds are small. In my preliminary investigation from illustrations in the archaeological reports and the ceramic assemblages in the Antiquities and

Monuments Office (AMO), bowls, dishes and utilitarian storage vessels such as jars and basins are the major forms of ceramic artifacts. They are common on most of the archaeological sites in Hong Kong. Eating and drinking utensils, cups, plates and ewers, daily utensils, vases, lamp saucers, censers, boxes, lids and grinding basins were discovered, but the quantities of identifiable sherds only comprise a small proportion of ceramic form in the total ceramic assemblage.

Ceramics from the Xicun, Chaozhou and Qishi kilns in Guangdong Province; the Jian, Dehua, Putian kilns and southern Fujian kilns in Fujian Province; and the *Yue*-type

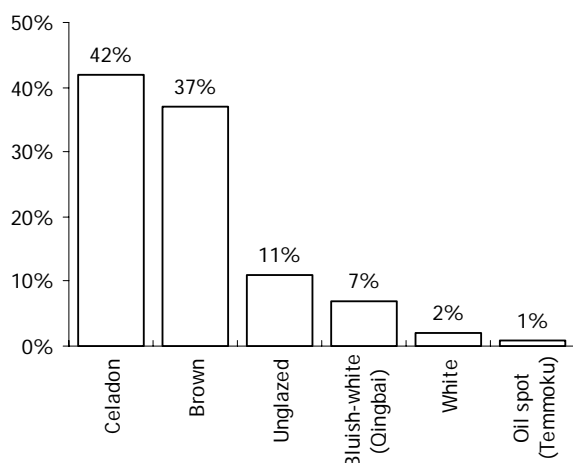


Figure 2: Approximate proportions of different ceramics types (based on the reports information of sherds counts)

and Longquan kilns in Jiangxi and Zhejiang Provinces are found in the ceramic reports for different sites and in the writings of Chinese ceramics researchers. Sherds from unidentified kilns comprise at least 30% of the total assemblage; according to the physical and stylistic attributes of the sherds, they may be products of South China. Some typical export ceramic shapes from Guangdong kilns, such as phoenix ewers, fish shaped ewers, kendi, beakers, lotus petal incense burners, jarlets and bottles with brown painting have not yet been found in any Hong Kong sites (Lam 1985). However, in Guangzhou, such forms can be found in Song Period river bank sites and in Song-Yuan dwelling and temple sites (Guangzhou 1987:95; Guangdong 2004; Institute of Culture Relics and Archaeology of Guangzhou 2005a, 2005b, 2005c). When historians and local archaeologists hypothesize that Hong Kong was the outer port of Guangzhou or a strategic point along the ancient Chinese maritime route to Southeast Asia, they should take note of this phenomenon in their statements.

#### Celadons

Eating and drinking utensils, such as bowls, dishes, plates, cups and ewers are the major forms in this category. At least 2400 sherds come from bowls. Most do not have any decoration, but some have dotted combing or lotus petal decoration. They were likely produced in Xicun, Chaozhou, or Fujian kilns in the Song Period. Longquan ware sherds have been found in different sites of southern Song to Yuan (AD 1271-1368) date. Lotus petal bowls are one of the common shapes.

#### Brown and unglazed ware

Almost all sites contain fragments of large brown or unglazed storage jars and basins. Some sherds have dark green, yellow-green, brown or black glaze. Body sherds are largely unglazed and some of the jars were furnished with horizontal handles and incised wavy line drawn hori-

zontally on the side. Jar sherds with different stamped potters' marks can be found in different sites. Some have Chinese characters in the floral frames for *ru* (in), *daji* (big fortune), *ji* (mark), *wang* (Wang), *mi* (search), *da* (big), *Shaoxingjiunian* (A.D. 1139), *chunguan* (spring light), *he* (harmony) and *qi* (Qi). Stamped leaf decoration can be found on some jar shoulders fragments and basin interiors. They are typical Qishi kiln products from the Northern Song to mid-Southern Song period (Foshan 1978). Jarlets, ewers and lids with incised design were also unearthed from Tai Hum Tsuen (Au 2002a), Ngau Hom Shek (Au 2003) and Lin Fa Tei (Hong Kong Institute of Archaeology 1999a).

#### Qingbai and white ware

Similar to celadon, *qingbai* and white wares are always unearthed in the form of bowls, dishes, plates and ewers. Beside eating and drinking vessels, a handful of box and vase sherds were recovered in Ngau Hum Shek (Au 2003) and Ho Chung (Sun 2005). The *qingbai* and white ware consists of three major types; one from Jiangxi or Guangdong usually has incised or impressed floral or fish decorations, the second is *qingbai* or white ware with incised design from southern Fujian, and the third is moulded ware from the Dehua Kilns.

#### Oil spot (*jian* or *temmoku*) ware

Tea bowls are the only shape found in the oil spot glaze sherds. *Jian* ware bowls with Chinese characters in gold decoration from the Yulintin kilns of Fujian have been unearthed in Hong Kong. A *shoushan* (long life like mountain) bowl recovered from a pit in Ho Chung, Sai Kung, and two bowl sherds with *shou* (long life) and *shan* (mountain) characters in Mei Wan Tsai, Lantau Island, were discovered (Sun 2005; Centre for Chinese Archaeology and Art 1992a). Recent researches on *jian* bowls with gold decoration found in northern Fujian kiln sites suggest that this fine tea bowl with delicate decoration was a high quality and rare type (Chen 2002; Fujian Provincial Museum 2000). Such bowls may have been clan heirlooms or may have been circulated in Guangdong markets in limited quantity. Some bowl sherds are the products of the Xicun kiln of Guangzhou and the Jizhou kiln of Jiangxi.

#### DISCUSSION

Most of the ceramic assemblages from controlled excavations consist of sherds, but the Sham Wan Tsuen burial site is an exception. From 1979 to 1984, the Hong Kong Archaeological Society (HKAS) conducted excavations to locate Tang kiln sites (maybe used for lime or salt or ceramic production) in the sand bar area. Three Song-Yuan burials (Burials A-C) were found in the site. There was a group of two incised celadon bowls probably from Fujian kilns, one Xicun incised *qingbai* dish placed upside down, with one small brown glazed jar and a long iron knife from Burial A. Burial B had two bowls and two brown glazed large jars. One of the jars contained cremated re-

mains, while in Burial C one small Xicun *qingbai* bowl and one probable Fujian celadon bowl were also upside down, with a Yue-type ewer alongside. Fourteen Northern Song coins were found in association (Cameron and Williams 1984:21-24; Guangdong Provincial Museum 1989:73).

In the dwelling areas, for example the Sha Ha site, most celadon, *qingbai*, *jian* ware, brown and unglazed sherds were unearthed from pits which likely contained daily refuse. They are products of various kiln sites from the Guangdong Xicun, Chaozhou and Qishi kilns, and the Fujian Tong'an and Jiangxi kilns (Antiquities and Monuments Office 2005; Liu 2005). In the Ho Chung site, archaeologists discovered a number of postholes and pits which appear to be from a large dwelling area within the settlement. These postholes belonged to pile-dwelling structures commonly found in South China. Four hundred sherds of vessels for daily use, such as bowls, dishes, cups, basins and jars, were identified as the products of the Guangdong Xicun, Chaozhou, Qishi kilns and the Fujian kilns (Sun 2005). Although most of the ceramics are still being sorted, it is possible to state that quantities of Northern Song to mid-Southern Song ceramics from the Guangdong Xicun, Chaozhou, and Qishi kilns were commonly distributed in Hong Kong. The inhabitants of the Hong Kong area also acquired ceramics from other provinces such as Fujian, Jiangxi and Zhejiang for daily use.

However, these common Northern Song Guangdong products were absent in Tsing Chuen Wai, Tuen Mun site, whereas Fujian Putian celadon, Zhejiang Longquan celadon and Jiangxi *qingbai* ware, dated from the mid-Southern Song to Yuan Period, were unearthed (Wong 2003). Although archaeological data from controlled excavations from the late Southern Song period are very limited, the distribution shows that possibly there were significant changes in ceramics types and exporting regions for ceramics found in Hong Kong throughout the period. The decline of the Guangdong ceramic industries in the Southern Song to Yuan Period was one of the major factors here (Wong 2004:48). Zhejiang, Fujian and Jiangxi export ceramics were most likely for daily use in the markets of Hong Kong in this period. Recent reports also indicate that vast amounts of ceramics from these provinces have been found in Pearl River Delta coastal areas such as Guangzhou and Zhuhai (Zhuhai 1993; Guangdong 2004; Institute of Culture Relics and Archaeology of Guangzhou 2005a, 2005b).

This phenomenon may relate to the highly developed commodities economy which existed since the Northern Song Period, in which merchants had huge amounts of floating capital for selecting and purchasing commodities which were much in demand. They usually bought commodities at wholesale prices and sold them from province to province, village to city, land to sea (Guo 1997:253-255). Ceramics were one of the major export commodities for wholesaling during the Song-Yuan Period.

In addition to the exports there was substantial population migration. More and more people from the north escaped to Guangdong in the Pearl River estuary during late Nanhan to Northern Song period (10th century) and at the time of the Mongols' final conquest in 1260-1270. The migrants constructed hundreds of miles of flood-control levees on the lower reaches of branches of Pearl River in order to make rice paddies. Large volumes of alluvium settled to form the Pearl River delta which gradually created highly productive agricultural land (Markson 2004). With the prosperity of the Song-Yuan period, maritime trade flourished along the sea routes. It is not surprising that export ceramics products were also concentrated in the Pearl River delta.

Merchants traded these exotic ceramics from different provinces to the people in the coastal area in Song-Yuan Period. Variations in demand and the requirements of particular groups of consumers may have affected merchants' decisions regarding the selection and purchase of ceramics from different provinces. From the distribution of different types of exotic ceramics in fragmented, small sherds it seems likely that most were distributed as ordinary commodities rather than as prestige items. A clear picture of ceramic distribution and consumption in Song-Yuan Period will emerge from future excavations and integrated analysis of ceramics markets in South China.

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