

Tribute Trade: A Comparative Study of Yuan Dynasty Ceramics and Sukhothai Dynasty Ceramics

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Abstract: Ceramics in Southeast Asian countries have been deeply influenced by Chinese ceramics, yet they also embody unique cultural attributes. This paper traces the tribute trade between the Yuan Dynasty of China and the Sukhothai Dynasty of Thailand, seeking commonalities in ceramics during that period. The study aims to compare and analyze the roles, styles, techniques, and mutual influences of Yuan Dynasty ceramics and Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics in tribute trade. Through the collection and analysis of relevant historical documents, archaeological data, and ceramic artifacts, it unveils the connections and distinctions between the ceramics of these two dynasties. The research explores the impacts of cultural exchange between the two nations in ceramics, including the transmission of techniques, artistic influences, and the exchange of art. The results of the study demonstrate that Yuan Dynasty ceramics and Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics mutually influenced each other in tribute trade and cultural exchange, jointly driving the development and innovation of ceramic art in both countries. This research holds significant importance for a deeper understanding of the diversity of Eastern ceramic culture and cultural exchange in tribute trade.

Keywords: Tribute Trade, Sukhothai Dynasty Ceramics, Yuan Dynasty Ceramics

1. Introduction

Thai ceramics represent one of the earliest subjects of serious investigation among Southeast Asian pottery, beginning with WA Graham's article "Siamese Pottery" published in the Journal of the Siam Society in 1922. The field gained momentum in the 1960s with Charles Nelson Spinks' significant contributions to the study of Thai ceramics and in the 1970s with the discovery of the Prasat Ban Phluang temple site. The "Guide to Thai Ceramics" extensively catalogs the known kiln sites in Thailand, including Haripunjaya, Kalong, Lampang, Sukhothai, and others.

1.1. Significance and Objectives of the Study

From the Yuan Dynasty of China to the pre-Qing Dynasty before the Opium War, during the early phases of Thai kingdoms such as Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, as Bangkok dynasties, the frequent exchange of envoys between these two nations indicated very close economic and cultural ties [1]. This research aims to explore the tribute trade relations between the two countries, examining the

history, culture, and artistic development of both dynasties through the ceramic exchanges in tribute trade. This study contributes to cross-cultural communication and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Through a comparative study of Yuan Dynasty ceramics and Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics, this research investigates the characteristics and influences of ceramic culture in tribute trade. In terms of visual aesthetics, it compares the forms, patterns, colors, and designs of ceramic artifacts to reveal the distinctive features and differences in the ceramic styles of both dynasties, studying their artistic expression and aesthetic appeal. In terms of manufacturing techniques, it analyzes the differences in firing processes, material choices, and decorative methods between the two dynasties to understand their technical similarities and differences, and how these affect the texture and appearance of ceramics. In the context of history, it explores the background and process of tribute trade and investigates the exchange and influence of ceramics between the two dynasties, revealing the role and significance of tribute trade in the transmission of ceramic art and culture. This research provides empirical evidence and reference for understanding the characteristics, evolution, and impact of tribute trade.

1.2. Current Status of Thai Ceramic Studies

Domestic literature on Thai ceramics offers various perspectives and clear intentions, but the quantity remains limited, with only a few articles comparing ceramics from both countries. Wu Wenke and Rao Yandang conducted a comparative analysis of plant motifs in ceramics from 15th to 16th century China and Thailand, exploring the influence of Chinese ceramics on Thai ceramics and the national characteristics embedded in Thai ceramic culture [2]. Deng Xiumei studied the form and decorative characteristics of Thai ceramics and Fujian blue and white porcelain, concluding that Thai underglaze iron-painted ceramics exhibit characteristics resembling Fujian blue and white ceramics [3]. Wang Xibo, based on the succession of ancient Chinese dynasties, studied the relationship between Chinese export porcelain and Southeast Asian ceramics, noting that the Song and Yuan periods were the second peak of Chinese ceramics exported to Southeast Asia, with Thailand and Vietnam particularly influenced [4]. Wang Wei and Wang Jianbao conducted a comparative study by examining Chaozhou kilns and ancient Thai ceramics. They utilized immigration history, historical geography data, and archaeological findings to compare the forms, glaze colors, body texture, decorative techniques, and processing methods of both, demonstrating a connection between Chaozhou kilns and ancient Thai ceramics [5]. Zhang Yue identified the underglaze painted patterns in Thai Sukhothai ceramics, attributing their direct influence to exported ceramics from Guangdong [6]. Fu Yunxian pointed out that Chinese potters first established kilns in Sukhothai, creating ceramic production activities that transported Chinese ancient ceramic culture and firing techniques to Thailand, both promoting Chinese civilization and the development of Thailand's ceramics industry [7].

2. Overview of Tribute Trade

2.1. Characteristics and Definition of Tribute Trade

In the history of ancient China's foreign relations, tribute trade served as a unique diplomatic method that had a significant impact on China's diplomatic activities [8]. Given the ancient strength of China as a nation, many Southeast Asian countries established tribute trade relationships with China under the image of a tribute state. According to the "History of the Yuan Dynasty," between 1297 and 1323, the Sukhothai Dynasty sent envoys to China seven times, establishing a tribute trade relationship with the Yuan Dynasty. Chinese ceramics, renowned for their exceptional quality and unique craftsmanship, became highly sought-after treasures among the Thai royal family and nobility. This led to frequent ceramic trade between the two nations, resulting in substantial economic benefits.

Ceramic trade played a pivotal role as a bridge and link in the tribute trade between these two countries, fostering communication and cooperation.

2.2. Tribute Trade Relations Between the Yuan Dynasty and the Sukhothai Dynasty

In the year 1269, the Yuan Dynasty's geographer Zhou Daguan accompanied a Yuan Dynasty envoy to Southeast Asia and completed the literary work "The Customs of Cambodia," which mentioned an ancient kingdom known as the "Sukhothai Dynasty." This is the earliest reference to ancient Siam (the ancient Chinese name for Thailand) in Chinese historical literature. Sukhothai, which translates to "Dawn of Happiness" in Thai, served as the capital of Thailand and was an ancient city in central Thailand, located approximately 447 kilometers to the south of Bangkok and 350 kilometers to the north of Chiang Mai [9]. The Sukhothai Dynasty, as one of the significant dynasties in Thai history, was established in 1238 and lasted until 1438.

The tribute trade relationship between the Yuan Dynasty and the Sukhothai Dynasty can be traced back to the 13th to 14th centuries [10]. During this period, tribute trade accounted for a greater proportion of foreign trade than during the Han, Tang, and Song, Liao, and Jin periods. At that time, the Yuan Dynasty, as a central empire, established an extensive tribute trade network due to its military strength. The Yuan Dynasty was renowned for its superb ceramic craftsmanship, producing high-quality ceramics. These ceramic wares became treasured possessions for the Sukhothai Dynasty's royal and noble classes. Through tribute trade, these ceramic artifacts entered the Sukhothai Dynasty, showcasing the Yuan Dynasty's ceramic-making technology and cultural heritage. Simultaneously, it strengthened the political and economic ties between the two nations.

3. Historical Background of Yuan Dynasty Ceramics and Sukhothai Dynasty Ceramics

3.1. Development and Characteristics of Yuan Dynasty Ceramics

The Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), as a significant period in Chinese history, witnessed the proliferation of Yuan opera and the mass production of blue and white porcelain due to urban development and the aesthetic influences of the Mongols from the northern steppes, reflecting popular culture [11]. The "slaughtering the city and sparing the artisans" policy during the Jin-Yuan transition protected a large number of ceramic craftsmen. Many literati joined ceramic production during this time due to the turmoil of war. Additionally, the Yuan Dynasty's "overseas trade" policy significantly increased both the quantity and variety of ceramics exported to foreign countries compared to previous dynasties [12]. The Yuan Dynasty, as a multi-ethnic and diverse era, enjoyed significant regional and ethnic cultural diversity. The introduction of high-quality ceramic raw materials from abroad, such as cobalt imported from Persia, resulted in more vibrant colors in blue and white porcelain produced, with finer decorative patterns [13]. This exchange with foreign nations led to significant developments and improvements in ceramic production techniques during the Yuan Dynasty, culminating in the creation of enduring masterpieces in blue and white porcelain. The technology experienced dissemination and feedback as a result of the Yuan rulers' colonial expansion and extensive overseas trade [14].

3.2. Development and Characteristics of Sukhothai Dynasty Ceramics

The tradition of Thai ceramics can be traced back to as early as 3,000 BC. The Sukhothai Dynasty (14th to 18th centuries) holds a significant place in Thai history, and its ceramics display unique development and characteristics. In terms of craftsmanship and technological innovation, Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics gradually matured and introduced innovative techniques. Various kilns were used in ceramic firing, including the Bangkok kiln and the square kiln, each with its unique features and

firing methods. Common decorative patterns on ceramics included flowers, animals, figures, and geometric designs. These decorations were rich in vitality and ornamentation, showcasing the artistic style and cultural features of the era.

The black underglaze ceramics of Si-Satchanalai (near Sukhothai in the Si Satchanalai Historical Park) and Sukhothai share many similarities in terms of firing techniques, supports, decorative painting, and the use of iron oxide. The similarities are undisputed; the debate centers on the direction of influence. Some research suggests that certain local techniques in Thailand were a natural development of the indigenous industry, with Chinese potters emulating their Thai counterparts [15]. The production techniques and artistic style of Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics had a significant impact on the subsequent development of Thai ceramics and have been inherited and further developed in Thai ceramic craftsmanship.

4. Comparative Study of Yuan Dynasty Ceramics and Sukhothai Dynasty Ceramics

4.1. Style Comparison Analysis

Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics place a strong emphasis on intricate details and fine carving, aiming for a splendid yet delicate artistic effect. Overglaze enameling is the most representative decorative technique of Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics. It involves applying colorful patterns on the glaze surface, resulting in rich and colorful decorative effects. Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics often employ the inlaying of gold thread into the ceramic surface, adding a sense of luxury to the decorations. The shapes of Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics emphasize smooth lines and elegant forms, frequently featuring curved and arched designs, presenting a graceful artistic image. As shown in Figure 1, Sukhothai ceramics incorporate numerous intricate floral motifs with central fish decorations.



Figure 1: Sukhothai Ceramics (Image Source: San Kamphaeng Museum)

Yuan Dynasty ceramics hold a significant position in ceramic art history due to their unique style. The appearance of blue and white porcelain in the Yuan Dynasty marked a bold departure in ceramic painting decoration, incorporating narrative stories and lending ceramics a literary and lifelike quality. This brought new dimensions to the decorative style and aesthetic appreciation of blue and white porcelain [16]. As shown in Figure 2, this Yuan Dynasty blue and white plate features a lotus petal mouth rim, rounded belly with foot ring, and the plate's center adorned with a blue and white fish and

aquatic plant motif. This plate was specially adapted to the lifestyle of the Arab people and is considered export porcelain made at the Jingdezhen kilns for West Asia during the Yuan Dynasty.



Figure 2: Yuan Dynasty Blue and White Plate (Image Source: National Artisan Platform)

When comparing Figure 1 and Figure 2 as case examples, in terms of decorative style: Yuan Dynasty ceramics are primarily characterized by blue and white decorations, using blue pigment on a white body to create exquisite patterns, resulting in a unique artistic effect. Blue and white decorations often feature themes from nature, such as flowers, birds, figures, and landscapes. They are characterized by large, simple, and fluid designs, pursuing a sense of simplicity and grandeur. In contrast, Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics frequently utilize overglaze enameling with deep, vibrant colors, which involves applying colored patterns on the glaze surface, producing a rich and opulent effect. The content of Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics' decorations is often based on mythology, religion, and courtly themes, displaying diverse and intricate forms.

Regarding the characteristics of the pottery shapes: Yuan Dynasty ceramics exhibit a wide variety of shapes, including bowls, plates, vases, jars, and pots. Their forms often feature clean and flowing lines with full, harmonious shapes. In contrast, Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics emphasize elegant lines and flowing forms, often employing curved and arched designs, presenting a soft and graceful artistic image. Common vessel types include vases, plates, bowls, and pots, featuring intricate and detailed forms.

In terms of artistic expression: Yuan Dynasty ceramics adopt a style that is simple, grand, and dignified, focusing on the overall artistic effect and creating an atmosphere. They achieve this through the use of clean lines and minimalistic decorations, emphasizing a sense of nobility and elegance. Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics pay attention to intricate details and fine carving, aiming for a delicate and splendid artistic effect. The rich colors in their decorations exhibit a grandiose courtly style and a mysterious religious ambiance. Through the analysis of the styles of Yuan Dynasty ceramics and Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics, it's evident that they differ significantly in terms of decorative style, vessel characteristics, and artistic expression.

4.2. Technical Comparison Analysis

The Sukhothai kiln, a renowned Thai pottery kiln, has long been recognized by scholars studying Thai ceramics as having been established by Chinese potters, around the late 13th century, during China's Yuan Dynasty. It was either established by Thai envoys on their return from visiting China or by Chinese potters in response to the demand of the Thai royal court.

Research includes a technical comparison between Yuan Dynasty ceramics and Sukhothai ceramics. In terms of glazes and firing techniques: Yuan Dynasty blue and white porcelain primarily utilizes blue pigment for decoration, with blue paint applied to a white ceramic body before glazing and high-temperature firing. The glaze flows naturally, resulting in a smooth and glossy surface. Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics employ various color pigments, including red, green, yellow, and blue, using techniques like painting on the glaze and inlaying gold threads for decoration. Sukhothai ceramics are typically fired at lower temperatures, often utilizing a combination of reduction and oxidation firing, creating unique colors and luster in the glaze.

Regarding painting techniques and decorative methods: Yuan Dynasty blue and white porcelain mainly relies on painting techniques, using brushwork and line strokes to convey intricate details and layers in the patterns. The painting style is characterized by simplicity, grandeur, and an emphasis on expressing the theme's aesthetics and overall harmony. Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics employ a variety of decorative techniques, such as overglaze enameling and inlaying gold threads. Overglaze enameling allows for more intricate and colorful pattern representation, while gold inlay adds a sense of luxury. The decorative methods focus on intricate details and fine carving.

Concerning kilns and firing environments: Yuan Dynasty ceramics are primarily produced in dragon kilns or official kilns, where high temperatures and relatively closed firing environments favor glaze flow and the formation of a smooth glaze surface. Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics are often fired in ground or updraft kilns, which operate at relatively lower temperatures with good ventilation. This firing environment helps maintain vibrant colors and allows for the implementation of fine inlaying techniques.

4.3. Influence of Ceramic Exchange between Yuan Dynasty and Sukhothai Dynasty

There was extensive cultural exchange in ceramics between the Yuan Dynasty and the Sukhothai Dynasty, and this exchange was facilitated and strengthened within the context of tribute trade. The Sukhothai Dynasty presented tribute items to the Yuan Dynasty, and in return, the Yuan Dynasty gifted blue and white porcelain and other ceramics. This exchange allowed Chinese ceramic culture to spread overseas, significantly enhancing the breadth and depth of Chinese cultural dissemination abroad. Tribute trade fostered the exchange and spread of ceramic culture between the two countries. During tribute trade, the Sukhothai Dynasty showed a keen interest in the technology and decorative methods of Yuan Dynasty ceramics and absorbed and learned from them. This led to the development of a unique ceramic art style in the Sukhothai Dynasty. This blend of technical inheritance and innovation enabled the artistic development of ceramics in both countries.

Yuan Dynasty ceramics and Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics had a profound mutual influence in the context of tribute trade and cultural exchange. In terms of technical exchange and inheritance, Yuan Dynasty ceramics, with their exquisite craftsmanship and distinctive decorative style, gained a strong reputation in the Asian region. The Sukhothai Dynasty exhibited a deep interest in the technology and decorative methods of Yuan Dynasty ceramics during tribute trade and learned from them. This technical inheritance allowed the Sukhothai Dynasty's ceramics to evolve and develop into a distinctive local style.

5. Conclusion

Yuan Dynasty ceramics and Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics played pivotal roles in the context of tribute trade, fostering ceramic cultural exchange and dissemination between the two nations. The development and characteristics of Yuan Dynasty ceramics are manifested through their exquisite techniques and unique decorative styles, with blue and white porcelain and official kiln ceramics as prime representatives. Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics, built upon the absorption of Yuan Dynasty

ceramic technology and artistic influences, developed a distinctive local ceramic style, characterized by overglaze enameling and gold thread inlay as unique decorative methods. The two exhibit certain differences in their ceramic styles, with Yuan Dynasty ceramics emphasizing a simple and grand decorative style, while Sukhothai Dynasty ceramics place greater emphasis on rich colors and intricate decorations. Exchange and influence between the ceramic cultures of these two countries led to mutual learning and fusion in terms of techniques, artistry, and decorative styles, creating a rich diversity of artistic forms.

By analyzing ceramics from two different countries existing within the same historical timeline, this study revealed that tribute trade facilitated mutual influence in ceramic culture, collectively driving the prosperity and development of Eastern ceramic art. This exchange and cooperation not only enriched the ceramic cultures of both nations but also provided important insights and references for future ceramic art. This research holds significant implications for gaining a deeper understanding of ceramic cultural exchange in tribute trade and the development of Eastern ceramic art.

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