A Sino–Thai Blue-and-White Porcelain at UMMA

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Abstract—A blue-and-white porcelain lidded bottle housed at the University of Michigan Museum of Art stands as a significant representative from a collection of late 19th-century tea sets crafted in China for the Siamese court. This brief examination delves into crucial visual cues, such as the bottle's distinct ringed-neck shape, incorporation of typical Chinese auspicious motifs, depictions of Siamese coinage and royal monograms from the Rama V period in its decorative patterns, and the presence of a Chinese-language hallmark on its base. These visual elements and inscriptions collectively unveil insights into the bottle's purpose, origins, and its broader significance within the realm of Sino–Thai ceramics.

Keywords: Blue-and-white Porcelain; China; Jingdezhen; Rama V (Chulalongkorn) Period; Sino–Thai Ceramics

Introduction

The University of Michigan Museum of Art (UMMA) in Ann Arbor has an important blue-and-white porcelain lidded bottle. Standing 31.5 centimeters tall and reaching a maximum of 14 centimeters wide, the bottle is adorned with blue underglaze in a variety of patterns. The primary decoration, situated at the bottle's widest bulge, features pairs of painted disks in the shape of Siamese coins. For each pair, the left circle represents the obverse side of the coin, while the right side represents the reverse. The royal monogram of King Chulalongkorn or Rama V (r. 1868–1910) of Siam appears on the obverse side, and the denomination and date—equivalent to 1874 CE—appears on the reverse. The coins are framed by a bat design on top, a ribbon pattern around and beneath, and a meander motif on the sides, the lattermost motif being a stylized version of Rama V's initials. The relatively narrow neck of the bottle features additional patterns framed by three rings of identical size. The lid features a fourth ring around its bottom edge, mirroring the rings on the neck. The lid also includes miniaturized versions of the main patterns on the bottle **[Figure 1]**. What do these visual clues—shape, decoration, and inscriptions—tell us about the bottle's purpose, origins, and context within the wider world of Sino–Thai ceramics? In this short notice, we look at these three elements in turn to show that the UMMA object is a significant representative from a group of late 19th-century tea sets produced in China for the Siamese court.

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https://doi.org/10.69486/112.1.2024.12

Figure 1: Blue-and-white lidded bottle, approx. 1888–1910, University of Michigan Museum of Art, H.: 31.5 cm, W.: 14 cm, porcelain with blue pigment under clear glaze, acc. no. 2005/1.461A&B © UMMA

Origins and Provenance

Before examining the visual clues in more detail, we first discuss the bottle's provenance, its likely place of production, and its connection to similar published objects. The bottle in question was originally part of the private collection of Ms Doris Duke (1912–1993). Duke was an American tobacco heiress, philanthropist, and enthusiast of Southeast Asian art. Duke purchased the bottle between the late 1950s and early 1970s through dealers in Bangkok as part of her plan to construct a Thai village in Hawai'i. She likely acquired the bottle through her friend Baron François Duhau de Bérenx (1932–2018), a Belgian aristocrat, decorator, and art dealer in Thailand who acted as a middleman in her purchase of Southeast Asian artifacts (Tingley 2003: 10–21). The piece was then likely moved to Duke Farms in New Jersey when the Thai village project in Hawai'i failed to come to fruition. After her death, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation donated many pieces of Duke's collection to various museums. In 2005, the Foundation donated this bottle to UMMA, where it has remained since. The bottle was recently on display in UMMA's small gallery of Southeast Asian art.

The distinctive blue underglaze of the bottle connects it to the famous Chinese kiln site of Jingdezhen (景德鎮) in Jiangxi province. The blue underglaze was the result of an advanced technical process that in the late 19th century was only available at Jingdezhen. The locally mined kaolinite (*gaolingtu*, 高嶺土) was first molded into different models and left to dry. The blue was probably made from a cobalt pigment as the key element painted directly on the unfired clay, which was then coated with transparent glaze. The final stage entailed placing the ware into a kiln and subjecting it to temperatures up to 1,300 degrees Celsius. Through high-temperature oxidation, the mixture of compounds with cobalt in the painted pattern reacted with the silicon in the glaze, resulting in a blue hue known as smalt in pigment mineralogy (Li 2015). These sophisticated processes led many clients outside of China to specifically request Jingdezhen wares for their recognized quality (Jörg 1982: 113). Exporters in harbor cities such as Canton (present-day Guangzhou, 廣州, in Guangdong province) often collaborated with kilns in Jingdezhen to fulfill these orders (*ibid*.: 123). The UMMA bottle would have entailed a similar mode of production in Jingdezhen and subsequent export to Siam. Siamese courtiers were closely involved in this process (see below).

With regards to similar objects that have been previously published, several blue-and-white lidded bottles of this period appear in museum and exhibition catalogues as well as on auction websites. For instance, there are two lidded bottles at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco (McGill & Pattaratorn 2010: 213–214, cat. nos. 138–139), which have the same shape but different decorative patterns and different examples of Rama V monograms **[Figures 2a–b]**.

Another bottle belongs to the Freer Gallery of Art collection within the National Museum of Asian Art in Washington, DC, which likewise has identical dimensions and form but not the same decorations as the UMMA

Figures 2a–b: Two Blue-and-White lidded bottles with monogram of Rama V, approx. 1888–1910, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, H.: 31.7 cm, porcelain with blue pigment under clear glaze, acc. no. 2006.27.99.a-b (a) and 2006.27.100.a-b (b) © AAM

bottle **[Figure 3]**. Like the UMMA object, these bottles came from the Doris Duke collection. Several more bottles have appeared at auction houses such as Christie's, where they have been misidentified as being for the Tibetan market, despite featuring the monogram of Rama V.[3] A very similar bottle to one of the Christie's sets is housed at the Jim Thompson House **[Figure 4]**. Presumably many more such objects still survive in private collections in Thailand and beyond. As far as we know, however, the UMMA specimen is the only lidded bottle with this particular decoration in a North American museum collection; as such the object warrants further scrutiny.

Unique Shape and Auspicious Motifs

The shape of the UMMA bottle and similar objects produced for the Siamese court is curious from the perspective of Chinese ceramics and typology. The UMMA website describes the object as a carafe. Since carafes usually lack a lid, here we follow the lead of the Asian Art Museum in describing this form as a

[3] See Christie's London, auction 9177, dated 16 August 2001, lot 498 [https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-2392350] and auction 9246, dated 8 November 2001, lot 268 [https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-3807729].

Figure 3: Blue-and-white lidded bottle, approx. 1888–1910, National Museum of Asian Art, H.: 31.4 cm, porcelain with blue pigment under clear glaze, acc. no. F2004.35a–b © NMAA

Figure 4: Blue-and-white lidded bottle, approx. 1888–1910, Jim Thompson House, H.: 30.5 cm, porcelain with blue pigment under clear glaze, inv. no. 0334 © JTH

lidded bottle (McGill & Pattaratorn 2010: cat. nos. 138–139). Yet the precise shape and dimensions of such lidded bottles are not, to the best of our knowledge, found in the history of Chinese ceramics produced for the domestic market. We are likewise not aware of a specific Chinese term to describe the bottle's exact form. For instance, it is not quite in the shape of a calabash gourd (Ch.: *hulu*, 葫蘆; Th.: *nam tao*, น้ำเต้า), long used in East and Southeast Asia for crafting water bottles. Porcelain wares with gourd-inspired forms were commonly produced as well. But the gourd-shaped ceramics produced in China for the Siamese market in the 18th and 19th centuries were typically vases (*chaekan nam tao*, แจกันน้ำเต้า). These wares feature a second bulge at the neck, just like a real gourd, and lack a lid. The UMMA object in question has only the main bulge in its lower half, with a slender, ringed neck, so is not best described as gourd-like in form.

In the Thai context, we argue that the closest term to describe the lidded bottle's shape would be *khontho* (คนโท), a term for a water bottle or ewer related to but distinct from Thai *khonthi* (คณฑี), Malay *kendi*, and by extension the Indic terms *kuṇḍī* (used rarely in Thai as

Figure 5: Detail of two types of borders, (1) exotic-cotton-leaf pattern seen at the top and bottom, (2) five-petaled flowers and leaves pattern seen in the middle (cf. Fig. 1) © UMMA

kunthi, กุณฑี) and *kuṇḍikā*. While only the *khontho* is close in shape to the UMMA object (the *kendi* and its relatives have an extra sprout emerging from the side), what all of these terms have in common is that they describe bottles crafted to hold cold water, whether for ritual or everyday use. For instance, a set of ceramic *khontho* with the royal monogram of King Rama X (r. 2016–present) were produced to hold sacred water from rivers from each of Thailand's provinces to be used in his coronation (Dusit 2562). The UMMA *khontho*, if we dare to adopt this term, was not necessarily produced for a ritual purpose. Other blue-and-white export wares for the Siamese court that share the same identifying patterns and marks are clearly tea sets (McGill & Pattaratorn 2010: 213, cat. no. 137), so the lidded bottle was presumably for carrying, storing, and pouring cold water in a tea-making context. The series of rings on the neck appear to be both a decorative and ergonomic feature, as they would aid in gripping the otherwise slippery bottle while pouring water.

What about the decorative patterns on the bottle? What do they tell us about the history of the object? Two distinct types of borders adorn the neck of the bottle. The first features the exotic-cotton-leaf pattern (*lai bai fai thet*, ลายใบฝ้ายเทศ; Robinson 1982: 218–303). This is a highly versatile floral pattern frequently observed in Siamese ceramics, characterized by its three-pointed leaves (Håbu & Rooney 2013: 41). A second motif of uncertain name is characterized by five-petaled flowers and leaves **[Figure 5]**. A third type of border appears at the bottom of the bottle, consisting of a golden fish and waterweed pattern. Beyond their decorative function, it is difficult to ascribe specific meanings to these borders and their placement on the bottle.

For the primary patterns on the bottle, however, including the coins surrounded by upside-down bats and flowing ribbons **[Figure 6]**, we assert that these were selected for their auspiciousness on the basis of Chinese wordplay. Auspicious symbols are an influential tradition within the Chinese context. Such a tradition stems from the fact that many Sinitic languages, including modern Mandarin, are abundant in homophones. Thus, the pronunciation of the word for "bat" (蝠, *fu*) is identical to "fortune" (福, *fu*) in Mandarin. Ribbons also represent good fortune in Chinese culture. The pronunciation of the term for a knot of ribbons, *hudiejie* (蝴蝶結), contains similar sounds to *fu* (福, "fortune") and *ji* (吉, "luck"). Ribbons, along with coins and other precious objects, appear in a traditional Chinese pattern known as *zabaowen* (雜寶紋), or the "miscellaneous treasures pattern", which has been

Figure 6: Detail of flying bat and flowing ribbons encircling two sides of a Siamese coin (cf. Fig. 1) © Nicolas Revire

popular in ceramics since the 12th–13th centuries (Song & Bian 2020: 88–94).

Thus the use of the bat and the ribbons on the bottle are informed by a Chinese aesthetic, witnessed in both artistic and ritual spheres, that incorporates objects selected for their auspicious homophones.

Auspicious Coin Pattern

On the UMMA lidded bottle, one additional specific miscellaneous treasures pattern is the use of the coin. The auspicious meaning of the word for coin—*qian* (錢) or *quan* (泉)—is similarly based on its homophonic association with *quan* (全), which means "complete". Indeed, the two sides of the same coin symbolize a complete whole and that good things must always come in pairs (Teng & Chen 2015). Though the arrangement and selection of the above patterns follows Chinese conventions, the depiction of coins themselves and the meander patterns that flank them are clearly Siamese.

The main coin used as a model was one *at* (อัฐ, from Pali *aṭṭha*, "eight") coin, valued at one eighth of a *fueang* (เฟื้อง). This particular coin was minted in mid- to late-19th century Siam (Ronachai 2012: 253–254, F505–F506) **[Figures 7a–b]**. The inscription on the reverse side of the coin confirms this dating: *at 8 an fueang* (อัฐ ๘ อันเฟื้อง), meaning "[one] *at*, 8 per *fueang*", followed below by the calendar year [CS: *cūḷasakarāja*] 1236, which fell between April 1874 and April 1875 CE. The inscription around the obverse side of the coin reads clockwise from left to right *krung sayam ratchakan thi 5* (กรุงสยามรัชกาลที่ ๕), meaning "The Kingdom of Siam, Fifth Reign", referring

Figures 7a–b: The obverse (a) and reverse (b) of an *at* coin dated 1236 CS (= 1874 CE), private collection, Bangkok © Ronachai Krisadaolarn

to King Rama V. In the middle of the obverse face, Rama V's royal monogram appears, with a crown on top and his initials below (*cho po ro*, จปร, abbreviated from his full title as มหาจุฬาลงกรณ์ ปรมราชาธิราช, *mahachulalongkornporomarachathirat*; P., *mahācuḷālaṅkaraṇaparamarājādhirāja*). These same *cho po ro* initials also appear in an extremely stylized form in the meander pattern to the right and left of each appearance of the primary bat-ribbon-coin pattern seen above **[Fig. 6]**.

Thai-language sources are not in agreement as to the name or meaning of the combined bat-ribbon-coin and royal monogram pattern. One possible name is simply *lai at* (ลายอัฐ, "*at*-coin pattern"), though this name does not appear in most published lists (Damrong 2460: 93–94; Pariwat 2539: 151). The meaning of the combined pattern is thus best explained by the Chinese trinity known as the *sanxing* (三星, "three stars"), which encompasses the terms (1) *fu* (福, "fortune") for the bat and ribbons, as explained above; (2) *lu* (祿, "prosperity", "salary for a government official") for the coin; and (3) *shou* (壽, "longevity") for the meander pattern of the *cho po ro* monogram.[4] This interpretation requires that we understand the particular shape of the monogram as an imitation of the character *shou*. While the shapes are not an exact match, other stylizations of *shou*—based on Chinese aesthetics rather than Thai letters—are found interspersed with bat motifs, symbolizing *fu*, in Qing-period ceramics from Jingdezhen (Chen 2017).

Why was this particular coin chosen for the pattern? Here we assume that Chinese wordplay once again guided this design. The monetary value of an *at* was relatively low. For the period in question, an *at* was a copper piece with a value equivalent to 22 times its weight in silver (Bangkok Times 1996: 31–33).

[4] See the "Guide to Jor Por Ror Porcelain" created by River City, Bangkok, and available online: https://www.rcbauctions.com/a-guide-to-jor-por-ror-porcelain/ (dated 1 February 2022).

When converted to modern metrics, one *at* weighs 0.23313 grams. Multiplying this by 22, a single *at* is equivalent to 5.129 grams of silver or 0.0005 English pounds during the relevant historical period. Why would one depict such a modest coin on this fine porcelain bottle bearing the king's initials? We argue that the *at* coin, which features the Siamese numeral for eight—long considered lucky in China—on its reverse face, was chosen for its auspicious value. In many Chinese dialects—including Mandarin and Cantonese, though less so in Teochew—the number eight, *ba* (八), sounds similar to *fa* (發), which bears the meaning of prosperity and wealth. The notion of *fa* here is quite close to *lu* in the *sanxing* trinity, as discussed above.

Despite the use of a Siamese coin model, the craftspeople involved in the production of the porcelain bottle in Jingdezhen were clearly Chinese. Indeed, the Siamese language inscriptions found on the two faces of the coin motif are not well executed, likely reflecting the work of a Chinese craftsperson who was not literate in Siamese script. The selection of the coin, drawn from the miscellaneous treasures pattern, along with the bat and ribbon, reflect a Chinese sensibility for what designs are most appropriate for elegant blue-and-white ceramics to convey a sense of fortune and prosperity. When coupled with Rama V's monogram in Siamese script, crafted in imitation of the Chinese character for longevity, the combined pattern reads as a Siamese twist on the traditional *fu-lu-shou* trinity.

Chinese Hallmark

A final inscription appears at the base of the lidded bottle **[Figure 8]**. This four-character Chinese hallmark corresponds to the name of a trademark used by Thai–Chinese aristocrats who had obtained royal permission to import porcelain production from China to Siam during this era. However, this phrase also makes logical sense within a Chinese context. The characters read top to bottom and right to left as *jin tang fa ji* (錦 堂 發 記, lit. "Grand Hall Wealth Company").

The origin of the idea of *jin tang*, grand hall, lies in the name of a hall that the esteemed prime minister of Northern Song, Han Qi (韓琦, 1008–1075), built in his hometown, Xiangzhou 相州 (present-day Anyang 安陽, in Henan province). Han named his hall Zhou Jin Tang (晝錦堂, Daytime Grand Hall), with the literary citation coming from the *Xiangyu benji* 項羽本紀 section of Sima Qian's (司馬遷, 145–86 BCE) massive historical work, the *Shiji* 史記, in which he quotes: "not bringing home wealth and rank one earned is just like wearing embroidered clothes at nighttime; who would even know?"(富貴不歸故鄉如繡衣夜行誰知之者; Sima 1878: 9; Zhang 1936: 127–128; our translation). The idea of returning to one's hometown with glory from afar has long been celebrated in Chinese thought. Since *jin tang fa ji* refers to a company run by a Siamese aristocrat of Chinese descent, the name *jin tang* is likely in reference to these ideas.

Figure 8: The Jin Tang Fa Ji hallmark found at the base of the lidded bottle, University of Michigan Museum of Art (cf. Fig. 1) © UMMA

The history of this company in Siam requires further explanation. After King Mongkut or Rama IV (r. 1851–1868) stopped sending tribute missions to China in 1853, Chinese porcelain orders were no longer managed by the Siamese state trading monopoly. Instead, they were primarily overseen by merchants of Chinese descent based in Bangkok, who acted on behalf of the King. Phraya Boribun Kosakon (พระยาบริบูรณ์โกษากร; also known as Li Fazhou, 李發洲, son of Phraya Choduek Ratchasetthi (พระยาโชฎึกราชเศรษฐี; Li Fu 李福), was one of the leading Chinese merchants in Bangkok, who changed the name of the family company from Jin Tang Fu Ji (錦堂福記; Teochew pronunciation as rendered into Thai script: *kim tueng hok ki*, กิมตึ๋งฮกกี่), to Jin Tang Fa Ji (*kim tueng huat ki*, กิมตึ๋งฮวดกี่; Sng & Pimpraphai 2015: 208). King Rama V assigned him the responsibility of ordering the blue-and-white tea sets with the King's monogram from China. Prince Prawit Chumsai, nickname Tong (หม่อมเจ้าประวิช ชุมสาย, ต๋ง), designed up to twelve different kinds of *cho po ro* monograms, including the ones seen on the UMMA bottle (Pariwat 2539: 150–151). Subsequently, the Siamese courtier and master artisan Phraya Wisawakam Sinlapa Prasit (พระยาวิศวกรรมศิลปประสิทธิ์) was sent to Jingdezhen around 1888 to oversee the fabrication of porcelain tea sets with similar decorations to those of the UMMA bottle (Sanur 2529: 11–13).

The original sets of the *cho po ro* porcelain are identifiable by a different mark, known as a *po* seal (ตราโป), which includes the fabrication year of 1250 CS (= 1888 CE), marked at the base of each ware **[e.g., Figure 9]**. These sets were so admired in late 19th-century Bangkok that Phraya Boribun Kosakon secretly placed another order with the same patterns, which bears the Jin Tang Fa Ji hallmark. The date of this order is uncertain, but most likely took place between 1888 and King Rama V's passing in 1910. This action displeased the King, and the second batch of the *cho po ro* wares inscribed with Jin Tang Fa Ji was confiscated and stored at the Tax Office warehouse until the middle of the 20th century (Pimpraphai 2014). The UMMA lidded bottle, along with its sister objects worldwide, likely come from this once-confiscated batch of tea sets. Like other similar pieces in these sets, the UMMA bottle would have originally come with a saucer, now unfortunately lost.

Figure 9: A saucer base from the original tea set with the royal "*po* seal" (ตราโป), dated to 1888, private collection in Thailand © Bhujjong 2015: 177

Sino–Thai Fusion

Crafted in Jingdezhen as an exquisite piece of export porcelain for consumption by the Siamese elite, this ware exemplifies a masterful blend of Thai and Chinese design elements. While the bottle's shape exhibits a distinct Siamese influence, the inscriptions at the base and primary decorative patterns unequivocally reveal the involvement of Chinese craftsmen in its production and embellishment, a process guided by a Siamese official. These skilled artisans seamlessly integrated familiar Chinese motifs such as the bat, golden fish, and miscellaneous treasures with royal Siamese symbols such as a coin with King Rama V's monogram. The UMMA object is thus an important witness for how exported blue-and-white ceramics from Jingdezhen in the late 19th century integrated Chinese and Siamese influences.

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