Kiln sites and ceramics museums in the southern Chinese provinces of Fujian and Jiangxi were the focus of the April 2010 study tour undertaken by members of the Southeast Asian Ceramics Society (SEACS). Imperial and folk kilns and their products were viewed in ceramics manufacturing districts including legendary Dehua and Jingdezhen. Among the many highlights of the trip was the chance to observe an operational wood-fired kiln being loaded with ready-to-fire teapots made on-site. The manufacturing, glazing and kiln stacking techniques used in mass production were observed there first hand.

Singapore based SEACS celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2009 and has an admirable record of promoting the study of ceramics by means of lectures and seminars, exhibitions, publications and study tours such as ours. Inaugurated in 1999, the annual William Willetts Lecture, named in honour of the founding president, has been delivered by a succession of eminent scholars. This tour complemented the Society’s main objective of furthering the study of Southeast Asian manufactured ceramics, by observing the Chinese technology and ceramic models that appear to have been adopted and later developed by SEA countries. Additionally the evolution of wares that were popular exports to Southeast Asia such as greenware, qingbai and underglaze blue and white was evident.

Our study tour, led by Chen Jiazi, curator of the National University of Singapore (NUS) Museum, commenced in coastal Xiamen, formerly Amoy on ancient trade maps. The view from our hotel over the bustling narrow strait to Gulangyu Island with its 16m tall statue of local hero, Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga), a pirate, trader and Ming loyalist was a salient reminder of the rich maritime history of China’s southeast coast. This was reinforced by a visit to the Xiamen Overseas Chinese Museum, built in the style of a palace, the displays in its three exhibition halls convey detailed stories of pioneering Chinese migrants. The inextricable histories of migration, trade, commerce and Imperial influence are brought to life.

A two hour bus trip took us to the Jinjiang Museum in Qingyang with its stylised maritime-themed façade. Comprehensive displays of export wares covering the Tang to Qing dynasties (618 -1912) gave us a broad perspective on the evolution of types and styles. Following this we viewed the Jingjiaoyishan kiln site, which features four kilns from late Southern Song to early Yuan dynasties (c. 1200-1368). The excavated kilns are well covered by a protective roof. Despite fences, the abundant shards in-situ were tantalisingly close for impromptu archaeological analyses (‘so near and yet so far’), but instead we adjourned to the museum gallery to view intact pots of the cizao wares for which the kilns are famous.

Next day we visited the comprehensive Quanzhou Maritime Museum, which displays Chinese export ceramics, maps of trade routes to SEA and beyond, and models of the ships used on the ‘Maritime Silk Route’, as it has become known. The museum displays again highlighted the importance of shipping and the integral role of Chinese ceramics in trade. The vibrant, cosmopolitan and generally tolerant nature of Quanzhou as a major trading port is demonstrated by the Qingjing mosque dating from the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). Islam was one of the many religions practiced by its foreign residents.

Our last and very important stop in this province was the renowned ceramics district of Dehua, often called the porcelain capital of Fujian. From the Song Dynasty (960-1279) onward, Dehua ceramics, particularly whitewares and qingbai type wares were exported to many regions, including SEA. Its highest quality whitewares later became known as ‘blanc de Chine’ in the West. We visited the significant Qudoukgong kiln on the slope of Mount Pozhai, which was excavated in 1976 to reveal utilitarian items, including stem cups, covered boxes, vases and bowls all typical of the ceramics exported during the commercially proactive Yuan Dynasty which customised ceramics for target markets. This long or dragon kiln is 57 metres long and is comprised of 17 firing chambers, each of which was individually controlled.

At the still active Yueji kiln, we were able to observe the process of ceramic production from start to finish. We watched while ‘saggers’ (previously fired, reusable ceramic containers) were stacked into the kiln chambers, each holding three teapots. Standing at the highpoint of the kiln and looking over the sites, the scale of the mass production was obvious. Stacks of timber were close by, felled from the surrounding region. Dedicated areas for moulding, luting, trimming, drying and glazing were all evident and we eagerly observed each stage of production.

The members of our group, which included TAASA committee members, Sabrina Snow and Ann Proctor, would all assume the closest vantage points while trying not to get in the way! We were met with unfailing good humour and we always hoped that our hushed comments and flurries of camera clicks were not a distraction. The skills we observed often drew our spontaneous applause: the response was generally a modest, bemused smile.

The nearby Yueji Contemporary Ceramics Centre provided a fascinating display of modern products by ceramists from various countries using the local kaolin stone. By contrast, the Dehua Ceramics Museum displays a comprehensive range of excavated ceramics from Tang to Qing. Several large charts on the walls state the chemical composition of
the various clays and glazes and indicate the modern approach to determining provenance of ware types. The chemical analysis is undertaken at Shanghai University.

On the way to the museums we had stopped at Sanban County, Dehua to marvel at an operational wooden waterwheel, rhythmically and unceasingly crushing porcelain stone virtually unattended, as has been the method for centuries. River water turns the wheel that drives a pivoting lever. The end of the lever has a mallet attached, which pounds the stone. The vibration of repeated impact causes more stone to fall from a heap into the hole where the crushing takes place - simple and very effective.

On day 5 of our study tour we flew from Jinjiang to Nanchang. Next day our first stop was the Jiangxi Provincial Museum displaying locally excavated wares. The earliest are greenwares dating from the beginning of the 10th century. Whitewares, qingbai and underglaze blue and white were also produced. There are many unique pieces that were excavated from local tombs. Next, in the Imperial Ceramics Museum in Jingdezhen, we admired the magnificent collection of Ming and Qing wares (1368-1912) produced by Imperial kilns for the courts of those dynasties.

Still blessed with an abundance of raw materials, Jingdezhen truly lives up to its name as a porcelain centre – even the city’s lamp posts are made of ceramic! Day 8 arrived too quickly and our last fascinating visit was to the Hutian kiln museum and excavations. Song and Yuan ceramics typical of export wares, such as the ubiquitous Song Dynasty qingbai ewer, were on display, as well as blue and white ware from the Yuan Dynasty.

Time after time our group huddled around a glass show-case as Jiazi generously shared her extensive knowledge with us. “Look at this piece of blue and white. See how the imported cobalt ‘bites’ into the clay!” Expert instruction such as this triggered rapid-fire questions, the answers enabling each participant to add pieces to their own jigsaw of knowledge of Chinese glazed ceramics.

Neither the inclement weather nor the unseasonably cold temperatures deterred the eager shoppers in our group as they searched for just the right mementos amongst the plentiful supply of beautiful reproductions in factory and museum shops and markets. Lessons learned from Jiazi were put to the test to enable selection of the most authentic pieces.

A ‘show and tell’ of purchases after dinner on our last evening provided the final opportunity to discuss the types, decoration and main attributes that distinguish the various ceramic wares of each dynasty. We agreed that the rigorous planning by Marjorie Chu, a stalwart on the SEACS board and participant on the trip and the expert ceramic commentary and analysis of Chen Jiazi had resulted in a very fruitful study tour.

The SEACS and the NUS have a history of collaboration. The current SEACS exhibition being staged at NUS Museum until 25 July 2010, ‘Southeast Asian Ceramics: New Light On Old Pottery’, is accompanied by a commemorative book that also contains a very comprehensive catalogue. Edited by and co-contributed to by noted Southeast Asian scholar, Prof. John Miksic, the beginnings of the SEACS, the contribution of Roxanna Brown to SEA ceramics studies, maritime archaeology, kiln sites in SEA and ceramics as trade commodities are all covered in its scholarly and fascinating chapters.

Linda McLaren is an independent researcher interested in the archaeological study of glazed Chinese ceramics found on shipwrecks and at terrestrial sites in Southeast Asia prior to the 18th century.