

**Southeast Asian  
Ceramic Society**

**“Five Dynasty Treasures: Chinese Ceramics  
found in the Indonesian Cirebon Shipwreck”**

**A talk by Lim Yah Chiew  
Synopsis and commentary by Natalie Ong**

**Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> May 2010 at 7pm**

As part of the ongoing events related to the exhibition “Southeast Asian Ceramics: New Light on Old Pottery” (ends 25<sup>th</sup> July 2010), noted ceramics specialist Lim Yah Chiew gave an enlightening lecture to Society members. Chinese ceramics being his area of expertise, the talk naturally focussed on those that were found in the Indonesian shipwreck, sometimes dubbed the 5 Dynasties shipwreck, but more commonly known as the Cirebon wreck.

It was discovered in 2005, approximately 100 nautical miles off the coast of Java, with the nearest town being Cirebon, thus accounting for the common name. A collaborative effort between the Indonesian government and the salvaging company, work started in July and ended three months later in October. With the wreck at 56m below sea level, conditions for salvage were difficult; it took at least 15 minutes to descend and an hour to surface or divers would suffer from fatal bends. This was aggravated by the fact that at that depth, a normal tank of oxygen only supplied one fifth of the required air. Consequently, the process was long, tedious and expensive, but the end result was highly rewarding.

Indeed, the wreck constitutes one of the largest — if not the largest — haul in the history of Southeast Asian shipwrecks. It was a veritable treasure trove with an estimated 260,000 pieces of trade goods, comprising mostly of ceramic wares, but including also glassware, terracotta, metals and metalware, spices, semi-precious stones, a few pieces of jewellery, religious articles, tin, iron ore, and even arsenic which was used for agricultural purposes back then. The ship itself was a fascinating find – 28m long, it was deemed to be of Sumatran or Javanese in origin and thought to be used for inter-island travel in the 17,000 island-strong archipelago. Together with the amazing quantities and types of goods onboard, its presence off the coast of Java presents us with somewhat of a mystery. We will return to this once we’re done taking a closer look at the wares drawn up from the seas.



Fig. 1: Lim Yah Chiew (right) examining the salvage items with renowned expert John Guy (centre) from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 2: On the ship with Horst Liebner (left) who gave the Society a talk on two 10<sup>th</sup>-century shipwrecks, the Cirebon and the Karawang, in Sept 2009

<sup>1</sup> All photos property of Lim Yah Chiew, unless otherwise stated.

By far the largest group, over 100,000 pieces of the ceramic wares found were of the Yue type (Fig. 3), originating from the Zhe Jiang Province in Southern China. Although this group mainly consisted of bowls, plates and ewers, a number of interesting objects were also found (Figs. 4-7).



Fig. 3: Yue Bowl with lotus motif  
The upright ridge of the rim lip caused some of the more observant members to hypothesise that this object could have once been a container which had lost its cover.



Fig. 4: Broken censer cover with cut-out flower designs



Fig. 5: Ceramic tiffin carrier



Fig. 6: Octagonal cup  
The unusual shape of the cup implies the possibility that it was made in the style of several pieces of gold wares — for example, those in the Belitung cargo — for the Arabian market.



Fig. 7: Octagonal cup from the Belitung wreck (photo by Tony Law, National Geographic)

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The next group comprises white ware from the Hebei region, frequently mistaken for northern Chinese white Liao ware. Ceramics historians debate as to whether the Liao Dynasty kilns copied Ding ware or employed potters from those kilns. Some of them label Liao white ware as Northern Ding. However, Lim is of the opinion that the colour appearing on Liao ware is more frequently white with a slight yellow tinge, which, he says, is due to the firing processes which occur in oxidised environments. Here the example of a “long-necked trumpet-mouthed” vase (direct translation from Chinese) shows clearly a grayish hue to the white glaze, as do the other items shown (Figs. 8-11). Phoenix head ewers were a speciality of the Ding wares and these were found in abundance on the wreck.



Fig. 8: Ding white “long-necked trumpet-mouthed” vase from Hebei, China



Fig. 9: Ding white ware dish with foliated rim



Fig. 10: Covered boxes



Fig. 11: Jarlet with appliqué designs



Fig. 12: Stopper in the form of a phoenix head, with holes that allowed it to be tied to the ewer

Other items salvaged from the wreck include a substantial group of glassware (Figs: 12-14), almost certainly of Arabic origin. Glass-making was probably invented in Ancient Egypt, but was widely popularised in Europe during Roman times, for example in Pompeii, where several types of glassware

were discovered. However, after the decline of the Roman Empire around 400 CE<sup>2</sup>, the Middle East became, once again, the global centre of production for glassware around the turn of the first millennium. As can be seen from the images below, these items were finely crafted and consisted mainly of bottles, most likely used for containing perfume, although a rare fish-shaped object was also found.



Fig. 12: Glass bottles of varied sizes and shapes



Fig. 13: Fish-shaped rock crystal



Fig. 14: Glass bottle with tripod stand

Another group of objects consists of metalware – from bronze to gold to coinage. Excepting a (possibly) Sumatran handle of pure gold (Fig. 15), most of the metal objects were from China. The bronze mirrors with varying designs (Figs. 16 and 17) pointed to a late Tang dynasty date (around 900 CE), as they were very similar to several other dated specimens around the world. In addition, one of the most noteworthy finds, Chinese lead coins with reign marks, seems to corroborate with this dating, i.e. around the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Figs. 18 and 19). However, it must be noted that, despite the presence of reign marks, coins are not the best indications of dating as they may be in use over a long period of time. This depends very much on the continuity of a political entity's government. Hence, if a dynasty lasted several hundred years and no major political upheaval occurred during that time, the currency that was in use at the beginning of the dynasty may well still be in circulation towards the end of it.

What was instrumental in suggesting a more specific range of dates for the shipwreck was an exceptional Yue bowl (Fig. 20). It was extraordinary, not in the sense that it was an object of immense beauty, quality or finesse, but that it was incised on the underside with Chinese writing. Rare it is that historians and archaeologists would find such a mark in classical times when potters were not “artists” as we know them in contemporary terms. Thus, the words “xu ji sao, mao cheng” have been a boon to

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<sup>2</sup> Common Era, abbreviated as CE, is one of the designations for the world's most commonly used year-numbering system. The numbering of years using BCE/CE notation is identical to the numbering used with *Anno Domini* (BC/AD) notation.

our study: “The potter, Xu, fired this piece in the year Mao Cheng”, or 968 CE. Although ceramic objects have the ability to weather tide and time, it would appear contrary to common business sense that Mr. Xu (or his guild of potter-merchants) would allow their goods to sit in a warehouse for years on end. The same logic would have applied down the chain of merchants. It seems more than likely, therefore, that the Yue wares moved from their place of manufacture to their place in this shipwreck within 5 to 10 years of their original production, taking into account the speeds of transportation and exchange at that time.



Fig. 15: Handle of pure gold, origin unknown, possibly Javanese



Fig. 16: Bronze mirror with figurative relief of a Chinese immortal playing an instrument under a tree



Fig. 17: Bronze mirror with astronomical designs of the Ba Gua and I-Ching symbols



Fig. 18: Chinese coins made of lead



Fig. 19: Lead Chinese coin from the Southern Han Dynasty, Reign of Emperor Liu Yen (917-942 CE)



Fig. 20: Yue bowl with incised writing

This thus brings us to the salient point mentioned in the beginning. The illustration below (Fig. 21) sets out quite clearly the origins of the wares found in relation to the shipwreck. It seems likely, given the dating of the goods found on the wreck, that they belonged mostly to the 5 Dynasties era. It was a period of chaos, with many battles and wars during a short period (907-979). However, the presence of cargo from different countries on a single trade ship testifies to good level of fairly continuous trade despite the political upheaval on the Chinese mainland.



Fig. 22: Origins of wares and location of wreck

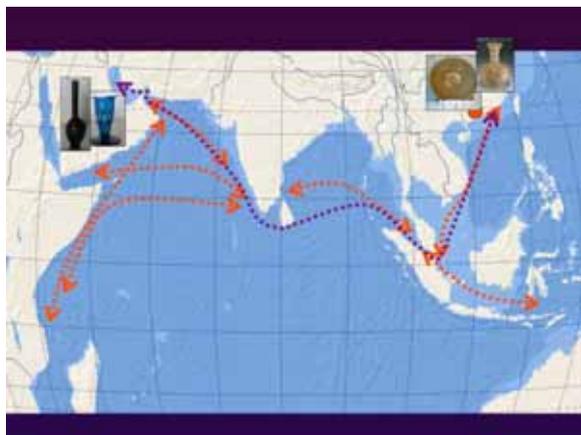


Fig. 22: The Maritime ship route



Fig. 23: Possible sea routes within South-East Asia and location of wreck

Fig. 22 above shows the hypothesised maritime ship routes within South-East Asia and further afield. The red arrows show the trade routes that would have come down from China. Ships would go past Vietnam and down the coast of the Malaysian Peninsula, turned at Singapore, and stopped either there or along the eastern coast of Malaysia for water and food supplies. They then had a choice of either heading into the Indian Ocean, landing at Ceylon (ancient Sri Lanka) and other stops further along, or turning south and east into the Indonesian archipelago. The purple arrows of the map show the dependence of trade ships on longer hauls on the tides and monsoons.

Finally, it seems clear from the evidence presented above that the wreck was headed for Java, which had, by that time (and for reasons yet unknown), shifted its centre of political power to the eastern part of the island. This was the new bastion of the Mataram dynasty, descendants of a rich and powerful entity. Eastern Javanese culture was developing, as can be evidenced from the first Javanese literary works being produced – the great Indian epic, the Mahabharata was being translated into Old Javanese, while the Ramayana saw rebirth in an Old Javanese version complete with localised details. If this was not an indication of wealth, then the Cirebon trade ship was wrecked far off course.

**References:**

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2. Essays Compiled at the Summit Forum on Study of Yue Wares by Zhejiang Museum, PRC, 2007
3. Chinese White Wares from Late T'ang to Yuan Dynasty by Kai-Yin Lo
4. The Art of Ding Wares by Mu Qing, Hebei Educational Bureau, PRC
5. Catalogue of the Special Exhibition of Ding Ware White Porcelain by the National Palace Museum, Taipei
6. Explore the Profound Mysteries of the Ancient Yue Ware Ceramics by Li Gang, Zhejiang People's Art Printing House