

## SEACS FIELD TRIP TO THE KILNS OF SUKKHOTHAI 9-11 NOVEMBER 2023

**Destination:** Selected Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai kilns as well as temple sites of historical and/or ceramic interest in the vicinity, accompanied by Khun Ahhasit Sukkham, former Asst. Curator of the Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum, Bangkok University; Dr. Dawn F. Rooney, much published author, SEACS member and expert on Thai and Southeast Asian ceramics; and a local professional guide Khun Ukkrit ('Steven') Packnoi.

It was remarkable how much was packed into what (long distance travel and meals apart) amounted to just one and a half days, and how much was experienced and learned, thanks to an exceedingly well-planned programme and much-appreciated expert guides (not forgetting the pre-trip reading material SEACS circulated and Dawn's book, *Ancient Sukhothai: Thailand's Cultural Heritage*, two copies of which were circulated for reading and reference during the trip.)

### **Photographic Record:**

For a full photographic record (posted by Jerome Zhenpeng Teo) of the group members, where we stayed, meals (and fun) we had, kilns, ancient sites and modern museums visited and experienced, including snippets of a talk by Khun Ahhasit, plus useful facts and images from museum and site brochures, do visit the SEACS Facebook page.

We have the photographic record; but what did members take away from the visit? What did each experience, learn, enjoy and find most memorable; what thoughts were generated by what we encountered? Among us were Sukhothai ceramic experts; veteran members who are also collectors with expert knowledge of Southeast Asian and Chinese ceramics, archaeology and history, some who were on their second visits to Sukhothai and others who were new SEACS members keen to learn more, excitedly on their first SEACS visit. Each was accordingly invited to submit a paragraph. Put together, the result is a collective narrative which functions as an experiential companion to the photographs on Facebook. This could be the first of many such narratives of future visits that gives a sense of their communal, social and educational value.

### **Summary of the Trip:**

But first, a summary of activities: We stayed, aptly, at the Legendha Resort and Cultural Centre (an experience in itself both culinary and cultural) and were up early to visit Ramkhamhaeng National Museum to find our bearings historically, culturally, and ceramically. We surveyed a large-scale model of the UNESCO World Heritage Sukhothai Historical Park, saw, and learned about the famed "walking Buddha" figure unique to the area, viewed multiple artifacts, and took our first group photo -- appropriately in front of a showcase of "Sukhothai Wares or Sangkalok Wares". Orientated now, led and enlightened by Khun Ahhasit, we walked among and explored a spread of various kilns either sheltered under purpose-built bamboo canopies or open and grass covered. Better informed by now, we toured the historical sites, their temples among monumental ruins to the North and Northwest, the Khmer-influenced Wat Phra Phai Luang, the astounding seated Buddha at Sri Chum and beyond the boundary, the physically challenging uphill Sa Pan Hin.

While some among us returned to rest after such a packed tour, others guided by Steven, took to buggies to visit the old town walls to the East within which are found more "wat" and chedis (or stupas) especially Wat Phra Mahathat an abandoned ancient royal temple of the Ayutthaya era, and Wat Sa Si, both with impressive Sri Lankan inspired stupas. Impressively spreading at the latter was a

gnarled ancient sacred bodhi tree descended from the Buddha's original under which he achieved enlightenment, where we encountered another image of the graceful "walking Buddha" and many more serene Buddha figures. It became clear that the construction and fortunes of the kilns, the development, the kinds, the fate of the ceramics they produced and that of their makers, were all inextricably linked to the spread of religious and cultural influences (Khmer, Hindu, Buddhist, Sri Lankan, Chinese) alongside the rise and fall of kingdoms which created these monuments to faith and power.

The evening followed with drinks and a pre-dinner illustrated two-part talk by Khun Ahassit -- on Si Satchanalai and Sangkalok wares and their difference, and on "Si Satchanalai Figurines: A reconstruction of ancient daily life, beliefs and environment" interspersed with lively audience questions and discussion. Thus concluded, with a delicious dinner and more conversation, a day that seemed a classroom come alive.

### **Last Half Day:**

We drove to the other UNESCO World Heritage site, Si Satchanalai Historical Park, to visit the Sangkalok kiln sites, the Thuriang Kiln No. 61 at Ban Ko Noi and the No. 42 at Ban Pa Yang, both located along the Yom river bank away from the town. We viewed more cross draft and updraft kilns, yet each looked unique in design, size and shape. The cross draft kilns seemed bigger and longer-shaped with 3 main parts: front firebox, middle pottery chamber, and rear chimney while the updraft kilns were smaller and rounder. On display on the grounds at Ban Pa Yang was aptly a large sculpture of the famous carp motif typical of Sukhothai ware. Amazing quantities of shards were scattered all round the latter site, which brought history to life: the detritus of 200 to 250 years of 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century peak production of Sangkalok ceramics like celadon for export, figurines and architectural decorations, the largest output in Southeast Asia in its time. We learned that evidence of these wares and their cultural and economic importance have been found in shipwrecks in the region, archaeological sites in Indonesia, Philippines and as far as Japan.

The Centre for the Study and Preservation of Sangkhalok Kilns is indeed a fascinating museum that few seem to know about or visit. Apart from crunching over amazing quantities of shards, we gazed into deserted firing pits, learned about the different kilns that produced the various kinds of ceramics, that Sangkalok is believed to be shortened from "Sawankhalok" which is not to be confused with Si Satchanalai (which it often is). The Thai authorities deserve kudos for maintaining such a wonderful cultural heritage

Our final destination was the Sawanyoranayok National Museum where we reviewed what we had seen and learned, then hopped over nearby to look at replicas of small figurines, large jars and statues made by a local kiln or buy souvenir copies of Si Satchanalai and Sangkalok wares we had seen and liked. Then it was 6 hours on the road back to Bangkok.

### **Our Collective Experience:**

For the veteran collectors, the great joy of this trip was to put in context the Thai ceramics from Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai that they have been collecting for many years. For others as interested in the history of these ancient cities and sites, such revisits or visits showed exactly where the kilns were located, how Thai history began with King Ramkhamhaeng's Sukhothai in the 13th Century who expanded an ancient city-state near an old Angkor border city centred on Wat Phra Phai Luang. Dawn Rooney's putting the Thai national narrative of Sukhothai as a powerful centre of religion, trade, and culture into a wider regional context in which Sukhothai was one of a network of city states that eventually came under the influence of Ayutthaya was much appreciated.

It was intriguing to learn from Khun Atthasit that the kilns were mass producing ceramic wares for export. Seeing these kilns as part of an industrial complex raises the question -- how did some of these mass produced Sawankhalok wares arrive at fourteenth century Temasek where our past SEACS President Prof John Miksic excavated them some seven hundred years later?

Did a Thai trader take on a consignment of these ceramics, sail down the Chao Paya River and along the Malay peninsula into the Java Sea, trading at port cities he visited? Or possibly a group of wealthy Temasek merchants funded a trader to sail up to Si Satchanalai to bulk-purchase Sawankhalok wares for sale in Temasek? Were these hundreds of pieces of Sawankhalok wares then retailed, or was there a system of bulk redistribution of these wares to other markets in the region? Finally, how did some of these Sawankhalok wares survive intact for the next seven hundred years to end up in an antique shop from where we purchased a piece or two to display in our living room cabinet? These are big questions to which we should start looking for answers.

Those vast monumental temple areas we visited also prompted thoughts of how they must have been rendered possible by the “food wealth” of the vast rice fields we saw from the road, the teak forests as well as the regional trade in ceramics along the maritime trade routes. What was the rhythm of daily life in the 14th century Theravada Buddhist Sukhothai Kingdom like – the people who lived there and the potters whose labour produced the remarkable hand-crafted glazed stoneware?

Among the several Wats we visited, awe-inspiring though all were, such as Wat Si Chum with its vast reconstructed seated Buddha visible from afar, it was Wat Sa Phan Hin that was accounted most memorable. One of many serene Forest (Aranyik) temples designed for meditation, what remains of its vihara or assembly hall houses one of the most beautiful Buddha images at Sukhothai, the Phra Attharot, 12.5m high, his demeanour one of peaceful strength, his right hand raised in a protective gesture, Abhaya mudra, common in Sukhothai art, dispelling fear. Seated beside him is a much smaller image of the Buddha with a “calling the earth to witness” gesture. Located commandingly on a mound some 200m high, this aptly named Temple of the Stone Bridge required a steep ascent up an uneven 300m long path or “bridge” of tricky, uneven slate slabs which like pilgrims, we devotedly ascended to a panoramic view from a wooded area, and safely descended helping each other along. At such temples, we felt a serenity that devotees over the centuries must have felt, too.

While the kilns were revelatory, some found the museums more engaging. The Ramkhamhaeng National Museum was notable for the replica of the pillar inscription about King Ramkhamhaeng and the relics excavated from the nearby crypt. Of special interest was the large blue and white Yuan bowl, presumably part of tribute gifts from the Yuan court of Kublai Khan to King Ramkhamhaeng.

Another, gazing at the sublime beauty of the walking bronze Sukhothai Buddha in the round, a masterpiece in the Ramkhamhaeng National Museum, stilled her mind. Its melding of human features with a transcendental abstraction representing the highest level of Thai artistic creativity, an image in perfect harmony with the universe.

An avid collector, initially attracted by the Sri Sachatnalai ceramics fish motif, is reminded by the exhibits of how his total fixation with ceramics from this period sparked a decade-long journey collecting Thai ceramics.

At the Sawankhaworanayok National Museum, the excellent collection of celadons and brown wares was of special interest, like the wonderful carp fish motif plate in underglaze black, and the superb collection of Buddha images upstairs.

One therefore wished there was an opportunity to buy DVDs with high resolution photographs of the pieces he saw. We would be able to enjoy the pieces, and the museums would get additional revenue generated from their ceramic collections. Familiarity with museum pieces is how we learn. And when they sit in remote museums in central Thailand not many people get to see them.

In conclusion, full as our time there was, a veteran among us rightly noted that our visit to Sukhothai and its “twin city” of Si Satchanalai was far too short to fully grasp the significance and complexity of the history of these two ancient capitals of Thailand. A new member, on her part felt there was indeed much more we could have learnt. She added how much she appreciated the food, the warmth, the community spirit, the generous storytelling, and the opportunity to know fellow members.

The last word goes to Dawn Rooney, that travelling with members of the SEACS – connecting with old friends and meeting new ones -- was a special highlight for her. The group’s interest in the Sukhothai Kingdom was infectious and supported by lively discussions of impressions of the temples, museums, and kiln sites. Being at the kiln sites with members reminded her that it was SEACS which first brought attention of Southeast Asian ceramics to the public.

**Compiled and edited by Koh Tai Ann1**

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