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Interaction of an Unknown Hill People in Northwestern Thailand With the Ancient Trade Along Silk Road

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Southeast Asia (SEA) is often called the land of contrast and diversity. Topographical contrast between hill and plain of mainland SEA is matched only by its cultural diversity.

Today the mountainous region of northwest Thailand is mainly inhabited by a large number of primitive tribes who speak different dialects. Their villages are scattered widely among the hills without any stable political unity. These tribal peoples rely largely on shift-cultivation on terraced hills, plus hunting and gathering of forest products. Historically, their meager subsistence probably never allowed them to have a luxurious court with king or ruler like those fashioned since the early Christian era by peoples on the nearby fertile plains.

By contrast, plains people have always been lowland wet-rice cultivators, producing large surpluses that supported their ruler and his royal court. Plains people can be classified into several culturally homogeneous groups who possess long traditions of literacy, art and history. It was this group that had the main contacts with the outside world.

"Priests from India, ambassadors from China, and traders from all over the world brought glamour and sophistication to these (SEA) courts, and their influence spread throughout the realm. In this way, the religious ideas and legal codes, writing and scholarship spread over the plains, but rarely penetrated the hills." [Burling 1965 : 5].

Within this conventional frame of thinking, highland regions of Southeast Asia and their peoples are generally regarded as isolated, backward and uncivilized without significant cultural achievement of their own, or even by adoption. As result, historians of Southeast Asia have paid very little attention to study of early development of peoples in the hills. However, the recent discoveries of a large quantity of ceramics and artifacts on Thanon Thongchai mountain range, along the border of Thailand and Burma, seem to challenge some previous archaeological presumptions and understanding of Southeast Asian cultures and history.

Construction of a highway near the border of Thailand and Burma in the 1970s, from Mae Sod to Umphang District in Tak Province, led to discovery of tens of thousands of old ceramics and other artifacts near villages and farms of various tribal groups who still live on the rugged mountains. After learning that these

beautiful ceramics and artifacts were worth money, tribal peoples, mainly Hmong, Lahu, Lisu and Karen, went to look for other sites with more treasures. Illegal digging went on extensively in many districts in Tak and nearby provinces of Chiang Mai, Kamphaeng Phet and Uthai Thani. More than one hundred sites, spread over four thousand square kilometers, have been reported. Because most sites are widely scattered on remote mountains it has been extremely difficult to stop this looting or simply to keep a site undisturbed until it can undergo archaeological investigation.

Scholars in Southeast Asian studies have been taken by surprise at recent discoveries in northwest Thailand. Before these discoveries, there had never been a major archaeological find in Tak. Previous finds in Thanon Thongchai mountains were mainly along the Kwai Noi River at Ban Kao in Kanchanaburi Province and at Spirit Cave in Mae Hong Son Province. Located several hundred kilometers from Tak, finds in Kanchanaburi and Mae Hong Son consisted mainly of crude stone tools and pottery vessels of prehistoric periods. Human remains, as well as bronze and iron tools, found in Kanchanaburi have been dated to about 1200 B.C. [Charoenwongsa 1982: 117-118]. Prehistoric cord-marked pottery and Hoabinhian type stone tools and vegetable seeds found at Spirit Cave in Mae Hong Son have been dated to around 6000-7000 B.C. [Gorman 1971: 81]. Although there have been reports of finds of crude stone tools from prehistoric time in Tak, artifacts and many types of ceramics and porcelains recently discovered in Tak all belong to the historical period when various ancient states and civilizations in mainland Southeast Asia flourished on the plains both sides of this mountain chain.

Mon have been indigenous in mainland Southeast Asia since the beginning of the Christian era. They had highly civilized kingdoms, such as Sudhamavadi (Thaton) and Homsavadi (Pegu) in Lower Burma, and Dvaravadi and Haripunchai in central and northern Thailand. Their power began to diminish in the ninth century when Khmer rose to power in the east, and it was eroded even further in the eleventh century when the Burmese rose to power in the north.

By early thirteenth century, many Thai groups had firmly settled in north and central plains of Thailand. Their kingdoms of Sukhothai, Lanna and Ayudhya were founded in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Other Thai states were also established in Laos, north Burma and north Vietnam. This expansion of Thai power was checked by the Burmese in the sixteenth century.

We actually know very little about ancient hill people, and significance of the highland area, except that there were old overland routes from northern Thai kingdoms of Lanna and Sukhothai to Martaban, an important seaport at the mouth of the Salween River in Lower Burma that received vessels and goods from China, India, Ceylon, Persia and Arabia. There are also records of Burmese and Thai troop movements across their vague common border during times of conflict in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Because of the transitory nature of hill people, it is very difficult to know with certainty about ethnic or cultural identity of people who lived in the western part of Thailand before the period of

southward expansion of Burmese. However, we can learn something about these unknown people and their culture from remains that suggest they had a part in ancient trade along Silk Road. Most remnants, ceramics and other artifacts have been found in ancient graves or cemeteries. A grave usually contains an urn or jar holding ashes and small pieces of charred bones, showing that the body was cremated and that ashes and body fragments were then put into the jar. This indicates that it was regular practice to cremate bodies before burial. However, a few complete or partial human skeletons have been found at some of these sites, which seems to indicate that primary burial was also performed for certain kinds of death.

Ceramics, iron and bronze artifacts were often found near the jars. Many lime-pots of various sizes were at times buried with other metal artifacts, such as swords, knives, sickles, bowls, dishes, trays, mirrors, bracelets and bells, as well as rock crystal and colored beads. Gold and silver jewelry, as well as silver coins and lacquer ware, have also been found.

All of these artifacts may have been possessions of the deceased or were offerings for him or her at the time of burial. Presence of such goods certainly indicates that the deceased belonged to a rather prosperous ethnic group. There also were indications that these people chewed betel leaf with areca nut and lime as stimulant, which practice still holds today among some indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia.

Many types of ceramics, including porcelains, found in graves came from diverse local and foreign origins. Locally the largest group of ceramics is of Thai celadon from Sawankhalok and Sukhothai. Numerous other Thai celadons and stoneware of excellent quality from northern kilns of Sankampaeng, Kalong, Wang Nua and Pan have been found, especially at Om Koi site in Chiang Mai. Numbers of earthenware water containers with white or brown decoration on red body, of late Haripunchai type (around twelfth-thirteenth centuries) were also discovered at many sites.

Among foreign ware recovered, Chinese ceramics form the largest grouping. Thousands of superb quality Chekiang celadons, mostly dishes, bowls and jars dating from Southern Sung dynasty to early Ming, have been found, as well as blue and white porcelains from Yuan to late Ming periods. A few pieces from Tang era have been found. For example, a sixth-seventh century Yueh jar with two pairs of handles (Plate 1) and a ninth-tenth century Yueh bowl (Plate 2), both found in Tak, are same type as those discovered in Indonesia [Adhyatman 1981 : 96, 284]. Other recovered Chinese wares include Fukien, Swatow, Shufu, Yingching and polychrome overglazed enamels. In addition to Chinese finds, many pieces of Vietnamese monochrome celadon and underglaze black and blue style were recovered at various sites along with a few Khmer ceramics of excellent quality.

Curiously, a group of interesting white-glazed ware, some with underglaze copper-green decoration, were discovered at many sites (Plate 3). Some bowls and trays also found, but in lesser numbers, were made of the same type of paste

covered with red or green glazes. This particular type of ware had not been known before these finds. Some scholars have identified them as lead-tin glazed ware attributable to Burmese-Mon origin and showing Middle Eastern influence [Di Crocco and Schulz 1985 : 8].

Ubiquity of foreign potteries in cemetery sites indicates that ancient peoples who inhabited the hills in northwest Thailand were not isolated. They had contact with their neighbors and trade with merchants who brought goods from afar.

This can be most readily illustrated by the presence of Chinese ceramics of different periods, indicating that ancient hill people related to Chinese maritime trade in Southeast Asia for a long time. Silk and other Chinese products must have also come but, unlike ceramics or metal objects, did not survive to become archaeological evidence.

Careful examination of thousands of Chinese dishes and bowls from Tak and nearby provinces give supporting evidence to this theory. Some burial sites are given dates as far back as T'ang and Sung periods because of Chinese celadons and other artifacts found in them (Plates 1, 2, 4). Going forward in history, many pieces of fourteenth century Lungchuan celadon (Plate 5), as well as large quantity of blue and white pieces of Yuan and early Ming dates have been recovered (Plates 6, 7, 8). Some Chinese blue-and-white ware can be dated to as late as the end of sixteenth century or start of the seventeenth century (Plate 9). So far no Chinese ware of Ching era have been reported.

Based on this evidence, it is likely that inhabitants of this mountainous region, whoever they may have been, had interaction with Chinese traders along the maritime Silk Road beginning at least from Tang Dynasty (618-906 A.D.) and continuing through the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. This intensive period of interaction appears to coincide with expansion of Chinese maritime trade during Sung and Yuan dynasties and with the golden age of Lanna, Sukhothai and early Ayudhya. Interaction probably began to cease at the time of Burmese invasion of Mon and Thai kingdoms in mid-sixteenth century.

Ancient Chinese trade certainly had great impact upon the lives of hill people in northwest Thailand. Many kinds of ceramics and other luxury commodities from abroad must have been highly valued and sought after. The many metal objects found, especially swords, are of such high quality and craftsmanship that they probably belonged to urban nobility rather than to commoners or peasants. These people also used much Chinese and Thai ceramics in their daily life and rituals.

Ceramics seem to have been associated with certain animistic beliefs of native people about afterlife and spirits. They were especially used in death ceremonies. This practice was not limited to this particular group of hill people. Many indigenous peoples in the Philippines and Indonesia also used imported ceramics in their religious ceremonies and burial customs :

"They (glazed ceramics) assumed a cultural significance which transcended considerations of function and utility. As highly prized possessions, trade ceramics

became an important measure of wealth and status in SEA societies. They also entered the realm of ritual practice, becoming an integral part of the social and spiritual life of the people, including funerary practices. Other art forms absorbed decorative motifs from ceramics and imbued them with local meaning." [Guy 1968 : viii].

Coupled with strong desire for these goods was an economy that apparently was sufficiently mature for the hill people to be able to barter for fine bronze ware and ceramics from Lanna, Sukhothai, Vietnam, Burma and China. Rich forest products, such as benzoin, bird plumes, gumlac, ironwood, sapanwood and beeswax, were in great demand for missions of tribute to China. Native hill people thus had incentive to exploit their natural resources more vigorously than ever before so they could supply commodities desired by foreign markets and in turn receive treasured ceramics.

Although it is still not clear how much Chinese arts and technology influenced ancient peoples in the mountains in northwest Thailand, Chinese ceramics certainly inspired ceramic production in northern Thailand. Chinese glazing and firing techniques were adopted by Thai potters in Sukhothai, Sawankhalok, Sankampaeng, Chiang Rai and Payao. Many Chinese designs also appeared on Thai celadons and stoneware during the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These Thai celadons were widely distributed on the Southeast Asian mainland and surrounding islands, while some went to faraway markets such as Japan and Middle East.

There is still a further question to be answered : That is the ethnic identity of people who inhabited the Thailand-Burma border in the distant past. This has become a popular topic for discussion and all sorts of speculation among scholars of Thai history, archaeology and ethnology. Whether these widespread mountain cemeteries belonged to a hill tribe who were once prosperous in this region, or whether they belonged to more powerful people on the plains who may have once occupied the hills as well, still remains an intriguing mystery.

Until now there has been almost no official archaeological excavation made at any of these sites. Illegal digging and looting on Thai side of the border has continued at will during the past few years and has recently spread into Burmese territory. Scholars are quite concerned that these historical sites, of which we know very little, will be completely ravaged before any thorough archaeological excavation can be carried out. Large numbers of superb ceramics have already been taken out of country to private collections and museums. It is indeed tragic to see tangible evidence of one of the glorious chapters of the history of Southeast Asia being taken out of context and lost forever.

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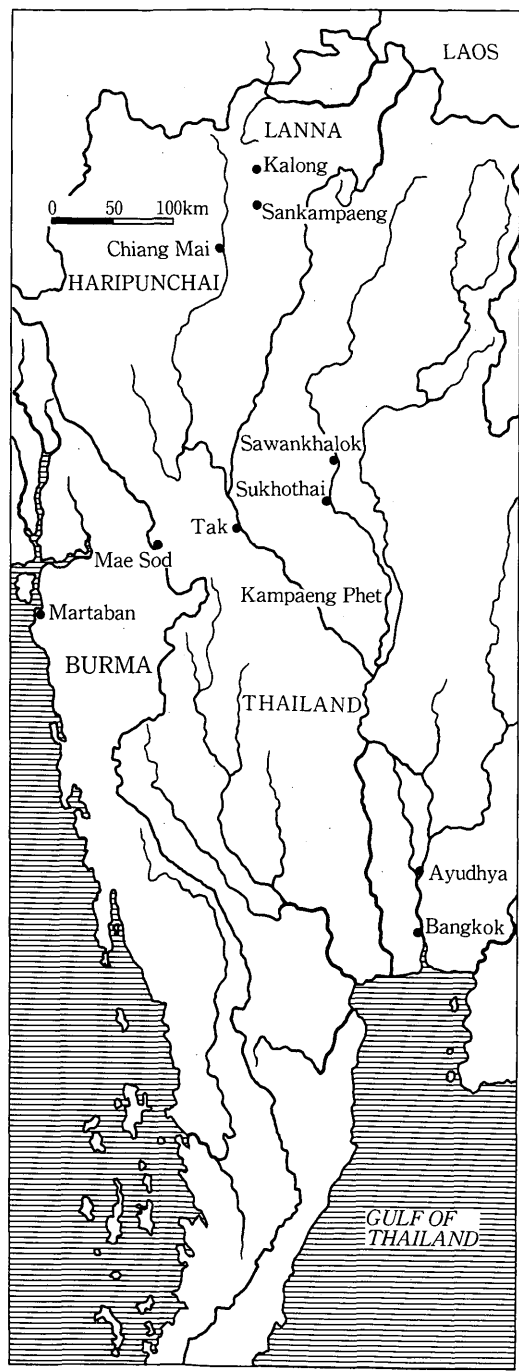
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PLATES

1. Wine jar with two pairs of loop-handles on shoulder. Covered with olive-green glaze falling short of flat base. Height: 32.3 cm. Sixth-seventh centuries.
2. Bowl covered with olive-green glaze falling short of footrim. Nine spur marks in center; base unglazed. Diameter: 20 cm. Ninth-tenth centuries.
3. Dish covered with white opaque glaze and copper-green underglaze decoration; base unglazed. Diameter: 28.2 cm. Fifteenth century.
4. Twin-fish dish with olive-green glaze to footrim; base glazed. Carved lotus petal design on exterior. Diameter: 21 cm. Twelfth-thirteenth centuries.
5. Large dish with blue-green glaze, decorated in center with molded dragon pursuing flaming pearl. Diameter: 33.5 cm. Fourteenth century.
6. Large underglaze-blue decorated dish with central panel showing two Mandarin ducks in lotus pond. Cavetto with lotus scroll and rim with blackberry lily. Diameter: 41 cm. Fourteenth century.
7. Two underglaze-blue bowls, decorated in center with lotus medallion and on rim with classical scroll. Exterior shows band of lotus scrolls above band of lotus panels. Base unglazed. Diameter: 16.5-18.3 cm. Fourteenth century.
8. Underglaze-blue bowl, decorated outside with scrolls and lotus panels and inside with conch and lotus. Diameter: 16 cm. Early fifteenth century.
9. Kendi with rounded sides, bulbous spout, tall neck and flaring rim, decorated outside in underglaze-blue with horses among cloud and wave scrolls. Height: 17 cm. Late sixteenth-seventeenth centuries.



Map of Thailand



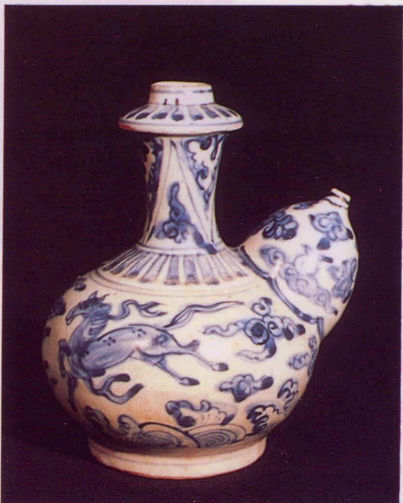
Pl. 3. Dish covered with white opaque glaze and copper-green underglaze decoration.



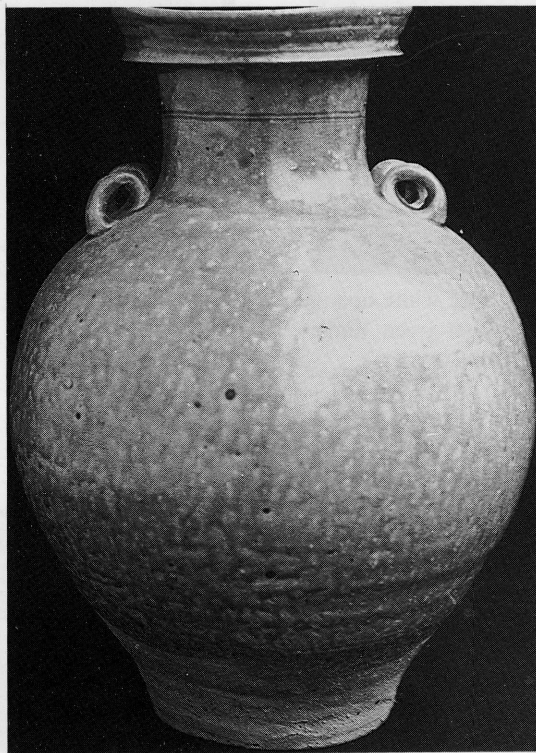
Pl. 5. Large dish with blue-green glaze.



Pl. 6. Large underglaze-blue decorated dish.



Pl. 9. Kendi with rounded sides, bulbous spout, tall neck and flaring rim.



Pl. 1. Wine jar with two pairs of loop-handles on shoulder.



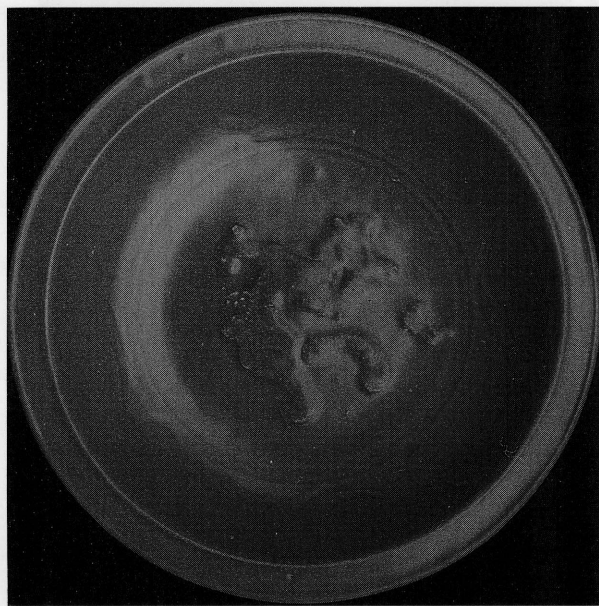
Pl. 2. Bowl covered with olive-green glaze falling short of footrim.



Pl. 3. Dish covered with white opaque glaze and copper-green underglaze decoration.



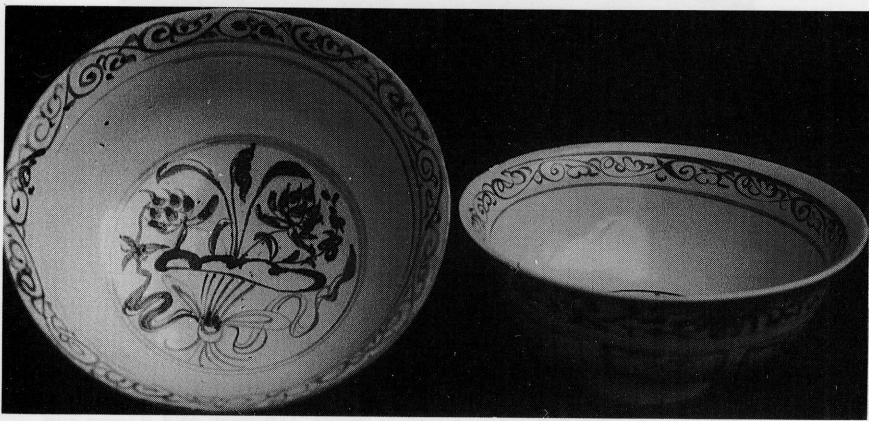
Pl. 4. Twin-fish dish with olive-green glaze to footrim.



Pl. 5. Large dish with blue-green glaze, decorated in center with molded dragon pursuing flaming pearl.



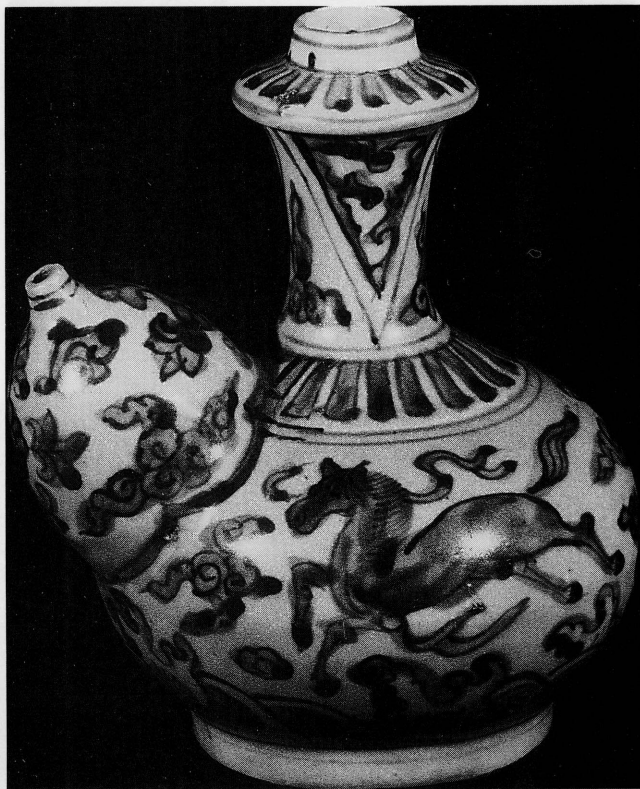
Pl. 6. Large underglaze-blue decorated dish with central panel showing two Mandarin ducks in lotus pond.



Pl. 7. Two underglaze-blue bowls, decorated in center with lotus medallion and on rim with classical scroll.



Pl. 8. Underglaze-blue bowl, decorated outside with scrolls and lotus panels and inside with conch and lotus.



Pl. 9. Kendi with rounded sides, bulbous spout, tall neck and flaring rim.