Guangdong Wares of the Northern Song Period

Peter Y.K. Lam

Introduction

Of all Chinese ceramic wares, those produced in the kilns of Guangdong are probably the least studied. Despite of the fact that the first detailed report of a Guangdong kiln site has been published as early as in 1958, until recently Guangdong wares are still labelled as Yue or Yue-type in museum cases and exhibition catalogues. Since 1980 the Art Gallery of the Chinese University of Hong Kong has launched a series of joint exhibition projects on Guangdong culture with museums in Guangzhou (Canton) and I have the privilege of visiting the city on many occasions and had the chance of exchanging ideas with the Guangzhou archaeologists and handling the kiln site finds at both the Guangdong Provincial Museum and the Guangzhou Municipal Museum. This paper is a preliminary attempt to summarize these kiln site finds in Guangdong during the past three decades with an aim to classify and identify certain types of wares commonly found in Southeast Asia.

More than one hundred Northern Song kiln sites have so far been found in Guangdong and there are others yet to be discovered or reported upon. The majority of these sites are situated along the coast of the South China Sea and scattered on the Pearl River Delta near Guangzhou. The finds from three kilns, Xicun, Chaozhou, and Huizhou will be discussed in more detail as these three sites have been well published and are representative of other sites.

Kiln Structure

The typical Guangdong kiln is of the “dragon-kiln” type commonly found in South China in the Song and Yuan periods. It was normally built on a hill slope with an inclination of about 12° to 17°. The kiln chamber was separated into 3 to 15 sections, the width of which varies from 2.15 to 3.16 metres, the height from 2.8 to 3.16 metres. The length of the kiln was very long, the longest was in
Chaozhou, which was about 100 metres, but the average length was 30 metres. The firing chamber floor was lined with a thick layer of sand for stacking seggars. The capacity for a medium size kiln of 30 metres has been estimated by the Chinese to be able to hold about forty thousand bowls in a single firing. Therefore the production must be enormous.

In Huizhou and Chaozhou two “stepped kilns” were discovered. These were improved and more advanced type of the “dragon kiln”. The long kiln chamber was separated into compartments. Each compartment was separated by walls with smoke vents below. The firing temperature attained is estimated to be around 1000°C to 1300°C, high enough to vitrify true porcelain.

General Characteristics of Guangdong Wares

With so many kilns in operation over a vast area it is very difficult to characterise the basic features of Guangdong wares produced in the Northern Song period. Both the body and glaze vary considerably. The colour of the glaze ranges from black, dark brown, olive green, green, light green to pale greyish yingqing which is almost white depending on the amount of iron oxide in the glaze and the firing atmosphere in which the piece was produced. The light green and the yingqing varieties however are most common. The glaze normally is very thinly applied and stops short of the base or foot-rim except in one group of well-finished large bowls where the foot-rim is also glazed. There is often a slight crazing or crackle on the whole or a part of the vessel, but this seems never to be very distinct.

The body also varies in colour, texture and fineness. The good quality pieces are usually of a white porcellaneous clay not dissimilar to the finest yingqing pieces produced in Jiangxi, but the more common type is a white stoneware clay with a slight greyish tinge, sandy, bubbly and rather rough in texture. Another type is buff in colour and has a “puddy” appearance and “split in layers”.

All the Guangdong wares are basically wheel-made. On the outside of bowls or dishes fine wheel-grooves are often easily discernable. Smaller pieces, for example, figurines, toys, loop-handles and pot-covers are hand-modelled. Some of the minor ornaments and components of incense burners and statues are mould-made and luted onto the vessel. The bowls and dishes come normally with a foot-ring which is always finished by cutting the centre recess. In the finer pieces this foot-ring is neatly cut and splays slightly outwards similar to the Yue ware produced in Zhejiang. In the thicker pieces the foot-ring is roughly cut and the inside wall of which slants towards the centre. There is still another group of large bowls which do not have a foot-ring. The base is disc-like and slightly concave in the middle. All of these type were fired upright in individual seggars resting on a solid lump of clay or on a ringed support. Remains of these kiln supports can often be seen on the bases of the bowls or dishes. This differs considerably from the true Yue ware which was always fired on several lumps of sandy fire clay, spur marks of which are seen as pale patches haloed in reddish brown.
As to decorative techniques, the methods employed include moulding, incising, carving, combing, stamp-impressing and painting in iron-brown. Of special interest is the painting in iron-brown, which is a "glaze decoration". That is to say the brown decoration is done either before or after the application of the overall glaze and strictly speaking in the latter case it is overglaze and not underglaze decoration. It is often very difficult to tell whether a design is under or overglaze, especially when the design is done when the overall glaze is still wet. The design will mix with the glaze and run in the firing. The incising and carving technique is also unique. In the finest examples the obliquely carved main motifs are always combined with repeated stamped semi-circular patterns of some detail. Example of this technique can be found on the shoulder of the well-known Eumorfopoulos phoenix-headed ewer (PI. 1) in the British Museum and on a series of finely carved large bowls with an ivory glaze. On rougher pieces such as the large bowl alleged to have been excavated from Butuan (PI. 2), the outline of the peony petals are apparently rendered by impressing with a pointed bamboo instrument while the other motifs are incised, carved or combed by other tools. This peculiar technique of decoration is unique to Guangdong and doesn't seem to have been found in other provinces.

Some Specific Types

a) Open forms:

Bowls and dishes are by far the most common products of Guangdong kilns. The first type to be described is a conical bowl with a thickened mouth-rim and a wide base (PI. 3). The foot-ring is low and the glaze which stops well above the foot may be bluish white or yellowish depending on the firing atmosphere. Bowls of this type are quite common in Southeast Asia and nearly identical ones have been found in Xicun, Chaozhou and Huizhou kiln sites. Being a simple form, this type of bowls continued to be produced and exported right into the 14th century. Late examples have been found in dated sutra mounds in Japan.

Another type of conical bowls have a strong foot-ring and a slightly flaring mouth. The inside is decorated with a sketchily incised and combed floral spray (PI. 4). The glaze is usually greyish white and stops also as in the above type above the foot-rim. Sometimes the exterior may be "slashed" with slanting radial lines (PI. 5). On the inside of some of these bowls, a floral medallion can be found. Also known as "banana-leaf", this medallion originates in Tang gold and silver ware and is commonly seen on Yue wares of the Zhejiang province. The carving on the Yue bowls is usually more refined and well executed.

There is another interesting group of dishes and deep bowls with moulded floral scroll design in the centre and "slashed" outside walls. The glaze is normally of deep green or olive green, not dissimilar to the "Northern celadon" type. The only difference from their northern counterparts is that the interior design is never
so sharply or distinctively moulded and the “sickle-leaf” is more static and crudely
carved. Very few pieces of this group have been found in Southeast Asia where
they are often regarded as northern.

Some of the small bowls and cups may have foliated sides. The bowl
illustrated in plate 6 is from Xicun and is “ten petalled”. The glaze
ranges from olive green to greyish white. The cups are usually of a better quality
and may even match with the standard yingqing ones produced in Jiangxi (P1. 7).

Of equally good quality is a group of well carved and incised dishes of
various sizes. One type of which has a finely incised “double-S” band round the
cavetto and a stylised flower in the centre (P1. 8). Sherds with similar designs
were found in Yangjiang and the sides are often lobed. Related to this
group is a class of finely potted dishes, also lobed but without a foot ring (P1. 9).
The glaze is of yingqing or greyish white and the carved floral designs are very
similar to sherds found at Xicun and Chaozhou.

There are large, rough bowls, as remarked above, which have a solid disc
base and the interior is decorated with incised, combed, carved and impressed
designs of floral elements. These bowls usually have round sides, slightly flaring
mouth-rim and the glaze is normally greyish and matt and stops well above
the solid base. Sometimes the carved design is enhanced by disorganised groups of
brown dots as in the bowl with a large parrot in the centre surrounded by a band of
floral scrolls (P1. 10). The parrot design on this bowl is nearly identical to the
well-known “Jizhou” sherd collected by Brankston in Jiangxi and now in the
British Museum (P1. 11). Extensive kiln site investigations have been carried out
in Jizhou during the past five years and so far not even one single sherd with this
peculiar decorative technique has been found in Jiangxi. Therefore it seems very
unlikely that the potters of Jizhou could have produced the Brankston sherd. The
same technique however is universal in Guangdong.

As mentioned earlier, perhaps the most characteristic product of
Guangdong is a large class of brown glaze painted dishes. The painting is usually
done in the centre with carved floral sprays around the cavetto (P1. 12). This
type is only found in Xicun where the painting is usually boldly drawn. In the so-
called Nanhai Guanyao (Nanhai Imperial Kiln), similar brown painted
bowls and jars were also found, but the painting was drawn only on plain bodies
under a green glaze without carved and incised decoration and the quality of both
the body and glaze is inferior to that of the wares of Xicun. Another peculiar
characteristic of both Xicun and Nanhai brown painted bowls is that their foot-rim
is always splayed outward to such an extent that the lower edge of the foot-rim
almost touches the outer base of the exterior (P1. 13). The whole foot-ring is
always glazed all over leaving only a small portion of the base unglazed for resting
on a lump or a ring of clay for firing.
b) *Closed forms: ewers, bottles, jars, boxes, etc.*

The phoenix-headed ewers are amongst the most attractive products of Guangdong. The most well-known one is the large ewer mentioned above in the *British Museum* (Pl. 14). The typical style and method of decoration, the potting and the boldly carved lotus petals round the base are all indicative of a Guangdong provenance. A fragment of a similar ewer has been unearthed in Chaozhou and simpler ones were abundant in other kiln sites. The one in the Museum Pusat, Jakarta for example resembles closely fragments of phoenix-headed ewers found at Xicun. The body of this type is more sturdy and sometimes decorated with the characteristic impressed and combed floral motifs. (Pl. 16) Another form of ewer also found at Chaozhou is decorated with carved slanting radial lines round the shoulder and fitted with a long spout and double-stranded handle. The body is lobed and carved with three or four groups of vertical lines. No complete vessels has been found at the kiln sites but a group of fragments discovered recently at Ceylon makes it possible to reconstruct the whole vessel. The neck of which should be flaring and ribbed, ending with a trumpet mouth (Pl. 17).

Among the finds of Guangdong kilns spouted bottles are not lacking. They are probably the forerunner of the "*kendis*" of the later Yuan and Ming periods. These bottles can be classified into two groups. The first type has a depressed globular body and a slender restricted neck. The glaze is the usual greyish *yingqing*. This type is more commonly found at Chaozhou sites. The second type is covered with a transparent creamy glaze which crazes and flakes off easily. It has a tapering spout, a wide mouth and a large neck. This second type is more common in Xicun.

There is also another type of ewers with a rather eccentric moulded fish shape. This is only found in Chaozhou. The glaze is of *yingqing* type and shows some crackle. The only piece I came across is the one illustrated in plate 18 from a private collection in Tokyo which was alleged to have been excavated in the Philippines (Pl. 18). More than three hundred fragments of this type of ewers have been unearthed at Chaozhou and it must be a very popular form.

Small bottles and jarlets are also very characteristic products of Guangdong kilns. The small bottles with a low foot-ring, globular body, a narrow ribbed neck and a splayed mouth come in all colours of glazes ranging from pale green to black. Some of the green ones may be decorated on the mouth and shoulder with brown spots. The jarlets, usually of "melon shape" are also decorated with spots or simple applique "bosses" near the mouth (Pl. 19). Other ones are decorated on the outside with lotus-petals which are either boldly carved in relief or in double-lines. The former seems to be a distinct feature of the Chaozhou potter. In some of the pieces of inferior quality, the carving is still bold and vigorous, but the knife stopped abruptly near the base of the petals and no additional care was made to cover up the "scars" (Pl. 20). The latter class of double-line carved lotus leaves on the other hand seems to have been more popular in Xicun. The motif
is found on bowls, jars, pots, bottles and cups either in a single band or in two opposite bands with the tips of the petals joining at the middle of the body. The background may occasionally be painted with brown spots or vertical strips (PI. 21).

Small boxes are also plentiful in Guangdong kilns. The most common types, also produced in Fujian and Jiangxi are the tall melon shaped ones and those with vertical sides and lobed cover and body, imitating a lacquer or silver prototype. The quality of both types is very high and the glaze is transparent and usually of yingqing type. More distinct Guangdong style are the joined boxes, also of yingqing type. These boxes, two or three joint together have lids modelled in the form of birds, or lotus-seed pods with fish. Some of these are also decorated with iron spots (PI. 22).

c) Some particular products

Finally I should like to mention two particular products of Guangdong kilns which are of special interest. The first is an astonishing find from two kiln sites in the southern suburb of Chaozhou. This is a group of dishes with sprig-relief fish under a sea green glaze very similar to the standard Longquan celadons of the 13th to 14th centuries (Pl. 23). The Chaozhou find however can be dated to the Northern Song period and there are features which differ considerably from the Longquan ones. Basically the bowl was wheel-made and lotus petals are absent on the outside. The thin glaze is more transparent and bubbly. The footring is squarely cut with the base left unglazed. The body is coarser and lighter in colour than the high iron content paste of the twin-moulded dishes of Longquan. However further research and excavation at the kiln sites have to be done in order to come to any definite conclusion.

The second, a less controversial one, is a find of dated sherds of the "Martaban" type in a kiln near Shiwan, Foshan. The jar, with a globular body and four horizontal looped-handles is impressed with a reign-mark (1116 A.D.) of the last emperor of the N. Song Dynasty. The body is of buff, porous stoneware clay and the yellowish brown glaze stops short of the concave base (PI. 24). This find confirms the traditional attribution of this type of jars to Guangdong and provides valuable stylistic criteria for future dating of similar classes of jars.

Related to these massive jars is a group of olive brown glazed basins commonly found in Southeast Asia and has until recently still been regarded as Vietnamese. The example illustrated in plate 25 matches in every respect with a nearly identical specimen unearthed at Xicun. The decoration consists of impressed floral or zoomorphic motifs under an olive brown glaze which flakes off easily. Sometimes very complicated designs such as dragons (PI. 26) or phoenixes are found. On the base of this sample is an ink inscription of a Chinese character "gang" (captain). Another unusual characteristic of this group of basins is that they were always stacked fired in a mouth-to-mouth, base-to-base position. Remains of stacking can often be seen on the mouth-rims.
Evidence for Dating

Based on the dating of the kilns by the Chinese archaeologists who made the investigations, all the material discussed in this paper is assumed to be of Northern Song date (i.e. late 10th to 12th centuries). This dating is supported by the following criteria:

(a) Dated ceramic pieces: apart from the dated Martarban jar mentioned above four statues found in a trench in the western suburbs of Chaozhou have dedicative inscriptions giving their dates as 1067, 1068 and 1069 respectively. Further excavations carried out recently yielded another base with similar dated inscriptions (1066 A.D.) and confirms that these four figures are from the Chaozhou kiln.

(b) Dated kiln furniture and tools: three pottery "hammers" found in the Chaozhou kiln have inscriptions all dated to mid. 11th century corresponding to the middle of the Northen Song period.

(c) Coins: in the Huizhou kiln a hoard of two hundred and eleven kilograms of copper coins were found on a kiln chamber. Amongst the fifty thousand coins only five of them are coins of Gaozong, the first emperor of the Southern Song period. All the rest (99%) are Northern Song or earlier.

(d) Dated tomb finds: In 1963, the Guangdong Provincial Museum discovered a tomb of the Northern Song period near Chaozhou. The tomb has a stone inscription datable to 1126 A.D. Amongst the finds are two bowls identical in potting, decoration and form to products of the Chaozhou kiln.

(e) Stylistic criterion: Most of the Guangdong pieces can be compared to similar pieces of known dates produced either in Zhejiang or Jiangxi. The recent discovery of the important site at Butuan in Mindanao, where Guangdong types of pottery are found in association with 10th to 11th century Yue wares is a good example. Similar discoveries have also been made in Ceylon and Fustat.

The above evidence is enough I think to assign a Northern Song date for the material discussed above, although some of the finds may be earlier and some later. The dating of the kiln finds will become more accurate as more kiln sites are investigated and as more archaeological specimens are discovered both in China and abroad.

* This is a revised version of a paper delivered at the First Asian Oriental Ceramic Society Conference, Manila in February, 1983.
FOOTNOTES


3. See Note 1 above.


7. op. cit, pp. 210-211.


9. Mr. Mai Yinghao, personal communication, see also *Xicun*, p. 8. After an examination of sections of sherds and underfired wasters the authors of the *Xicun* report noted that some of the brown paintings were overglaze.

10. Medley, Margaret, *The Chinese Potter*, London, 1976, Fig. 70.


15. *Xicun*, pl. 45.


17. *Xicun*, pls. 11, 37, 43.

18. Guangdong Provincial Museum, “A Study of the Connection between the Old Kilns at Foshan-Shiwan and Yangjiang-Shiwan”, *Shiwan Wares*, Hong Kong, 1979, p. 163, Fig. XII:1.


21. Xicun, pl. 87; Chaozhou, Fig. 9.

22. Xicun, pl. 4-10.

23. Unpublished sherds of this type are on display at the Guangdong Provincial Museum, Guangzhou.

24. See Note 10 above.

25. Chaozhou, Fig. 38.


29. Chaozhou, pl. 27:2.

30. Xicun, pl. 73.

31. Chaozhou, pl. 14:1, Huang Yuzhi et al, “Song Kilns at Bijiashan, Chaozhou, Guangdong”, Kaogu, 1983:6, p. 519, Fig. 1:5.

32. Chaozhou, pl. 32:2.

33. Xicun, pls. 50, 53, 54, 66.

34. Chaozhou, pl. 18.

35. Chaozhou, pl. 26:3; Xicun, pl. 82.


38. Xicun, p. 121.

39. “Gang” is an abbreviation for “Gangshou” (張首), see Zhongguo taocishi, Peking, 1983, p. 309. Several pieces with similar characters are known to be extant. See for instance the “temmoku” bowl found at Fukuoka, Japan with an ink inscription “Zhanggang” 張綱 (Captain Zhang), illustrated in Chinese Ceramics Excavated in Japan, Tokyo, 1978, p. 70, pl. 247:1-2.

40. Chaozhou, pls. 23-25.

42. *Chaozhou*, pl. 41.

43. cf. Huizhou report, see note 5 above, pp. 50-51.


45. cf. Note 27 above for the Ceylon finds. For more recent finds from Fostat see Bo Gyllen- 
svard, “Recent Finds of Chinese Ceramics at Fostat I”, *Bulletin of the Museum of Far 
Eastern Antiquities*, No. 45, 1975, pp. 91ff and also Mikami, Tsugio, “China and Egypt: 
pp. 67ff. The big bowl illustrated in pl. 5 with incised “dragon-fish” is nearly identical 
to sherds from Chaozhou (cf. *Chaozhou*, p. 13, Fig. 9).

2. Detail of decoration on a large bowl, Art Gallery, the Chinese University of Hong Kong.
3. Bowls with thickened mouth-rims, found at Pulao Tioman, Malaysia.

4. Conical bowl with sketchy design, private collection, Hong Kong.
5. Sherds of bowls with "slashed" walls, found at Pulao Tioman, Malaysia.


7. Small cup with foliated sides, private collection, Hong Kong.
8a. Incised design on a *yinqing* type dish, Collection of Mr. B. McElney, Hong Kong.

8b. Incised design on a *yinqing* type dish, from Yangjiang.

9. Carved design on a foliated dish, private collection, Hong Kong.
10. Carved "parrot" design in the centre of a large bowl, Art Gallery, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.


13. Side view of previous (cf. Plate 12) bowl.


19a Jarlets and bottles, Art Gallery, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

19b Jarlets and bottles, Art Gallery, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.


21. Jarlet with carved and painted design, present whereabouts unknown.

23. Green glazed dish, from Chaozhou, Guangdong Provincial Museum, Guangzhou.
24. Fragment of a large jar with impressed reign-mark, Foshan Museum.

25a Bowl in brown glaze with impressed design, Art Gallery, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

25b Bowl in brown glaze with impressed design, Art Gallery, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

26. Rubbing of impressed design on a fragment of a brown glazed bowl, found at Pulao Tioman, Malaysia.