

The Interaction Between Chinese and Malaysian Civilizations in the Context of Ceramic Trade in the Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644

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Abstract

Transnational trade between Malaysia and China is believed to have commenced around 110 BCE. By the 14th century, during the Ming Dynasty, the frequency of trade exchanges and the diversity of traded goods between the two regions had significantly increased, indicating a period of active maritime commerce. The Age of Discovery and the opening of new maritime routes further accelerated global navigational activities and the process of trade globalization between the 14th and 17th centuries. This paper adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the trade mechanisms, product varieties, and commercial routes of ceramic trade between Malaysia and China during this period. It further analyses the underlying reasons for the trade and cultural exchanges between the two regions in this specific historical context. The study also offers historical insights and cultural significance that can inform contemporary trade development and cultural transmission between Malaysia and China.

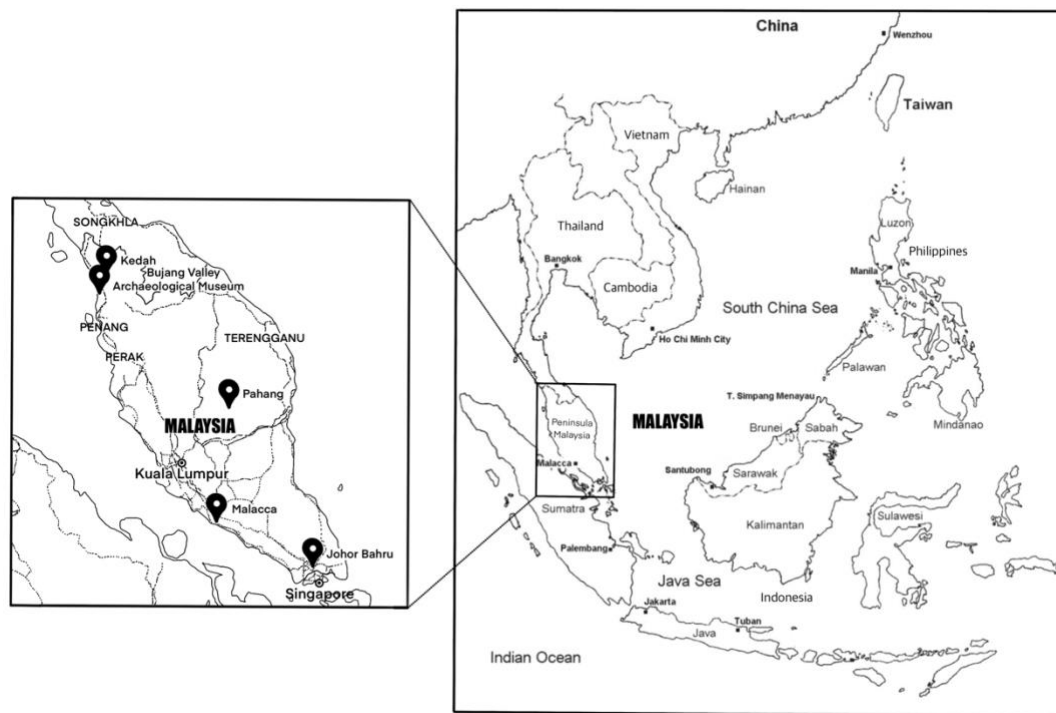
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INTRODUCTION

At present, it is known that the earliest trade between China and Malaysia was in the Han Dynasty, and since the Han Dynasty, the trade between the ancient countries on the Malay Peninsula and China has gradually increased (Nie et al. 2006). The Tang, Song and Yuan dynasties were the period of great development of China's ceramic skills. From this time onward, the number of Chinese ceramics in the goods traded between China and Malaysia increased. This is indicated by the large amount of Song Dynasty Chinese porcelain found at excavation sites 18 and 19 in Bujang Valley, Malaysia, and the evidence of Tang and Song Dynasty porcelain found in Sungai Mas (Murphy 2018). Compared to previous historical periods, both the variety of goods and the circulation range within Malaysia and the broader Southeast Asian market had significantly expanded. According to the records in Zhu Fan Zhi and Dao Yi Zhi Lue, the types of Chinese ceramic exports during this period were already highly diverse, including blue-and-white porcelain, celadon, monochrome pottery, and various

sizes of water jars, among others. These goods were distributed throughout Southeast Asia at that time, such as Phong Phong (present-day Pahang, Malaysia), Tan Maliing (present-day Singapore) and other places (Figure 1).

Figure 1, The sites where a large quantity of Chinese porcelain was found in Malaysia



Source: Modified from Lamb 1959; Zhang 1981; Murphy 2018

In the Ming Dynasty, China's overseas trade was generally divided into two periods with the first year of Longqing (1567) as the dividing line, the former part was mainly in the form of official government trade, and the latter part was mainly in the form of private trade (Wang, 2015). In fact, prior to Zheng He's first voyage to the West (1405) at the end of the 14th century, Zhu Yuanzhang, Emperor Taizu of the Ming Dynasty, was initially open to overseas trade after overthrowing the Yuan Dynasty. During this period, the Ming government continued to follow the overseas trade policy of the Song and Yuan Dynasties, allowing private trade to develop. It was only later, when Japan frequently invaded the southeastern coastal regions, that the Ming government strengthened coastal defenses and enacted the regulation prohibiting "single boards from entering the sea" (Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica 1962). Since then, the private trade of the people was strictly controlled, and the tribute trade continued as a diplomatic means for the Ming government to politically attract overseas countries.

During the 28 years from the third year of Yongle in the Ming Dynasty (1405) to the eighth year of Xuande in the Ming Dynasty (1433), Southeast Asia was one of the main activities of Zheng He's seven voyages to the Western Seas, and Malaysia was naturally included. The Ming Dynasty had a particularly close relationship with Manarca (present-day Malacca), and even Zheng He chose Manarca as a supply station for his fleet during his first voyage to the West, where money, food and branch ships were stored and joined together. The good relationship between the two countries not only enabled the smooth development of China's overseas tribute trade at that time, but also because of the protection of China in the Ming Dynasty (Zhang 1981), broke away from Siamese control and even later developed into

an East-West trading center. After 1433, the official announced to stop sailing activities, and from then on, the positive official foreign trade in the early Ming Dynasty gradually turned to conservative. Until 1567, the official opened the port in the Moon port of Zhangzhou City, Fujian Province, China (Zheng and Su 2009), allowing private people to go to sea and allowing foreign businessmen to land in Guangzhou and Macao for trade, that is, from this time on. The private overseas trade replaced the official tributary trade and became the main overseas trade exchange mode in the middle and late Ming Dynasty.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Through the use of qualitative research methods, this study reviews and organizes archaeological excavation data and related literature on Southeast Asia. Building on this foundation, it employs archaeological typology to conduct a comparative analysis of Ming dynasty ceramics discovered in Malaysia, in relation to ceramics of the same period with well-established archaeological dates. The comparison is carried out through a typological and quantitative approach, visually presenting the connection between Ming dynasty ceramic trade between Malaysia and China. Furthermore, an analysis of trade categories and routes is conducted to explore the reasons behind the large-scale export of ceramics during that period.

THE WAY OF CERAMIC TRADE BETWEEN CHINA AND MALAYSIA IN MING DYNASTY

Trade practices are generally categorized into official and private sectors. However, when discussing foreign trade during the Ming dynasty, it is essential to address the “tribute trade”. Strictly speaking, “tribute trade” can be regarded as a form of official trade; yet, it differs significantly from the modern understanding of official trade. This trade system involved foreign countries sending valuable or rare items to China as “tribute” in exchange for rewards granted by the Chinese emperor. Since this practice was largely used by the Ming government as a means to promote national prestige, rather than as a means of real economic gains, the market price of “tribute” and “return gift” is often exhibited a significant disparity. At that time, the Ming government often returned more valuable items of higher market worth. Emperor Chengzu of the Ming Dynasty once said, “As for commercial taxes, the state imposes them to suppress the lowest classes, not for profit. Now, when foreign peoples come far, do we seek to encroach upon their interests? What gain would be, and how would it diminish the great courtesy extended to all foreign nations?” (Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica 1962). Suddenly, Southeast Asian countries came to pay tribute. During the Yongle period of the Ming Dynasty, the number of “tribute trade” became an unprecedented peak period, resulting in the grand scene where “envoys from various foreign tribes arrived in successive years, with their tribute missions coming and going along the roads” (Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica 1962).

Official trade, as the main means of overseas trade of Chinese ceramics in the Ming Dynasty, declined after the eighth year of Xuande (1433), and then until the end of the Ming Dynasty, private trade replaced official trade as the main mode of trade. From Table 1 can see the changes in the number of official overseas trade from the early Ming Dynasty to the middle Ming Dynasty (Wang 1970; Wade 2000). It can be seen that the tributaries from Malacca to China from 1400 to 1510 were almost uninterrupted, but the number of tributaries was the highest in the early Ming Dynasty and gradually decreased after that.

Table 1: The Main Tributary Countries and Times in Southeast Asia in the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty

Year/Harbor	Java	Basay	Siam	Chams	Cambodia	Malay Peninsula	Brunei	Philippines
1400-1409	8	3	11	5	4	3	3	2
1410-1419	6	7	6	9	3	11	4	2
1420-1429	16	5	10	9	-	3	2	5
1430-1439	5	3	4	10	-	3	-	-
1440-1449	7	-	3	9	-	2	-	-
1450-1459	3	-	2	3	-	3	-	-
1460-1469	3	1	1	4	-	2	-	-
1470-1479	-	-	4	3	-	1	-	-
1480-1489	-	3	3	3	-	-	-	-
1490-1499	2	-	3	3	-	-	-	-
1500-1510	-	-	1	2	-	2	-	-

Source: Modified from Wang 1970; Wade 2000

At this time, the scope of trade was extensive, according to Huang (1936), “Western Zei Cochin, Champcheng, Siam, Lower Port, Kaluba, Cambodia, Great Clay, Old Port, Malacca (present-day Malacca), Aceh, Pahang, Johor.....”. From the records, it is found that at this time, the Malay Peninsula with close trade exchanges with China are Malacca, Pahang, Johor and other places, and these places have also found some archaeological evidence to prove this documentary record (Mei and Wang 2000).

Since the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, the government has been implementing the maritime embargo policy, which has imposed many restrictions on unofficial trade, and the economy and life of coastal citizens under the maritime embargo policy have been seriously affected. In the middle and late Ming Dynasty, the call for opening trade ports in coastal areas such as Fujian and Guangdong has been rising, and the Ming rulers finally imposed taxes in the first year of Longqing (1567). In Fujian, ports were opened to allow private maritime trade. Since then, private trade replaced official trade and became the main way of trade in the middle and late Ming Dynasty (Chen 2006).

TYPES OF CERAMIC TRADE BETWEEN CHINA AND MALAYSIA IN MING DYNASTY

According to the previous archaeological excavation data, the types of Chinese Ming Dynasty porcelain found in Malaysia are mainly celadon and, blue and white porcelain. In the late 1930s, two Malay fishermen found two celadon plates in a river a few miles upstream from Serokam in the Sidam District of Kedah. In terms of style, Peacock (1959) tends to date the early Ming

Dynasty. In 1960, at least 8,000 pieces of Chinese porcelain were found during two excavations in Malacca and Johore Lama, which were funded by the Malaysian Federal Museum Department. Some of the pieces from Malacca are older than Johore Lama. In Malacca, pieces of Chinese blue and white porcelain were found, including those from the mid-Ming Dynasty (mid-15th century), Johore Lama found more in the 16th and 17th centuries (Othman 1978). Remarkably, according to Colin Jack-Hinton, at Kota Tinggi, Johore even found a six-character mark with the Chenghua year (1465-1487), John Pope mentions that there are only about 30 pieces of Chenghua blue and white porcelain in existence in the region, but all of them are marked with year numbers (Jack-Hinton 1963).

The types of Chinese Ming Dynasty ceramics found in the Malaysian shipwreck and the results of site excavation are also very similar. The Chinese Ming Dynasty ceramics discovered primarily consist of celadon and blue-and-white porcelain, with smaller quantities of white porcelain and brown-glazed ceramics also present. Table 2 lists shipwrecks in Malaysia dating from the Ming Dynasty. According to the porcelain from these wrecks, it can be shown that celadon dominated in the early Ming Dynasty, and blue and white porcelain gradually increased after the middle Ming Dynasty.

Table 2: The Chronological of Shipwrecks with Ming Dynasty Chinese porcelain found in Malaysia

Name of wreck	Location	Hull form	China and other countries porcelain cargoes
Turiang - Early 14th century	In the southern part of the South China Sea, more than 100 nautical miles east of Peninsular Malaysia.	The remains of a Chinese sailing boat 26 meters long and 7 to 8 meters wide.	A total of 12,000 ceramic pieces were recovered, 57% are Sukhothai kiln's underglaze black flower porcelain, 35% are Minzhe Longquan celadon and Jinjiang Cizao kiln's sauce glaze, and 8% are Vietnamese blue and white porcelain.
Nanyang - c. AD 1380	In Malaysian territorial water, 10 nautical miles from the island of Tioman. In 63 metres of water, 23 nautical miles from the coast.	Quite small, possibly around 18 metres long with a beam of 5 metres. May have exceeded 30 metres in length with a beam of 8 metres.	15,000 pieces of Thai Sawanhalok Kiln celadon and pottery, Sukhothai kiln underglaze brown flower porcelain, a small amount of Chinese pottery. There are 150,000 pieces of porcelain, 40% of which are Thailand Sawanhalok Kiln celadon, 40% of Minzhe Longquan kiln celadon, and 20% of Thailand Sukhothai kiln underglaze brown flower porcelain.
Royal Nanhai - c. AD 1450	40 nautical miles east of Kuantan in Peninsular Malaysia, in 46 metres of water.	The hull remains 28 meters long and 8 meters wide.	30,000 pieces of Thai Sawanhalok Kiln celadon, a small amount of Chinese blue and white porcelain and Vietnamese blue and white porcelain.
Xuande - c. AD 1500-1520	30 nautical miles north of the	Approximately 28x8 metres in	Chinese blue-and-white porcelain and monochrome

	Malaysian island of Tioman, in 53 metres of water.	size.	white-glazed ceramics, and Si-Satchanalai and Sukhothai underglaze black decorated ware.
Wanli - early 17th century)	Terengganu coast, east of Peninsular Malaysia.	The 17-metre vessel build around a ribbed framework, rather than transverse bulkheads, and has been identified to be of either European or Chinese origins.	Tens of thousands of porcelains, most of Jingdezhen blue and white porcelain.

Source: <https://www.maritimeasia.ws/>; Kwa 2012

Since the 16th century, the West entered the Age of Exploration, integrating into the global trade system through long-distance transcontinental maritime trade. Both Portugal and Spain became significant players in this system (Zhang 2018). Chinese trade vessels, Portuguese and Spanish ships, as well as those of the Dutch East India Company, were frequently found in regions such as the southeastern coast of China, Southeast Asia, and other maritime areas. Among the cargo recovered from these sunken ships, Chinese porcelain was by far the most abundant (Wu 2009). Chinese porcelain is undoubtedly one of the most direct pieces of evidence of maritime trade during this period. Shipwreck data discovered in Southeast Asia are mainly distributed along the coasts of Vietnam, the Gulf of Thailand, the Strait of Malacca, as well as in the waters of Indonesia and the Philippines. Among the Ming dynasty shipwrecks discovered in Malaysia, the Turing, Longquan, and Wanli wrecks contain a significant amount of Chinese ceramics. Notably, the blue-and-white porcelain found in the Wanli wreck is the most numerous in terms of quantity and most varied in terms of decorative styles (Yang 2021). Through the examination of literature, physical artifacts, and scientific archaeology, it has been established that these porcelains were primarily produced in Jingdezhen and Zhangzhou kilns in China. By utilizing typological analysis, a comparative analysis was conducted between the representative blue-and-white porcelain cargo recovered from the Wanli wreck and Chinese blue-and-white porcelains from the same period with similar decorations and consistent forms (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Blue and white porcelains



Source: Modified from Chen 2017; Liu 2018; Jiang 2013

Figure 2: 1-3 are blue-and-white porcelains from the Wanli wreck; 4 is a blue-and-white porcelain excavated from the Guanyinge kiln site in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, China; 5 is from the San Diego wreck (1600); 6 is a blue-and-white porcelain excavated from the Guanyinge kiln site in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, China; 7 is a blue-and-white porcelain excavated from the Imperial Kiln Factory site in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, China.

The comparison reveals a high degree of similarity between the porcelain cargo and ceramics produced in Jingdezhen, suggesting that this region may have been a major center for the production of export porcelain at the time. Furthermore, similar products were also found in other Southeast Asian shipwrecks, indicating that these blue-and-white porcelain items, with their specific shapes and decorations, had a broad market during the same period and were well-received in their destinations.

MING DYNASTY CHINA AND MALAYSIA CERAMIC TRADE ROUTE

In the Song and Yuan dynasties, China had a broad vision of the ocean, and the ocean trade sailed on both sides of the Indian Ocean through the South China Sea. In the Yuan Dynasty, the geographical position of the ocean was detailed, and the “Hainan States” were subdivided into the Great East Ocean, the small East Ocean, the Western Ocean, etc. (Sun 1989). After the opening of new shipping routes, Sumatra, Java, Malay Peninsula and other areas close to the Strait of Malacca became an important transportation point for China's porcelain industry in the Ming Dynasty, and a large number of Chinese Song and Yuan porcelain were found in this area to prove it.

In the early Ming Dynasty, the maritime prohibition was strictly enforced, and on the other hand, to ensure the official tribute trade activities and only a few ports were retained based on the previous dynasty as landing ports for neighboring countries.

Guangzhou has always been a stable port, while Quanzhou, Fuzuo and other ports were immediately withdrawn in the early Ming Dynasty, and trade was extremely unstable, so Guangzhou developed into the largest port city on the southeast coast of China during this

period. “At the beginning of Hong Wu, it was set up at Huangdu, Taicang. Re-established in Ningbo, Quanzhou, Guangdong. Ningbo to Japan, Quanzhou to Ryukyu, Guangzhou to Hunching, Riao, Western countries” (Li 1982), this period of Sino-Malaysian ceramic trade is also mainly from Guangzhou. Later, according to the Daming Convention of the 15th year of Wanli (1587) of the Ming Dynasty, the domestic departure point for the island countries in Southeast Asia was the Department of Ship in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province.

In the 16th century and the first half of the 17th century, the situation in the East Asian seas began to fluctuate, and the pattern of trade changed greatly. Since the 16th century, Western countries have entered the era of great navigation, and many European countries such as Portugal, the Netherlands and Spain began to arrive in East Asian waters and joined the traditional Asian trade network, and they built the global trade system at that time through long-distance trans-continental sea navigation. At this point, the Maritime Silk Road of the Ming Dynasty also underwent great changes, and the navigation route of the entire Maritime Silk Road was also from the initial arrival in East Asia and Southeast Asia, the coastal areas of the Indian Ocean, the East Sea coast of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula region of West Asia, and finally reached Europe through the Atlantic Ocean (Bournois and Geng 2016). The export of ceramics is more dependent on the great Asia-Europe sea route built by European and American ships. In the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean, the Pacific Ocean and other broader seas, ships loaded with ceramics are found ready to be exported to Europe and the United States.

Since the Yuan Dynasty in China, maritime trade mostly passed through Guangzhou and Champa, then sailed around the Malay Peninsula, traversed the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, and finally reached the Mediterranean coastline (Hu 1987). The expansion of the overseas market of Chinese porcelain in the Ming Dynasty and the extension of sea transport routes did not change the important position of the Malay Peninsula in sea transport, and the Malay Peninsula in the Ming Dynasty still continued the role of sea transport in the previous dynasties, as a sales place of Chinese porcelain, and on the other hand, as a transfer station of Chinese porcelain.

THE REASON OF MING DYNASTY CHINESE CERAMICS EXPORTED TO MALAYSIA

As a transit

Since ancient times, the South China Sea has been the route of sea shipping in Southeast Asia. As mentioned above, Guangzhou was an important foreign trade port in the Ming Dynasty. In fact, in the Tang Dynasty, there were foreign merchants shipping Chinese porcelain to the sea through Guangzhou. According to ancient books, these porcelain wares travelled 200 miles southeast of Guangzhou to Ton Men Hill (present-day Hong Kong), two days west to Kyushu Shi (northeast corner of Hainan), and two days south to Xiang Shi (southeast corner of Hainan). And three days southwest to Mount Bulao (Champa Island, Vietnam). Another five days to the Strait (Malacca), the quality of the people called, the north and south hundred miles, the north coast of the country of Luoyue (the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula), the south coast of the Buddha's country (Sumatra ah southeast) (Feng 1962). From the records in the book, it can be seen that now, Malacca and other places on the Malay Peninsula were only used as stop over points, and were not exclusively used as commodity trading places, but this situation changed in the Ming Dynasty.

Based on Zheng He's seventh voyage to the West, Chinese porcelain needed to pass through the Strait of Malacca if it wanted to be transported to India, Bangladesh, Iran and other places, and most merchant ships did not just stay in Malacca but used Malacca and other places

as a transit point in trade. After the goods were bought and sold in these areas and restructured, the navigation route either continued to the west or east (Zhang 2006).

Chinese market

According to records (Zhang 2006), in the Yongle period of the Ming Dynasty, the number of Chinese coastal residents who sailed out to sea to stay in the South Ocean Islands has been quite large. After the Yongle period of the Ming Dynasty, it gradually increased.

During the Yongle period of the Ming Dynasty, there were already many Chinese people living in the Nanyang Islands. Since then, Chinese immigration has gradually increased. The reason for this is that one is afraid to return home because of the violation of the prohibition of doing business across the sea, and another is that the nature of ocean-going trade also needs to establish some overseas residence. In spite of this strict law on inward and outward entry and commerce, there were still some Chinese who, for the sake of commerce, were continually forbidden to sail abroad, and who, once abroad, could not return to their own country; some dwelt in Malacca, others in Siam or Tai Nai, and others scattered in other parts of Southeast Asia (Yan 1957).

Chinese immigrants established commercial bases. They either opened shops selling all kinds of Chinese goods or acted as middlemen in acquiring local specialties for Chinese merchant ships. Or set up warehouses and own ships to broker trade; Or set up handicraft workshops, imitation of Chinese goods. When Southeast Asia was ruled by the Kings, the Chinese settlement was still very small. The European powers had established their colonies, the increased opportunities for trade and encouraged the Chinese to emigrate throughout Southeast Asia in large numbers (Bassel and Guo 1965).

Unification of currency (weights and measures)

At that time, Chinese copper coins and Chinese weights and measures were widely circulated and adopted in Southeast Asia. For example, in the state of Java, the people were very rich, and the trading transactions exercised the copper money of the Chinese dynasties. In the old Port country, trading in the market also made Chinese copper coins cloth and so on (Ma and Wan 2005). Siam, on the other hand, once asked the Ming Dynasty, Begging for a measure of Chinese style (Huang and Xie 1982).

CONCLUSION

The trade between Malaysia and China has existed since ancient times, and the cultural exchanges and cultural influences brought by the trade exchanges are manifold. The export of Chinese porcelain not only influenced the habit of using Malaysian utensils, but also the penetration way of cultural aesthetics. The existing large amount of Nyonya porcelain from the late Qing Dynasty in Malaysia is a good example. The study on the trade between Malaysia and China in the Ming Dynasty also has reference significance for the contemporary trade between China and Malaysia. Under the current trend of trade globalization, the positive significance of economic development brought by globalization on the collision and exchange of civilizations between China and Malaysia, no matter in the stage of technology or human development, cannot be underestimated.

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