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**NOT PRIMITIVE, CERTAINLY NOT SIMPLE:
WOMEN'S EARTHENWARE PRODUCTION IN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Louise Cort and Leedom Lefferts

A woman rises before dawn and starts to work on a pile of clay dug the day before from a nearby pond or field. Her tools are a tree stump, a few wooden paddles, and a clutch of mushroom-shaped clay anvils or river stones. By the end of the day, 20-30 spherical pots stand drying in the workspace beneath her stilt-supported house. The proudly swelling vessels are the same size, and all conform to the pattern of pots made by women in her community. When those pots - and perhaps several dozen more produced in the course of a week - are dry, she stacks them in an open field with straw, bamboo and brushwood, strikes a match, and in 30 minutes fires them to golden-orange perfection.

This is the pattern we have witnessed again and again in the course of our research on present-day pottery production in mainland Southeast Asia. We have not ceased to be amazed by the confident skills borne by hundreds of such women living in villages throughout the region. Yet their products are the unglazed earthenware vessels reflexively termed 'simple' (as in 'just a simple earthenware pot') and their bonfire technology for firing is inevitably described as 'primitive'. We reject these terms, instead marvelling at the complexity of the motor skills and conventions of form that each woman potter internalizes and repeats thousands of times in the course of her career, at the elegance and tense lightness of the











MAE PIAK FORMS CLAY CYLINDERS IN PREPARATION FOR MAKING WATER JARS.
DAUN JIK VILLAGE, UBON PROVINCE, NORTHEAST THAILAND, 1994. ALL PHOTOS BY THE AUTHORS

finished forms, and at the subtlety of her control over the firing process.

Village women of mainland Southeast Asia are known as skilful weavers, but their skills as potters are seldom appreciated. Unlike their textiles, which are sold in urban centers

regionally and internationally, their pots seldom reach city markets. Instead they are distributed to nearby villages or, at best, to local market-towns, in areas where refrigerators have not yet replaced clay jars for cooling drinking water. Here small earthenware pots are still deemed indispensable for simmering

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MAE PEUM SHAPES THE RIM OF LARGE WATER JAR

WHILE REVOLVING BACKWARDS AROUND THE EXPANDED CYLINDER ON ITS STAND. TAKO MAW VILLAGE, NAKHON RATCHASIMA PROVINCE, NORTHEAST THAILAND, 1995



herbal medicine, even if aluminum or stainless steel pots have replaced larger clay pots for cooking rice. Only very recently have urban Southeast Asians begun to incorporate clay pots into interior decoration as components of nostalgia for the countryside.

Our own awareness of the complexity and, indeed, the diversity of Southeast Asian earthenware production arose almost by accident in the course of Lefferts's research on village society and on textiles. The stoneware traditions of Japan had been the focus of Cort's research, although she had studied earthenware production in India. In 1993 we agreed to escort Dr Narasaki Shoichi, an eminent Japanese ceramic archaeologist, to villages in northeast Thailand to see women earthenware potters at work; he was interested in possible ethnoarchaeological comparisons to prehistoric earthenware production in Japan.

Day after day, as we went from village to village observing women following the steps of producing their pots, we realised that we were witnessing interesting variations in technology rather than the consistency we had expected. Lying at the heart of mainland Southeast Asia, with borders on both Laos and Cambodia, northeast Thai society is a rich mixture of longstanding and immigrant populations. These include Khmer-speaking people who have lived in the southern tier since the heyday of the Angkorean empire in the 11th through 13th centuries and various Lao-speaking groups who crossed the Mekong from upland Laos. Nowadays it is

difficult to distinguish among these groups by any factor other than the language used at home; everyone learns standard Thai at school. We expected to see some differences between the decoration or form of the finished pots of various language communities. Instead, we discovered telling distinctions in the 'heart' of the pot - in the initial form that each woman made but then submerged in the final pot form.

A common trait of all earthenware production in mainland Southeast Asia is that - contrary to the process of throwing a vessel on the wheel, when the sequence is base, then body, then mouth - the mouth is made first and the body follows. In order to make the mouth, the potter shapes a thick cylinder of clay, on one end of which she then forms the mouth. In this anything-but-simple process, the potter revolves in a 'dance' - sometimes walking backwards - around the cylinder, which remains stationary on an upended section of tree trunk, while holding her hands in a sequence of defined positions to form a template that slides over the wet clay and coaxes the rim from the cylinder's edge. We term this cylinder the 'preform'. It disappears in the course of making the pot. Once the mouth rim stiffens enough to hold its shape, the potter expands the cylinder of the body in several stages, wielding a wooden paddle to strike the outer surface supported by an anvil held on the inside, until it becomes a thin, rounded form with a closed round base.

It is that cylinder, or 'preform', that reveals the most subtle distinction between communities or technical lineages of potters. Women in the largest pottery-making group in present-day northeast Thailand, speakers of the Thai-Khorat language, form their cylinders from solid logs of clay, in which they open holes from both ends. (To make large pots, they stack two cylinders to make a tall preform.)

To casual observers, the potter's dynamic expansion of the vessel form with paddle and anvil is eye-catching. But in the preceding steps, in which the preform is manipulated, the basic shape of the pot is established. We realized it is inaccurate to speak of 'making' a pot with paddle and anvil. That process finishes the form, but the all-but-invisible preform starts it.

Once we understood the hidden diversity in earthenware pots made by various communities in northeast Thailand, we realized that we had to expand our survey to surrounding areas to explore connections that extended beyond modern regional or national

MAE PIAK SHAPES A WATER JAR USING A WOODEN PADDLE AND

A FIRED-CLAY ANVIL (HELD IN HER LEFT HAND AGAINST THE INNER WALL OF THE VESSEL). DAUN JIK VILLAGE, UBON PROVINCE, NORTHEAST THAILAND, 1995



boundaries. Visits to north-central and northern Thailand and Laos introduced us to more variations in the way potters made preforms, including a coil-formed or ring-formed cylinder built upon a flat base. (The edges of the base were later obliterated by paddle and anvil.) In central and southern Thailand we saw women use a fast potter's wheel to throw cylinders with mouth rims, cut them off the wheel without a base, and paddle the base closed. In upland central Laos, we even encountered a process that made no use whatsoever of paddle and anvil. Those women coiled and smoothed a hemispherical preform that consisted of the upper half of the finished pot. When the rim was stiff, they turned the preform upside down to rest on the rim while they used coils to shape the hemispherical base of the vessel. The process ended when the potter pulled her finger out of the hole in the base and pinched it shut!

The cross-border affinities of the Thai-Khorat potters eluded us until we went to Cambodia. There, in the large cluster of pottery-making villages at the heart of Kompong Chhnang ('Pot Province'), as well as in smaller communities in southern Cambodia, we were delighted to find the familiar cylinder. Some Khmer potters started from the same solid log of clay, while others first made rectangular slabs of clay, then stood them on end and joined the vertical seam to make a cylinder. Ethnic Khmer in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam also used the latter procedure. This large family of a 'Khmer' pattern of earthenware production thus spans the political borders of three modern nations,



while it conforms to the geography of the Angkorean empire. We do not assume an unbroken continuity of technology from that distant past to the present, but we see a shared way of approaching the initial form of the pot that links widely dispersed communities, and certainly has done so for some time. Even though the Thai-Khorat potters of northeast Thailand do not identify themselves as Khmer or speak Khmer, their technological behavior displays links that they have forgotten.

Alerted to this regional connection, we also noted others. The process that involved coiling a preform from midpoint upward, without resorting to a paddle and anvil for finishing, which we first saw in upland central Laos, is also used by Cham potters on the coastal side of the mountain range in central Vietnam, as well as by women in peninsular Malaysia. We assume that this markedly distinctive (and widely dispersed) sequence of techniques for forming an earthenware pot was introduced to the mainland from insular Southeast Asia.

As of today, we have discovered a total of six different processes used by women potters in mainland Southeast Asia to work a lump of clay into a finished vessel, using transformations of different preforms to define remarkably similar final shapes. There are still gaps in our knowledge, including how earthenware is made in central Vietnam and northern Laos (and across the border in Yunnan), and the process of filling them may lead to more revelations of connections and commonalities. This research shows that paying attention to technology and artistic expertise may lead to a radically different

understanding of contemporary Southeast Asia than the usual focus on political boundaries or religious systems.

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