

CONNECTING EMPIRES AND STATES

Selected Papers
from the 13th
International
Conference of the
European
Association of
Southeast Asian
Archaeologists,
Volume 2



Edited by
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Published by:

NUS Press
National University of Singapore
AS3-01-02, 3 Arts Link
Singapore 117569

Fax: (65) 6774-0652
E-mail: nusbooks@nus.edu.sg
Website: <http://www.nus.edu.sg/nuspress>

ISBN 978-9971-69-643-6 (Paper)

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National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists International Conference (13th: 2010: Berlin.)

Connecting empires and states: selected papers from the 13th International Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists, Volume 2 / edited by Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz, Andreas Reinecke & Dominik Bonatz. – Singapore: NUS Press, 2012.

p. cm.

ISBN: 978-9971-69-643-6 (pbk.)

1. Excavations (Archaeology) – Southeast Asia – Congresses. 2. Historic sites – Southeast Asia – Congresses.
3. Archaeology and art – Southeast Asia – Congresses. I. Tjoa-Bonatz, Mai Lin. II. Reinecke, Andreas. III. Bonatz, Dominik. IV. Title.

DS523

959.01-- dc23

OCN795110021

Front cover image: Aerial view on the excavation at Tanah Lua, Tanah Datar in West Sumatra, Indonesia, April 2012 (Photo: D. Bonatz and M. Tonch).

Back cover image: Angkor Thom: face tower from south, Cambodia (Photo: A.J. Gail).

Typeset by: Forum, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Printed by: Mainland Press Pte Ltd

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Chapter 28

Tai Potters across Borders: Tracking Ceramic Technology in Southern Yunnan and Northern Thailand

Leedom Lefferts and Louise Allison Cort

Abstract

Relationships among the populations of southern Yunnan, northern Thailand (Lan Na), northern Laos and Burma have been discussed extensively in terms of ethnicity, linguistics, politics, religion and other frameworks. This paper offers a different mode of understanding, through the perspective of ceramic production technology. Drawing on fieldwork in Yunnan in 2009 and 2010 and our earlier surveys of pottery production in adjacent areas of Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, it describes continuity across borders of ceramic production technology, at the same time as it identifies disparities in ceramic repertoires and usages that illuminate diversity defined by borders. It considers several noteworthy issues of diversity: the production of ritual vessels in the earthenware repertory; interaction with Burmese ceramics; the issue of stoneware production; and concludes with some comments on ethnicity.

Introduction

Relationships among the populations of southern Yunnan, northern Thailand (Lan Na), northern Laos and Burma have been discussed extensively in terms of ethnicity, linguistics, politics, religion and other frameworks. This paper offers a different mode of understanding, through the perspective of ceramic production technology. From the 1950s onward, valuable studies by Chinese archaeologists recorded the production of ceramics by Dai and other minority groups living in Sipsong Pan Na (Xishuang Banna) and adjacent areas of Yunnan (Li Yangsong 1958, 1959 [1989]; Zhang Ji 1959; Lin Sheng 1965; Daizu Zhitao Gongyi Lianhe Kaocha Xiaozu 1977; Yang Yuan 1986; Cheng Zhuhai *et al.* 1986; Wang Ningsheng 1989, 2003; Wang Yawen 2008). Those studies, motivated by issues in Chinese archaeology, were seldom linked to adjacent cultures of speakers of Tai-related languages and others to the south. Our field work in Yunnan in 2009 and 2010, joined to our earlier surveys of pottery production in adjacent areas of Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, enables us to make links not available to our Chinese colleagues [Fig. 28.1].

In particular, the perspective of ceramic technology allows us to circumvent the slippery categories of ethnicity, language, politics and religion in the search for evidence of relationships. We can point out continuity across borders on the basis of the evidence of ceramic production technology, while identifying disparities in ceramic repertoires and usages that illuminate diversity defined by borders. In this paper, after briefly explaining our approach to documenting ceramic production technology and the continuity that it reveals, we consider several noteworthy issues of diversity: the production of ritual vessels in the earthenware repertory; interaction with Burmese ceramics; and the issue of stoneware production. We conclude with some comments on pottery in relation to contemporary constructs of ethnicity.

Ceramic Production Technology

In the pre-industrial but contemporary (thus, modern) village-centered context we investigate, ceramic production is embodied behavior passed down from one generation to the next, learned as a product of

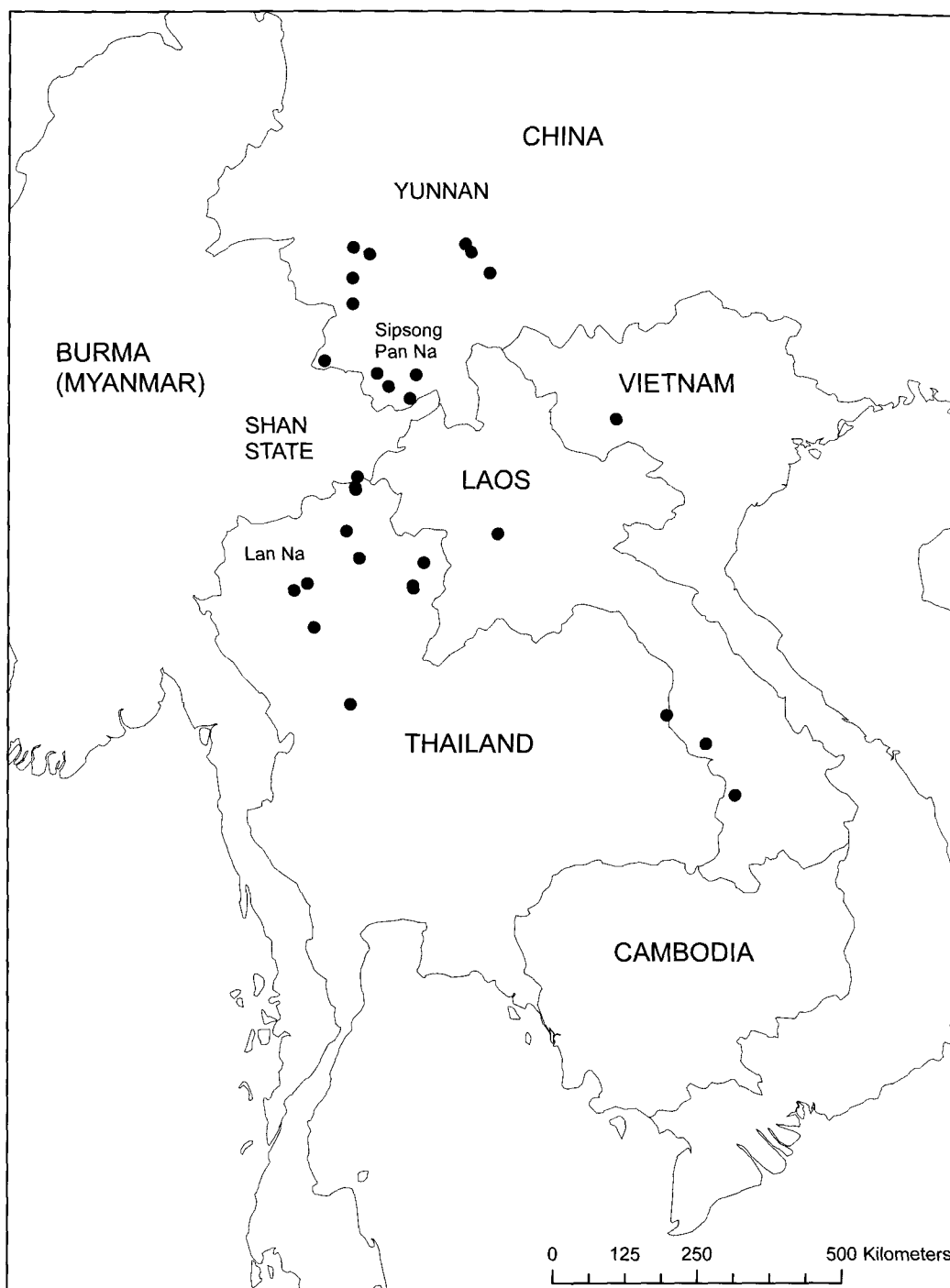


Fig. 28.1: Sites for Type B earthenware production (Map: D.G. Cole, Smithsonian Institution).

living with other people doing the same activities, much as one learns a mother tongue. This production is embodied in the producer's body and its various appendages; arms and hands, legs and feet, and head and eye, and bodily torsion are the primary tools for this effort, alongside which the few manufactured tools utilized are primarily extensions and elaborations of the body's basic equipment. The apprentice internalizes a sequence of actions for clay preparation, direct manipulations of the clay, and firing of the finished pieces (see Ingold 2001). This is true of both types of ceramics made in Mainland Southeast Asia (including southern Yunnan), earthenware and stoneware. We have surveyed both categories of production, finding a total of seven different modes of earthenware production and three different modes of stoneware production in the totality of 197 villages we have surveyed throughout mainland Southeast Asia.

We have found that stoneware ceramic production by Tai potters in Mainland Southeast Asia (men were the primary makers, sometimes assisted by women) follows a single pattern. The case of earthenware is far more complex in its variety. (The preponderance of earthenware production is conducted by women, sometimes assisted by men, although in some instances men are the makers.) Superficially, all earthenware cooking pots made in the Mainland “look alike” — with a sturdy rim, globular body and round bottom — but we have learned, through careful investigation, that there are numerous ways to get to that finished form (Lefferts and Cort 2003). To date we have recorded seven variations, which we term Types A through G. For the purpose of classifying these variations, we have come to depend upon scrutiny of the very first stage of shaping a vessel (the stage often overlooked by ethnographers) — the making of the “preform” (Cort *et al.* n.d.). This key stage involves the potter’s initial transformation of a mass of raw clay into a preliminary shape, with the rim finished but the body yet to be completed. It “disappears” into the finished pot.

For this discussion the critical pattern of preform production is the one we call Type B. To produce this preform the potter makes a flat circular base, builds a cylinder on the base (using coils or rings of clay), and shapes the rim on the cylinder’s upper edge [Figs. 28.2a–c]. The preform has a flat base joining the wall at an angle. Subsequently the potter uses a paddle and anvil to round out the angle between the base and the body, producing a round-bottomed pot. Before 2009 we traced this pattern in Tai communities throughout northern Thailand (Lan Na), where it is almost wholly dominant, as well as in one village in northern Laos (with further surveys still needed), two communities in lowland southern Laos, and one site in northeast Thailand, all areas where other types predominate.

In 2009 and 2010, with the invaluable collaboration of Dr. Wang Ningsheng, Wang Yawen and Yang Cheng of the Ethnic Studies Center, Yunnan Nationalities University, we surveyed earthenware-producing communities in southern Yunnan province, both in Sipsong Pan Na and further north. With the exception of one Wa village (no longer making pots), these communities identify themselves as Dai. (From our perspective, this is a subdivision of Tai, especially since we were able to communicate using common terminology about pottery production.) With one exception, to be discussed below, the potters make earthenware according to the Type B pattern. In terms of ceramic technology, therefore, we see a single Type B earthenware “techno-complex” connecting southern Yunnan and northern Thailand (as well as, we suspect, northern Laos and Shan State, Burma, although we have not yet surveyed those areas) [Fig. 28.1]. The recognition of this fundamental identity allows us to ask meaningful questions about variations. Here we will consider red and black earthenware for ritual, relationships to Burmese pottery technology and the relationship between earthenware and stoneware.

Red Earthenware for Ritual

Earthenware potters in northern Thailand using the Type B process produce a range of secular and utilitarian shapes — pots for cooling drinking water, for cooking rice, for steeping herbal medicine. Until 2009, we had gathered no information about pots for ritual use, either from the potters themselves or in temples in the region. Thus we were surprised to learn that earthenware pottery production in Sipsong Pan Na encompasses miniature vessels made specifically for offering in local Theravada Buddhist temples. (Dr. Wang told us that a different set of miniature offering vessels, “very crude and primitive, shaped by hand,” was made for use at the shrine of the village gods, housed in a small hut [pers. comm., 6 Feb. 2009], but we never knowingly saw such pots or heard them mentioned by potters.) These miniature vessels are made alongside — and replicate the forms of — full-size utilitarian vessels, although the repertory of miniature pots also includes some distinctive forms not made (or no longer made?) in regular size, notably alms bowls. Both sizes of pots are red as the result of firing in an oxidizing atmosphere in a bonfire. In an archaeological context, the miniatures might be mistaken for “toys”.

One potter in Sipsong Pan Na listed for us the essential vessel forms for offering and their required contents: two cooking pots for presenting water; two cooking pots for money; one cooking pot of cooked vegetables; one alms-bowl of cooked rice; one two-part steamer set with lid, containing husked raw rice; and a set of one gourd-shaped drinking-water bottle and one candle stick [potter Yü Nang, Manlang village, Mengzhe town, Menghai county, pers. comm., 6 Feb. 2009 (Fig. 28.3)]. This basic set



Fig. 28.2a-c. Steps in Type B production of earthenware: (a) building a cylinder on a flat base; (b) shaping the rim; (c) rounding out the angle between the base and the body. Potter Mae Sii, Wua I village, Haan Kaew joint village, Hang Dong district, Chiang Mai province, Thailand (Photos: L. Lefferts and L. Cort 1995).

was donated on behalf of living worshippers; when the donation was made in memory of a deceased ancestor, a teapot was added. Other miniature forms were also made, including a vase, a lidded jar for tea leaves and a tea cup with handle, but their inclusion was optional. The donor chose the moment for donation, which could occur at any time during the year and was not connected to any major festival. Accompanied by the entire family, the donor carried the set of pots to the temple, placed it on the altar, and sat near the altar while the monks chanted sutras. Each household made such offerings once or twice a year. After the ceremony the donor left the pots in the temple, where they stayed until the abbot decided to remove them from the altar. Stacks of discarded miniature pottery vessels could usually be seen piled in a corner against the outside wall of a temple.

Were these ritual repertoires ever produced in Lan Na? A clue is provided by a record made in the late 19th century. Carl Bock, traveling in northern Thailand, visited a cave near Muang Fang, Chiang Mai province, and recorded assorted offerings of earthenware pots:

To the left of the entrance was a narrow niche or recess in which was a broken figure of Buddha, at whose feet the pious pilgrims had laid a collection of the characteristic clay decanters or water-jugs, pots, and jars of the country [...] In the cave was a reclining Buddha made of brickwork, covered by a coating of thick varnish, and once heavily gilt. [...] All around the central god was an assemblage of figures. [...] At the feet of the gigantic idol lay another heap of clay pots and jars, with rice-trays containing rice, small wooden and stone figures of Buddha, brought all the way from the Ngiou [Shan] States, and deposited there by worshippers; while heaped upon an adjacent altar was an immense collection of representations of Buddha, together with a curious assortment of priests' clothing, water-jars, streamers, tufts of hair, spittoons, and other odds and ends [Bock 1884 (1986): 289–90].



Fig. 28.3: Potter Yü Nang holds miniature red earthenware pots for use in offering at the village temple. Manlang village, Mengzhe town, Menghai county, Yunnan province, China (Photo: L. Lefferts and L. Cort 2009).

Bock's observation of a practice that once existed in Lan Na but has now vanished offers a measure for the transformation of Buddhism in northern Thailand over the course of the last century. As northern Thailand was drawn into Siam, Theravada Buddhist practice became unified and homogenized in the course of the process of "rationalization" emanating from Bangkok. It seems that the Chinese government's concern with religion has not extended to how rituals take place. In Thailand, rituals have been unified and "cleansed" in a manner not seen (yet, at least) in Yunnan (see Borchert 2005, 2008).

Black Earthenware for Ritual

In addition to the miniature sets of red utilitarian pots for temple offerings, we also encountered a second type of miniature clay vessel on the altars of temples in Dai villages in Sipsong Pan Na. They were of two shapes — small gourd-shaped bottles and small alms bowls — and distinguished by their lustrous black surface, produced by means of polishing and smoky firing or, in current production, by black paint. The bottles (*nam tun*, h. 17cm) were used to make offerings of water [Fig. 28.4]. The alms bowls came

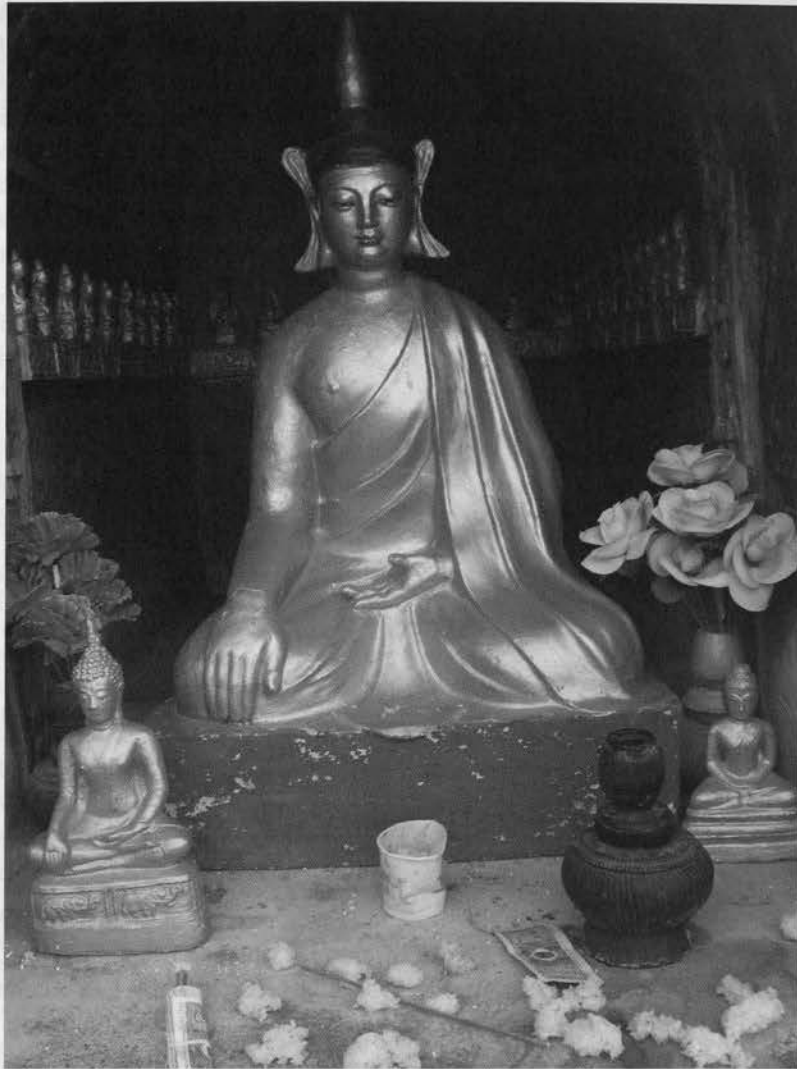


Fig. 28.4: Black earthenware water bottle on Buddhist altar. Manfeilong, Menglong town, Menghai county, Yunnan province, China (Photo: L. Lefferts and L. Cort 2009).



Fig. 28.5: Black earthenware alms bowls in three sizes, made by potter Ai Un. The kiln formerly used for black firing is in disrepair, so black paint is now used to finish the bowls. Mannankham village, Menglong town, Menghai county, Yunnan province, China (Photo: L. Lefferts and L. Cort 2009).

in three sizes, we were told by the one male potter who still makes them in Sipsong Pan Na (potter Ai Un, Mannankham village, Menglong town, Menghai county, pers. comm., 9 Feb. 2009 [Fig. 28.5]). The smallest size (diam. 8.5cm) was given to the temple in a set together with a water bottle; the medium size (diam. 15.5cm) was placed on the altar holding rice, incense, or other offerings; and the largest size (diam. 21cm) was used by monks to receive food offerings or to collect donations of candles, money and rice.

Like the miniature red earthenware pots, the black pottery offering vessels are miniature versions of full-sized pots, albeit pots with a special function in the temple. We never saw full-size black bottles being made or in use, although Dr. Wang told us that they were used inside homes to keep drinking water cool and placed in a sheltered location against a wall (pers. comm., 16 Feb. 2009). In 1990, during visits to Tai Lu villages along the Ou River in northern Laos, we had encountered many such bottles in the homes where we stayed. Bock's descriptions confirm that black pottery water bottles were still in prominent use in northern Thailand as well in the late 19th century:

The ordinary kitchen utensils are of very inferior make, but more attention is paid to the manufacture of the decanters or water-bottles, by which the natives set great store. These vary in shape from that of an ordinary wine decanter or "carafe" to that of a really well-designed and artistically-worked goblet or tureen. The larger and better kinds are furnished with a silver or gold cup, which is kept inverted over the mouth of the decanter. The best water-vessels, however, are of Ngiou [Shan] make. These are either of a black or slate colour, and bear a polish [Bock 1884 (1986): 193].

Strict silence is observed at mealtimes, and when the repast is finished a small quantity of water is drunk from the heavy clay decanters or goblets, which are passed around, each person rinsing out his or her mouth, and ejecting the contents into a spittoon, or, if this convenient receptacle be wanting, through an equally convenient hole in the floor [Bock 1884 (1986): 312-3].

The Burma Connection: Technology Transfer

Bock's report connected the best black water bottles to Shan State, the westerly extension of Tai settlement into Burma. This reputation seemingly still holds true in Sipsong Pan Na. In a shop in Menghai market, we were told that the miniature black water bottles offered for sale had been made in Kengtung, the old *muang* in Shan State. More precisely, Charlotte Reith's field research in the 1990s determined that both black and red polished earthenware vessels are made outside Kengtung near Mongkaing town, in villages adjoining the stoneware-making village of Honar (pers. comm., 21 Jan. 2003 *inter alia*).

The history of the present-day producers of such bottles in Thailand and Yunnan also connects them to Shan State. In northern Thailand, full-size polished black earthenware bottles (*nam ton*) are made outside Chiang Mai in the village of Mung Kung (equivalent to Mongkaing), which is said to have been established by Shan potters from Kengtung, perhaps in the 1780s (Rujaya Abhakorn, pers. comm., 2 Jan. 1996). In turn, in the mid-20th century, mobile potters from Mung Kung had developed two production sites further north in Chiang Rai province, as we learned from 1996 field research. In Sipsong Pan Na, a Dai man who lived near the Burmese border is said to have come to Mannankham village in the 1940s and taught local men to make pottery bottles and to construct an updraft kiln in which to produce the blackened surface (Wang Ningsheng 2003: 250).

On the one hand, the exotic technology of forming and firing these black-fired polished earthenware bottles sets them apart from the Type B repertory of Dai potters in Yunnan and Tai in northern Thailand, who fire their red pots in bonfires. We classify as Type E the distinctive shaping technology for the bottles, which employs small movable wheels placed on pivots and used to shape and dry individual vessels [Fig. 28.6]. On the other hand, the black bottle's gourd shape relates it to a long-necked bottle shape (*nam tao*, "gourd for water") widely found in the repertory of Tai stoneware potters and also made in red earthenware versions in some earthenware-producing communities in the region. Differing in function from the large round, lidded jars used for cooling drinking water consumed by all household members, the bottles play an important role in providing individual portions of drinking water to guests in the home and to monks by accompanying food offerings in temples.

Another dimension of technology seemingly introduced from Shan State into Sipsong Pan Na (but not, to our knowledge, to northern Thailand) is the use of lead glaze on utilitarian earthenware pots. In

two villages, potters apply lead glaze to ornament pot rims and lids [Fig. 28.7]. The potter who showed us this production in Sipsong Pan Na had no recollection that the practice had not “always been there” (potter Yü Nang, Manlang village, Mengzhe town, Menghai county, pers. comm., 6 Feb. 2009). In a village further north, however, a potter aged around 70 recounted how she had gone to Shan State some 50 years earlier and learned to use the glaze (potter Mae Ai Non, Mangyang, Mangzhang village, Nayun town, Menglian county, Pu'er region, pers. comm., 27 Feb. 2010). This technique appears to be related to the practice documented across the border in Kyauk Taing village, Shan State (Reith 1997: 48, 59–61).

As suggested by the case of the lone man who brought black pottery production to Mannankham village, these transfers of technologies probably can be understood as taking place unofficially at a personal or local level. The regularity and depth of Yunnan potters' contacts with Burma was evident in our conversations with both Dai earthenware makers and Han stoneware makers (see Chang 2009). Burma offers significant opportunities to earn money from labor or selling finished products. A Han man making stoneware in Lincang told how he had regularly gone to Burma during the dry season each year to do construction work and make pots, just as his great-grandfather had before him (potter Yang Chengyao, Mengzhe market, pers. comm., 5 Feb. 2009). A Dai woman potter described spending a few dry seasons near the Yunnan-Burma border demonstrating pottery-making for tourists (potter Yü Nang, Manlang village, Mengzhe town, Menghai county, pers. comm., 6 Feb. 2009). At the same time, the technology transfers of polished black pottery and lead-glazed earthenware

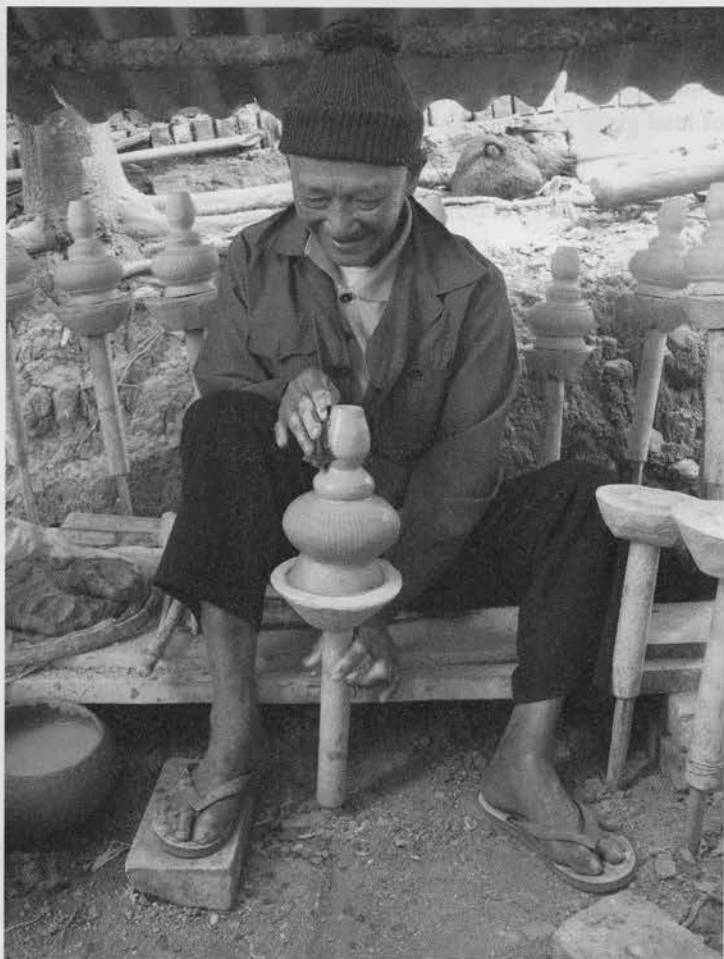


Fig. 28.6: Potter Ai Un shapes water bottle on small movable wheel. Mannankham village, Menglong town, Menghai county, Yunnan province, China (Photo: L. Lefferts and L. Cort 2009).

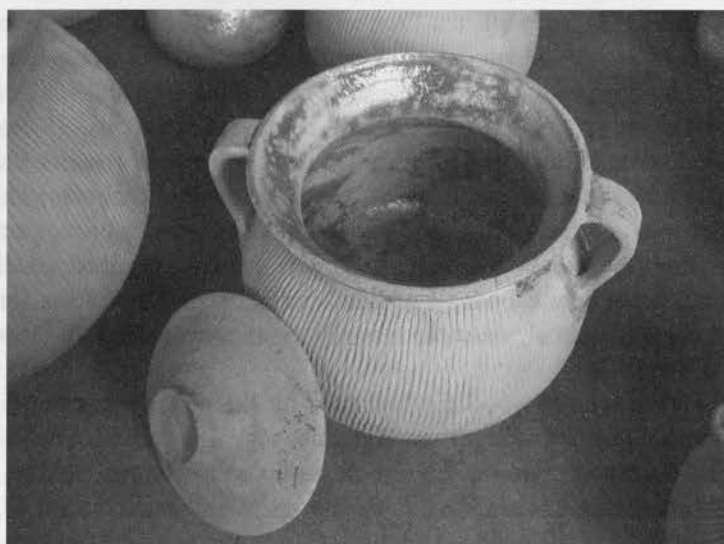


Fig. 28.7: Lead glaze applied to rim and interior of red earthenware cooking pot. Manlang village, Mengzhe town, Menghai county, Yunnan province, China (Photo: L. Lefferts and L. Cort 2009).

from Shan State into Sipsong Pan Na probably represent a relatively recent movement along a long trail of successive transfers, whereby the practices were introduced into Burma from northern India, whose potters had acquired them in turn from the Islamic world (see Rye and Evans 1976). Curiously, the use of lead glaze on earthenware does not appear to have made inroads into northern Thailand.

Connections between Earthenware and Stoneware

Type B earthenware technology poses a basic question: why make a flat-bottomed preform, only to have to go to the trouble of rounding out the edges to make a round pot? Most potters working in Type B mode use some sort of rotating flat surface — such as a wheel on a pivot, or a flat board rotating on a support set in the ground or on the potter's knee — to build a preform with a flat base. We propose that this element of Type B earthenware technology indicates its close historical connection to the technology used by the Tai potters who make stoneware. Tai male potters making stoneware use a wheel to construct jars with flat bases, starting with a flat disk of clay as the base and using clay coils to build upward to shape the wall, ending with the rim. They work on a heavy but compact wooden wheel carved from a section of tree trunk and revolving on a pivot. While building up the coils, they work alone, turning the wheel slowly with one big toe; when they proceed to “throwing” in order to smooth the coils, consolidate the wall and shape the rim, an assistant seated opposite spins the wheel rapidly.

In the modern day, production sites of earthenware and stoneware are separated (and also divided by gender). In a very few instances, however, which we documented in northeast Thailand and Laos along both sides of the Mekong River, the same communities make both stoneware and Type B earthenware. In a few other cases, also in that region, adjacent communities linked closely by marriage exchanges make either Type B earthenware or stoneware, functioning together as a sort of “team” to supply the totality of ceramic requirements for their area.

It is our hypothesis that migrant Tai communities moving southwestward into the region brought a “package” of technology for making both stoneware and earthenware (see O'Connor 1995). Only in the few communities just mentioned does that “package” survive. In one village in northeast Thailand, the men who made stoneware vessels also used their wheels to shape flat-bottomed preforms for women's earthenware vessels. According to one potter, “My father made jars; my mother made cooking pots. They go together with the wheel — they are the same” (potter Nai Cheun, Kut Pla Khao village, Khao Wong district, Kalasin province, pers. comm., 12 Jan. 1996). Two different tempers were added to the single clay body to create the distinctive properties of the two types of ceramics.

More generally, stoneware production by Tai men continues in isolated villages only in northeast Thailand, Laos, northeast Cambodia and northwest Vietnam (as well as Shan State; Charlotte Reith, pers. comm., various dates). What happened to Tai stoneware elsewhere? Since Type B earthenware technology predominates in both northern Thailand and southern Yunnan, we might expect to find Tai stoneware production there as well, but that is not the case today. Stoneware production associated with the historical *muang* of Lan Na is well documented by archaeology and surviving artifacts (Shaw 1989, 2009; Sayan Praicharnjit 2008). Notably, much of that stoneware was glazed and its glaze and painted decoration reflect a familiarity with Chinese ceramic styles, albeit tempered by regional taste. Sometime in the past, however — when and why are not yet clearly understood — that production ceased. It is not known how the people of Lan Na met their requirements for stoneware vessels thereafter, until such time as river boats or, more recently, trucks could distribute stoneware jars made in factories southwest of Bangkok.

The type of wooden wheel used by Tai stoneware potters is used in Sipsong Pan Na by women in some villages making Type B earthenware [Fig. 28.8]. Historical production of Chinese-style glazed and decorated stoneware is also documented in Yunnan, at kilns that fired both celadon-glazed ware and cobalt-decorated vessels (Shih Ching-fei 2008; Wang Xibo n.d.). The question of who operated those kilns — whether they could have been Dai (or other non-Han) — has, to our knowledge, not been raised. The stoneware made today in southern Yunnan has a different source. Han potters of Lincang relate that their ancestors “25 generations ago” migrated from the great ceramic center of Changsha, in Hunan province, and intermarried with Dai (potter Yang Chengyao, Mengzhe market, pers. comm., 5 Feb. 2009). Did those



Fig. 28.8: Potter Yang No uses wooden wheel to shape perform for earthenware pot. Tuguo village, Yuanjiang town, Yuanjiang county, Yunnan province, China (Photo: L. Lefferts and L. Cort 2009).

immigrants introduce a stoneware technology and marketing system that somehow overwhelmed an older Dai stoneware production that has not yet been identified archaeologically?

A further suggestion that Han potters replaced an older, regional stoneware production is provided by a distinctive stoneware vessel shape associated with the Tai — the double-rimmed jar. Lincang potteries now supply southern Yunnan with the jar shape made by Tai potters further south and closely associated with Tai culinary culture, as a container for fermenting and storing salted fish [Fig. 28.9]. The shape is known from historical stoneware kilns throughout northern Thailand. This jar form is also used by Han in southern Yunnan to “pickle” meat, fish, or vegetables. Early versions of this shape are found among unglazed stoneware made in southern China during the Eastern Han period (1st–3rd century), by potters who were not necessarily Han. Was this jar a Tai idea eventually borrowed by the Han, or vice versa? Further investigation of sites for stoneware production in southern Yunnan may provide the answer.

Conclusion: Pottery and “Ethnicity”

Focusing on technology offers an alternative means of understanding relationships among peoples living in a region which stretches across modern nation-state borders and across older borders of principalities. Looking across borders at earthenware production in southern Yunnan and northern Thailand enables us to see connections in technology as well as some striking differences in production repertoires and the cultural significance of ceramics. As we have explained, we resist typing ceramics by ethnicity but rely upon careful observation of the technology of production. That done, however, it is possible to state that



Fig. 28.9: Stacks of double-rim stoneware jars for sale. Mengzhe town, Menghai county, Yunnan province, China (Photo: L. Lefferts and L. Cort 2009).

almost all earthenware in southern Yunnan is made by potters of Dai ethnicity. Ethnicity has different significances on each side of the border, however. In northern Thailand, the Tai, sometimes called *khon muang* or Lan Na Thai, are the dominant culture, although from a regional perspective they can be seen as under cultural assault from the cultural model of central Thailand (Bangkok). In Yunnan one observes the Dai communities pushed literally and figuratively to the edges as Han occupy the center of the landscape, the economy and the cultural paradigm (see Davis 2005). Yet the Yunnan Dai communities appear to have retained aspects of production — notably the set of miniature vessels used for ritual offerings — that seemingly have vanished from northern Thailand (and probably other regions further south), and they have introduced new technologies, such as lead glaze.

In both regions, utilitarian earthenware, once an indispensable material component of everyday life, is in the process of replacement by refrigerated water in glass bottles, metal cooking pots used on gas burners, and other aspects of “development” and “modernization”. Under these circumstances, in both locales, earthenware has begun to take on a new significance associated with a cultural identity under threat. In northern Thailand, the earthenware pot used to cool drinking water has begun to be deployed as a symbol of Lan Na culture. Whereas it once stood on shaded platforms outside village houses, making water available to the passerby on the dusty lane, it now appears in front of mansions and restaurants in Chiang Mai and Bangkok.

In Sipsong Pan Na, the villages of Mange and Mandou, outside Jinghong, proudly preserve the memory of earthenware vessels once provided to the royal palace in Jinghong, the former central *muang* of the region. With the support of the provincial culture bureau, Mandou potter Yü Meng (born 1957) has become a “poster potter” for Dai Lu ethnicity, traveling around China (on the day we interviewed her, she was about to leave for a demonstration in Beijing) and to Japan. She stamps her products with a seal bearing her name in both Han characters and Dai Lu script. Who are the audiences for these “ethnic” pots? Are the vessels claimed by the associated cultures or appropriated by the dominant ones (such as Bangkok tourists in Chiang Mai and Han tourists in Sipsong Pan Na), or both? Without doubt, the repositioning of “traditional” earthenware on both sides of the borders will affect which pot forms survive and disappear in the future.

By focusing on technology, we have sought to appeal to archaeologists by moving away from definitions of types based on the slippery and changeable category of ethnicity (among others). We have described an example of commonality — the Type B preform for an earthenware pot with flat base subsequently made round using paddle and anvil. At the same time we take note of subtle variations in the means by which the Type B preform is shaped. These variations suggest subcategories whose sources have yet to be understood. Our Type B encompasses three Types (I–III) recorded by Wang Ningsheng during his surveys of 17 villages in Sipsong Pan Na (Wang Ningsheng 2003). Potters of all those communities are classified as Dai, but the variants raise the questions we have also encountered elsewhere — of the older, finer divisions of language and “ethnicity” that has now been absorbed by modern nations (see also Cort and Lefferts 2012).

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