

A small box from Thailand, probably 15th century



In 1371 the first emperor of the Ming dynasty in China issued a decree forbidding all private trade with other countries – a ban which was to be effective for over a hundred years. He had just succeeded in leading an uprising against the last emperor of the Yuan dynasty. The Yuan emperors were Mongolian – the successors of Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan. In the Yuan dynasty, there was a lot of trade and cultural interaction to the west, with other parts of the wider Mongol empire such as Iran, and also to the south with the regions that are now Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia. The Ming emperor was determined to stamp out the corrupting influence of ‘barbarians’ and stopping trade was one way of doing this.

In the later years of the Yuan dynasty the manufacture of porcelain in China had reached unprecedented scale and quality – particularly celadons and the relatively new ‘blue and white’ porcelain (white porcelain decorated with fine brushwork with a blue cobalt-based pigment). These wares were very popular in those countries which were trading with China. When the Ming emperor suddenly stopped all trade there was an opportunity for potteries in other countries to fill the gap in the market with their own wares, provided those were recognisably similar to the Chinese porcelain that had suddenly stopped coming. In particular, potteries in Vietnam and Thailand targeted this market and increased production dramatically.

Potters near the modern town of Sawankhalok in northern Thailand had started making glazed stoneware pottery about the year 1300. They may have learned the techniques from Chinese refugees, who are known to have been in the area at that time, or possibly from the ancient Khmer empire, based in Cambodia, which had controlled the area until the early 13th century. Wherever their knowledge came from, they soon started producing pottery with Chinese design elements, even before the Ming dynasty trade ban. This included pots with delicate brushwork designs under a clear glaze, such as can be seen in the image above, which shows a circular lidded box just 8 cm tall.

As this box is stoneware, not porcelain, the potters covered the exterior with a white slip before painting the decoration.

After the Chinese trade ban, the potters in the Sawankhalok area increased production and made a much wider range of items to meet this market opportunity. One researcher has estimated that in the location of the main pottery village there are the remains of around 1000 kilns, which were active some time between around 1300 and 1558, when the Burmese invaded and production ceased.

The western world first became aware of Sawankhalok pottery around 1900, as a result of British diplomats pursuing their interests in local pottery. The British representative in Bangkok sent a bowl and some sherds to the British Museum in the 1880s and an official of the consular service in Thailand wrote two reports of his visits to the kiln sites in the early 1900s. However, its full significance did not become apparent until the 1930s, when excavations of burial sites in the Philippines uncovered hundreds of intact pots that had been made at Sawankhalok. Subsequent excavations in the Philippines and Indonesia have confirmed that in the 15th century Sawankhalok was the main source of the glazed stoneware pottery which was imported into these regions in large quantities.

Small covered boxes, such as the one in the picture, seem to have been particularly popular in this export market, and it has been said they have been found in 'almost endless variety'. It is likely that my box was made some time in the 15th century and, although made at Sawankhalok, it was probably discovered initially in the Philippines or Indonesia, where most intact examples of Sawankhalok pottery have been found. Apart from the brushwork decoration there are a number of other features which are characteristic of such boxes. For example, several tiers of ridges have been turned into the base (see photo below). The knob on the lid has been formed into a short stalk and around it are nine small spikes almost certainly intended to represent a calyx or group of sepals which would surround the stalk of a fruit. This idea is supported by the indications on my pot that the area within these spikes was originally coated in a dark brown glaze, now mostly worn away but with some remnants remaining.



Various commentators have suggested that the fruit being represented in such boxes is a pomegranate, or persimmon or possibly a mangosteen. I think, in view of the spiky upturned sepals and the position of the stalk, that a persimmon is most likely, but you can judge for yourself by looking at the pictures of these fruits at the end of this note.

You may have noticed that, unlike Chinese blue and white porcelain, the brushwork decoration on my box is black rather than blue. This is typical of all Sawankhalok pottery and is because an iron-

based pigment has been used for the decoration rather than one based on cobalt. The most likely reason for this is that the Sawankhalok potters did not have any source of cobalt, at least at an acceptable price. Cobalt ores are scarce and for many years the Chinese had to import their cobalt from Iran before they found their own deposits. In the 15th century the Vietnamese, competing with the Thai potters for the same market, were able to use cobalt decoration because they had their own source of cobalt, but this was an impure ore and the decoration in Vietnamese blue and white had a greyish tone not seen on Chinese wares.

The decoration around the main part of my box clearly represents a plant with a twining stem and leaves. However, initially I was less clear whether the decoration on the side of the lid was meant to be representational or merely decorative. I must admit that every time I looked at these blobs it brought to mind groups of three trees standing on the crest of a hill. I always knew this was a bit fanciful and that was confirmed when I saw a picture in a book of a box with a similar decoration on the lid, but with the middle 'tree' of each group inverted. Clearly this is just a decorative device!



The Ming dynasty ban on foreign trade was no longer effectively enforced by early in the 16th century and was officially rescinded in 1569. It didn't take the Chinese porcelain industry long to dominate the export market again and Chinese blue and white pottery came to be pre-eminent, and imitated, across the world.

Kevin Akhurst
June 2022



Persimmon



Mangosteen

Pomegranate

