

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

---

## **The Dating of Chinese Porcelain Found in the Philippines: A Historical Retrospect**

J. M. Addis

*Philippine Studies* vol. 16, no. 2 (1968): 371–380

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

## Notes and Comment

### *The Dating of Chinese Porcelain found in the Philippines: A Historical Retrospect*

The earliest published work on the dating of Chinese porcelain found in the Philippines is an article by Walter Robb "New Data on Chinese and Siamese Ceramic Wares of the 14th and 15th Centuries" published in two parts in *Philippine Magazine*, XXVII, Nos. 3 and 4, August and September 1930. Robb's study is concerned with 60 sites in Rizal province excavated by Professor H. Otley Beyer and is explicitly a summary from Beyer's field and laboratory notes. Robb's article therefore has particular value as one of the rare published accounts of Beyer's views on the Chinese porcelain found in the Philippines.

In this article Robb quotes Beyer as grouping the "porcelain finds", presumably from the 60 Rizal sites, into four periods: (1) a *monochrome period*, subdivided into a late Sung and a Yüan period; (2) a *transition period*. It is as well to quote Robb's definition of this period in full. It is "characterised by an approximate equal mixture of early Ming monochrome wares with a second and new type decorated in cobalt blue or copper red under the glaze. This period is believed to date almost entirely within the 15th century, although some late 14th century material undoubtedly carries over into the transition sites. It may be noted here that the blue and white wares of this period present a characteristic pencilled or brush-painted design which differs decidedly from the heavily outlined drawings characteristic of succeeding periods." (3) A *Ming blue and white period*, covering the 16th and 17th centuries, "in which nearly 90 per cent of all the wares found are painted under the glaze with heavily outlined blue-and-white designs". (4) A *post Ming period*.

Robb claims that the sites excavated by Beyer on which his study is based have been carefully studied in respect of horizons and associations.

Relying no doubt on Beyer, Robb states that two new features coincide with the beginning of the Ming dynasty, "a more glassy type of glaze, filled with coarser bubbles, which gradually replaced the softer and more opaque coverings of the Sung and Yüan wares" and "the development of blue painted designs under the glaze followed shortly by decoration in polychrome enamels over the glaze". It is clear, however, that this second point is a generalisation only. Robb admits pre-Ming blue-and-white, for in the second part of his article he writes, "Some rather ornate blue decoration was found on a few rare pieces in the 13th century site at Sta. Ana, but this is certainly of late Sung or early Yüan date".

Robb also notes a difference in shape between Ming and earlier bowls. "The Sung bowls are noted for their beautifully curved outlines and relatively small bases, while the Ming bowls early developed a more utilitarian shape with straight or bulging sides and a stouter, base".

Robb also finds criteria for dating in the treatment of bases. "Two new base forms, that seem to appear in the latter half of the 14th century and continue through most of the 15th century, but which have disappeared entirely from the 16th century sites, are types termed by Beyer the 'hole-bottom base' and the 'sharp or bevelled-edge base'. It was early noted in exploring the stratified Philippine sites, that the 'hole bottom' wares were the surest and quickest indications of late 14th and 15th century horizons, while the 'sharp or bevelled-edge' bases were chiefly characteristic of 15th century horizons alone. In the early 16th century the bevelled-edge becomes thicker and more rounded...." It seems clear, although he does not say so, that Robb is here speaking only of Chingtehchen wares.

He also notes that "the colour both of the glaze and of the blue designs is very distinctive on 15th century wares". He speaks of the "true Mohammedan blue" of the early 15th century, with "a curious semi-liquid quality which contrasts decidedly with the darker and more opaque Mohammedan blue of the Chia Ching period"; and of the "glassy glaze of a decided greenish tone sometimes approaching true celadon" which he calls a "decided characteristic of the 15th century blue and white".

Robb's text is accompanied by illustrations of 20 pieces to which he assigns dates. A celadon dish with two biscuit fishes is given as 13th or 14th century, an undecorated celadon dish fired on a pointil as 14th or 15th century, a celadon bowl of the same type as

"14th or 13th century" (presumably a misprint for 14th or 15th century), a celadon bowl with much carved decoration as 13th to 15th century, another celadon piece as 14th to 16th century. An iron-spotted white jarlet is given as 13th or 14th century, a double gourd white ewer with a dragon handle as "13th to 15th century, probably 14th" a blue and white jarlet with vertical beeding as probably late 14th or early 15th century, a small cubical vessel with blue-and-white decoration as probably late 14th or early 15th century also. Two hole-bottom dishes with blue-and-white decoration and a brown fish (described as "goldfish in over glaze red enamel"—it is in fact a raised fish, left clear of glaze but treated with a thin dressing, through which the body oxidises brown) are given as 15th century. Robb ascribes to the 15th century three familiar blue-and-white types, a kylin dish, a fish among waves and a floral design (cf. Fox Plates 29, 44 and 38). Two more pieces are ascribed to the 15th century and two others to the late 15th or early 16th. It is to be noted that whereas Robb's text is concerned with excavations in Rizal, the pieces which he illustrates come mostly from the Visayas.

Robb's article was a pioneer study, and great credit is due both to him and to Beyer's work on which it is based. Every allowance must be made for anyone writing of 14th and 15th century blue-and-white before those trail-blazing studies, Brankston in 1938, Jean Gordon Lee's Philadelphia Catalogue of 1945 and Pope's 14th Century Blue and White of 1952. What is surprising in Robb's (Beyer's) attributions is not that some of them seem wrong in the light of our greater knowledge to-day, but that so many of his hits now seem near the mark. The celadon datings in particular seem modern for the time of writing. The celadons are put firmly in the Yüan and early Ming periods where we would also now assign them.

It is, however, a fault of Beyer's observations as transmitted by Robb in 1930 that they do not discriminate between the wares of different provenances. When the comparison is made between the shapes of Sung and Ming bowls, one wonders what Sung bowls are intended. Is it a comparison between Chekiang bowls of the two periods? Or between Ming blue-and-white and the Ch'ing-pai from the same general areas? Or are the shapes of Ming wares from Chingtehchen being compared with Sung wares from other areas? So much is left uncertain that the comparison is of little value. It is the same with the comments on glazes. Again, the classification of excavation sites into three periods according to the prevalence of monochromes and blue-and-white would only begin to be meaningful if we were told at the same time what proportion of the monochromes are from Jaochou/Chingtehchen. The real significance of the observation that blue-and-white predominates over monochromes in Beyer's third period may be that Chingtehchen wares have come to predominate over Chekiang celadons and other wares.

There is, however, a far more fundamental objection to Beyer's datings as transmitted by Robb: he gives no reason or argument for his attributions. Robb claims, no doubt rightly, that Beyer's 60 excavations in Rizal were carefully stratified, so that when one piece is given to the 14th century and another from the same site to the 16th, we can be confident that the former is from a lower stratigraphic level than the latter. But no archaological evidence for any of the sites is advanced other than the ceramics; yet no evidence for the dating of the ceramics is given. All we have is a series of arbitrary statements, an *ipse dixit*. We are left to suppose that Beyer from a knowledge of the books written on Chinese porcelain at the time drew certain analogies with the Chinese wares which he excavated in the Philippines, though this is not explicitly stated. And yet, as we now see, so many of the wares found in the Philippines belong to types unfamiliar to students of Chinese porcelain found in China.

Olov R. T. Janse was the next in the field with an article entitled "An Archaeological Expedition to Indo-China and the Philippines: Preliminary Report" in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Volume 6, June 1941, No. 2. In the 20 pages and 32 plates of this article there is little reference to the dating of the Chinese wares. Plates 29 and 31 illustrate blue-and-white hole-bottom dishes with a central fish, which he dates Early Ming, and Plate 30 shows a typical dish with a design of a lion and ball (wrongly described as a kylin) which he also dates Early Ming.

Janse published a second article, entitled "Notes on Chinese Influences in the Philippines in Pre-Spanish Times," in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Volume 8, March 1944, No. 1. Here again there is little reference to dating. He lifts verbatim from Robb's article, but without attribution, the comment that the blue-and-white of the 15th century has "as a rule, a pencilled or brush-painted type of design, quite different from the heavily outlined drawings typical of the succeeding periods."

Janse also, in these rare excursions into dating, gives no evidence or argument for his attributions.

Janse's article prompted Beyer to commit himself to the only published comment above his own signature on Chinese ceramics found in the Philippines. This is contained in the *Supplementary Illustrations to the Outline Review of Philippine Archaeology by Islands and Provinces*, privately printed in Manila in November 1949. Beyer complains that Janse makes use of Robb's material from Beyer without acknowledgment. He refers to "these later wares which Alfred Marche, Dr. Carl Guthe, and myself had (several decades before Dr. Janse's arrival) demonstrated to be plentifully present in the 14th and 15th century burial-places in this archipelago," but so

far as I have been able to ascertain, neither Marche nor Guthe published their findings.

In this 1949 paper Beyer explicitly corrects the dating given in Robb's 1930 article. "Later experience...has shown that the dating of most specimens in that paper was a little too conservative—and that the actual dates, as corrected in the present paper, will be found to be a century or more earlier." This is borne out by the notes on the illustrations accompanying his text. A celadon dish with two biscuit fish, which Robb called 13th or 14th century, Beyer now calls "a fine quality Lungchu'an celadon dish...of 11th or 12th century date." A plain Chekiang celadon dish, of the type which Robb called 14th or 15th century, Beyer now calls "Lungchu'an ware of probable 12th or 13th century date." A celadon bowl with all-over decoration, which Robb called 13th to 15th century, Beyer now calls "of probable 12th century date."

Beyer's back-dating of the other wares is not quite so drastic. The white double-gourd ewer with dragon handle which Robb gave as 13th to 15th century, Beyer gives as "of probable 12th or 13th century date," the iron-spotted white jarlet which Robb put in the 13th or 14th century is now "of late Sung or early Yüan date (12th or 13th century)", the blue-and-white jarlet with vertical beeding which Robb put as probably late 14th or early 15th century now becomes "possibly late Sung or Yüan, and certainly not later than the 14th century." Beyer calls the hole-bottom fish dishes, which Robb put in the 15th century, "14th or early 15th century." The kylin dish corresponding to Fox Plate 29, which Robb ascribed to the 15th century, Beyer now calls "14th or very early 15th century"; the blue and white dish with the design of fish among waves corresponding to Fox Plate 44, which Robb also put in the 15th century, Beyer now calls "an early type of 14th or beginning 15th century date"; and the blue-and-white dish with a floral design similar to Fox Plate 38, which Robb called 15th century, Beyer retains as "early or middle 15th century."

Once again, Beyer in 1949, like Janse in 1941 and 1944 and Robb in 1930, offers no evidence or argument in support of his dating.

The next landmark in the study of Chinese ceramics excavated in the Philippines is Dr. Robert B. Fox's "The Calatagan Excavations: Two 15th Century Burial-Sites in Batangas, Philippines" published in *Philippine Studies*, Volume 7 Number 3, August 1959, in Manila. This is a report of the excavations of burial-sites at Calatagan from 1st February to 20 May 1958. It is of great value as the first published record of controlled excavations in the Philippines by a professional archaeologist. It is explicitly a preliminary

report covering only the ceramics and not the other artifacts found in the graves; and it was the original intention, the Editor states in his Preface, that "not only the data but also the conclusions and speculations that the data might seem to warrant," should be published, "with statistical tables and graphs and with detailed technical descriptions of the grave furniture found." This has not yet been done. But Dr. Fox's 1959 publication does contain statistical tables and much detailed description.

Dr. Fox's study also suggests approximate dates both for particular pieces and for the sites as a whole. For this he adduces no archaeological evidence other than the ceramics. Once again, therefore, as with Robb's 1930 report, Fox in 1959 depends solely for the dating of his sites and their contents on the attribution of dates to some of the Chinese ceramics, and to a quite minor extent the Siamese ceramics, found in them. Once again, like Robb, Fox relies solely and explicitly on Beyer's dating criteria and in some cases on Beyer's actual dating of particular pieces.

Beyer's 1959 attributions, as transmitted by Fox, now require to be studied. Fox writes, "With the exception of one Sung stone-ware jar, possibly an heirloom, all of the Chinese pottery recovered in the graves has been dated by Professor Beyer as belonging to the period from the late Yüan Dynasty (1280-1368) to the end of the 15th century or early Ming, embracing what Beyer has called the 'transition period' in which decorations, in cobalt blue or copper red under the glaze equal, then replace the characteristic early Ming monochromes or single-colour glazes." Fox then refers in a footnote to Robb's two 1930 articles, already discussed. Beyer then in 1959 still adhered to his 1930 division of porcelain finds into four periods, or at least maintained the validity of his 'transition period.' Fox, however, in 1959 appears to give a rather earlier date for the beginning of Beyer's 'transition period' than Robb did in 1930: "late Yüan" is presumably a few decades earlier than "late 14th century."

Fox reports that "all the Calatagan sites discovered to date fall into the same general time period. Significantly, no sites with trade pottery of Sung date (960-1279) have been discovered, nor sites with the diagnostic pottery of the 16th century.... All of the sites, therefore, may be dated as falling into the period between the late 14th century and the end of the 15th century or the early part of the 16th century." It is curious that in this argument by process of elimination there is no reference to the Yüan dynasty (1280-1368). If the term "late 14th century" does not include any Yüan years, Fox does not in fact attribute any pieces from Calatagan to the Yüan dynasty. In this definition of the 150 year period of the Calatagan

ceramics Fox does not go beyond the limits of Beyer's transition period as laid down by Robb in 1930.

Up to this point the argument for dating depends solely on the observed balance between monochromes and decorated wares as defining the second or transition period in Beyer's chronology of four periods. Dr. Fox's 1959 text contains less specific discussion on the arguments for dating than Robb's in 1930. As did Robb, he notes Beyer's observation of the "narrow, sharp footrim, bevelled on the outer rim" and states that this is "the most common footrim found with plates which also have the most characteristic designs, such as the kylin, Chinese lion, chrysanthemum and jar, the crane in garden, and so forth (see Plates 23 to 40 inclusive)." Robb noted this type of footrim as "chiefly characteristic of 15th century horizons alone. In the early 16th century the bevelled edge becomes thicker and more rounded." Fox, following the earlier dating on which Beyer had decided as early as 1949, states that the sharp bevelled footrim "is confined wholly to blue and white pieces of the 14th and 15th centuries (mostly early 15th)." In fact it becomes thicker and rounder in the late 15th and 16th centuries." This amounts to a back-dating of a few years. Yet no argument is proffered for either the earlier or the later dating. Once again we have no more than an *ipse dixit*, an *ex cathedra* pronouncement by Beyer without the support of evidence.

Fox quotes only one other dictum of Beyer's on dating criteria. "A distinctive feature of the early Ming monochrome bowls reaching the Philippines is a raised center or 'bump.' This feature, according to Beyer, is early Ming, made during or before Yung Lo." We may perhaps see in this statement a faint and distorted reflexion of Brankston's discussion of small blue-and-white bowls "with raised centres, sometimes known as *man-t'on hsin* (loaf centre)." Brankston however goes straight on to point out that in addition to the bowls of this type that he attributes to Yung Lo "there are marked Hsüan Teh pieces with the same decoration, and also 16th century pieces with other motifs."

Fox illustrates 44 blue-and-white pieces, excluding Swatow and Annamese wares, and attributes dates to 26 of them. Of these he ascribes two to the 14th century: Plate 64, a vase which Beyer dated "definitely 14th century Ming," a qualification which can only designate the Hung Wu reign, and Plate 45, a large dish with lotus plants and waves, "probably 14th century according to Professor Beyer." No argument is given. It should be noted in passing that neither of these pieces bears any affinity in style or idiom to the group of pieces related to the dated David vases as discussed in Mr. Pope's "14th Century Blue and White," or to any other groups of blue-and-white wares generally attributed to the 14th century



to-day. Fox attributes the hole bottom dishes, of various designs, to the late 14th or early 15th century, following Beyer's own correction of 1949 to Robb's dating of 1930. Relying on Beyer's attributions, Fox puts a bowl (Plates 52-53) with a commendatory inscription on the base as "probably Yung Lo in date or earlier," and gives the same attribution to a number of bowls with spare decoration of mounted figures (Plate 54). Again quoting Beyer, he gives two bowls (Plates 56-57) with pointed leaves outside as Yung Lo, and the same date to two wine cups with aquatic plants outside. He puts in the early 15th century the kylin dishes which Robb in 1930 called 15th century and Beyer in 1949 "14th or very early 15th century," the rock and flowers design, which Robb called 15th century and Beyer in 1949 "early or middle 15th century," and also the lions-and-ball, crane-in-landscape and chrysanthemum-and-fence designs. He puts a kendi (Plate 62) in the mid-15th century.

Fox illustrates nine celadon pieces (bowls and dishes) to which he ascribes dates. Only one is put as possibly dating from the Yüan Dynasty—it is "identified by Professor Beyer as 14th century early Ming [i.e. Hung Wu] or late Yüan." Two other pieces are attributed in the same way to the Hung Wu reign. One other piece, a bowl with the raised centre or "bump" is associated on Beyer's criterion "with the Yung Lo Dynasty [sic. reign] or earlier." Three others are dated Early Ming, without further precision, and two more simply to the 15th century. For all these datings of celadons no evidence or argument is offered, apart from the argument on the central "bump," which is itself offered without substantiation.

It is noteworthy that Beyer at all periods has been far freer in attributing pieces positively to the Hung Wu and Yung Lo reigns than even the most valiant of modern students of the period. Only Brankston before him had made any attributions to Yung Lo, and Beyer does not quote or appear to rely on Brankston, except perhaps mistakenly in the matter of the "central bump" in bowls. The only blue-and-white pieces tentatively attributed to Hung Wu at that time were the small dishes with slip dragons and blue clouds, which have no bearing on the pieces found in Calatagan. In making these attributions to Hung Wu and Yung Lo Beyer seems to have been operating entirely on his own and independently of the published studies of Chinese porcelain in Chinese and Western collections. But neither he nor his two spokesmen give any indication of what were his criteria.

Beyer's dating of the Chinese porcelain from the Calatagan excavations as transmitted by Fox has been accepted by Dr. Charles Spinks as a hard datum for the dating of the period of operation of the Sawankhalok (or Svandaloka) kilns. In "The Ceramic Wares

of Siam" published by the Siam Society, Bangkok in 1965, Spinks writes:

Large quantities of Thai wares have been unearthed from grave sites in various parts of the Philippine archipelago by Beyer and Fox. As the latter archaeologist has noted, 'the Philippines, being one of the great sources of Siamese ware due to decades of intensive trade and the practice of the pre-Spanish Filipinos of placing potteries in the graves, offers an unlimited opportunity for studying the products of the Siamese kilns.' Careful analysis of the association of Thai wares with pieces from China found in the graves has proved most rewarding in establishing the period of ceramic production at the Sukhodaya and Svandaloka kilns.

At the Calatagan sites Svandaloka and Sukhodaya pieces were found in association with such Chinese wares as 14th century monochromes, late Yüan wares, and Ming types of underglazed blue with sharp, bevelled footrims belonging to the early 15th century. From this evidence of association, it may be deduced that most of the Svandaloka pieces discovered at Calatagan reached the Philippines during the latter part of the 14th century or early in the 15th century. Only a few Thai pieces have been found in later graves, they are rare in the late 15th century and early 16th century sites, and practically disappear in the early post-Spanish burial sites.

The marked decline in Svandaloka pieces in Philippine grave sites established after the middle of the 15th century would suggest that the supply of these wares had been seriously reduced if not cut off. When we examine conditions prevailing in north-central Siam during this period, we can appreciate at once why the wares of Sukhodaya and Svandaloka were no longer reaching the Philippines.

Thus, in so far as the dating of the Svandaloka wares rests on the evidence of the Chinese wares from the Calatagan sites, the presence of Svandaloka wares in the Calatagan sites, or indeed in other sites in the Philippines, cannot be taken, except with reserve, as evidence for the dating of Chinese wares found in association with them or for the dating of excavation sites in the Philippines. If it appears, on further consideration, that the Calatagan sites date from the late 15th to the early or mid-16th centuries, then Dr. Spinks's argument as quoted here will need to be reconsidered.

The only other authority to have published comments on Chinese porcelain excavated in the Philippines is Mrs. Kamer Aga-Oglu. I have not been able, from my base in Manila, to gain access to all

her published writings that have a bearing on the Chinese wares found in the Philippines, but in those that I have seen there is little in the way of evidence or any argument on the subject of dating. In the illustrations accompanying the "abridged" text of a paper "Ming Porcelain from Sites in the Philippines" published in *Asian Perspectives: The Bulletin of the Far-Eastern Prehistory Association*, Volume V, 2, Winter 1961, (Hong Kong University Press, 1962) (one of 19 papers presented at the 10th Pacific Science Congress of the Pacific Science Association held at the University of Hawaii, 21 August to 6 September 1961), Mrs. Aga-Oglu ascribes to the 16th century a blue-and-white kylin dish similar to Fox Plate 28, which Fox has called "typical early 15th century"; and also to the 16th century a fine quality blue-and-white stork dish rather different from the versions illustrated by Fox: but in neither case does she offer any evidence or argument. She does, however, discuss with some argument the dating of the small wine-cups, both blue-and-white and enamelled, of the type illustrated in Fox Plates 60, 70 and 71, which Fox dates, on the strength of Beyer's dictum, to the Yung Lo period. Mrs. Aga-Oglu disputes this dating on the ground that the little cups from the Philippines do not correspond to the description of Yung Lo glazes given in Soame Jenyns's "Ming Pottery and Porcelain" of 1953 (which she curiously describes as undated). Her argument for ascribing the cups to the Ch'eng Hua periods is that "plain white eggshell porcelain cups and bowls were evidently made also during the Cheng-hua period (Jenyns n.d.); this seems to us a more probable age for the examples illustrated here."

From this review of the published writings of Chinese ceramics found in the Philippines it appears that with the exception of the few pieces dated by Mrs. Aga-Oglu on her own responsibility, all the attributions of dates, from 1930 to 1959, rest on the general criteria and particular ascriptions of Professor Beyer and that these criteria and ascriptions are unsupported by evidence or argument.

J. M. ADDIS