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**PARTICIPATION OF THE PHILIPPINES IN THE NANHAI TRADE:  
9th - 16th Centuries**

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Nanhai trade was a luxury trade that involved a very extensive trade network principally between China and the countries in mainland Asia and insular Southeast Asia. Prime commodities such as silk, ceramics, lacquer wares, glass beads, and metals were traded by the Chinese for the exotica of the South Seas, such as pearls, aromatics, spices, pepper, ivories, scented wood, rhinoceros horns, beeswax, and cotton. Much of the maritime trade was in the form of exchange of tributary goods. It went on continually for many centuries, covering as far as the Middle East and Africa.

**Early Records on Nanhai Trade**

The earliest written reference is that of the Han chronicles or Han Shu, in which tributary envoys, as early as 140 *B.C.*, sailing from the Leizhou Peninsula (Southwest of Guangzhou) to various states on the Malay Peninsula, Burma, and South India, are recorded<sup>i</sup>. In the Sixth Dynasties (219-584 A.D.), the traffic of tributary missions is well documented in Chinese historical annals. Not only Chinese ships, but Arabian and Indian ships, and even Cambodian ships were plying the South Seas<sup>ii</sup>.f

With the prosperity of the Tang dynasty (618-906 A.D.), trade flourished along both the overland and maritime Silk Roads. An extended maritime network is recorded in the New Tang chronicles, Sin Tang Shu, albeit there was no mention yet of the Philippines. The ships originated from Guangzhou, went on to Vietnam, Cambodia, the Malay Peninsula, Java, Sumatra, then would turn westward to India and sometimes would go as far as countries in the Middle East<sup>iii</sup>. The Nanhai trading area was teeming with Arab ships, which were the most active at that time.

**Indirect Trade Participation in the Tana Dynasty**

Otley Beyer, an American archaeologist, maintained that after the massacre of foreigners erupted in Guangzhou in 878, the Arab traders diverted their maritime trade route

by turning eastward from the Malacca Straits toward Borneo, the Philippines, and Formosa, then passed by 'North China' to go on to Korea and Japan<sup>iv</sup>. Though disputed by the American historian, William Henry Scott<sup>v</sup>, this theory is supported by the archaeological finds of Yue wares of the 9th-10th centuries from northern Zhejiang in the Philippines.

The earliest Chinese ceramics excavated locally so far date to the late Tang dynasty or the 9th century. Feng Xian Ming, a leading Chinese ceramics expert, expressed the same view during his few visits to the Philippines: that he had not seen any Chinese ceramics dating earlier than the ninth century<sup>vi</sup>. These late Tang ceramics were most probably brought into the islands by the Arabs and the Champa traders actively involved in the sea trade. Considering the far more numerous and larger archaeological sites with Tang ceramics along the coastal regions of Borneo, particularly Sarawak, some scholars believe that relatively rare Tang ceramics found in the Philippines were not formally traded but left behind by Arab voyagers "while bartering for food and ship supplies"<sup>vii</sup>. It is the conjecture of the historians that the continued absence of reference to the Philippines in Chinese written records till the Song dynasty was because the Tang and Five Dynasties ceramics unearthed in the Philippines were peddled by the "non-Chinese agents".

In the absence of written records, it is the ceramic finds of the 9th and 10th centuries that include Yue and Hunan wares, though in modest quantity as compared to the volume of wares of later periods, that attests to the share of the Philippines in the maritime trade during this period. So far, only the findings from Samar in the Visayas and Butuan in Mindanao include these early wares.

### **Involvement in Both Official and Private Trade in the Song Dynasty**

Although China has had 2,000 years of maritime trade relations with her neighboring countries, it was in the Song and Yuan dynasties that the Nanhai trade was in full swing. It is also the Song and Yuan annals in which detailed descriptions of trade with the Philippines are recorded.

The first historic reference to the Philippines appears in the Northern Song annals for the year 972. It is stated therein that the Office of Superintendent of Maritime Trade was set up in Guangzhou in Guangdong and afterwards in Hangzhou and Mingzhou in Zhejiang to supervise the foreign trade with several countries including Ma-i<sup>viii</sup>. Ma-i was the old name of the island of Mindoro before the coming of the Spaniards. It was considered as a country by the Chinese.

A unique combination of circumstances during the Song dynasty (960-1278 A.D.) spiraled China's maritime trade to a new height. China was constantly suffering aggressions from external forces. The whole of Manchuria was occupied by the Liao and the fringes of her domain were seized by other tribes. The unrest in the north intimidated the safety of the overland Silk Road along which China had conducted a great part of her foreign trade with the West since the Han dynasty. With the unpopularity of the overland Silk Road, the maritime trade along the coast in South China accelerated dramatically.

Official records show that of all the dynasties, the Song maintained the grandest court. There is evidence for the employment of 24,000 officials during the reign of Yingzhong (1064-1068 A.D.)<sup>ix</sup>. Apart from the onerous expenses of such an immense court and the annual astronomical recompense committed to the Liao, the Song government suffered from another serious financial drain, that of supporting military campaigns against the aggressors on the northern frontiers. Apparently, the lucrative Nanhai trade was a very important source of revenue for the economically strained Song court. The government openly encouraged maritime trade, offering various incentives to merchants from other countries to trade with China. Every year, an official farewell banquet was tendered in October in the lunar calendar to honor the departing foreign merchants<sup>x</sup>.

The Song dynasty saw the increase of direct Chinese participations in the Nanhai trade. With the greatly improved shipping industry in the Song dynasty, the Chinese trading vessels were replacing the Arab ships which were of smaller size in the South China Sea and beyond. The largest Song vessels had the capacity of loading up to 600 tons of cargo and were well equipped with navigational instruments. They were capable of travelling on long sea voyages from South China Sea up to the Persian Gulf and even Africa<sup>xi</sup>. A mass of Northern Song ceramics material was reported to have been discovered in Fostat in Cairo<sup>xii</sup>.

An impressive quantity of Guangdong ceramics of the Northern Song period (906-1127 A.D.) have been excavated in Butuan this past decade. In 1988, the Oriental Ceramics Society of the Philippines, in co-operation with the National Museum, held an exhibition of the wares. Butuan must have been a big market for Chinese ceramics in the Northern Song period when Guangzhou was the busiest port.

The first Philippine tribute mission to China mentioned in Chinese archives is known to have come from Butuan on March 17, 1001.<sup>xiii</sup> More tribute missions from Butuan were recorded. There was one on Oct. 3, 1003 in which red parrots were presented in addition to the other native products including tortoise shells<sup>xiv</sup>.

In 1007, the king of Butuan sent an envoy to China petitioning for the granting of ceremonial flags and equal status with Champa.

Since there was an established Butuan-Champa trade network, it was not surprising for the former to try to seek the same prestige as the latter. According to the historical record, the ceremonial flags were granted but not the equal status with Champa with whom China had started trade contact as early as the 4th century<sup>xv</sup>.

In 1011, the king of Butuan sent another envoy. To impress the Chinese Emperor, the Butuan envoy was armed with a memorial engraved on a gold tablet, first-class camphor, Molucca cloves, and a South Sea slave. Before leaving China, the Butuan envoy was honored with the military title of "Cherished Transformed General", a Butuan Memorial and the ceremonial insignias<sup>xvi</sup>.

The balangay boats that have been discovered intermittently in Butuan sites by the National Museum are a testimony to the boat constructing skills of the Filipino people in the early period. One of them has radiocarbon date of 320 A.D. and another one of 1250 A.D.<sup>xvii</sup> Those boats are known to be capable of withstanding rough winds in long sea journeys.<sup>xviii</sup> They could possibly be the vessels that carried the tribute missions to China from Butuan, other than plying the inland Philippine waters for local transport.

The Song court moved south from Kaifeng in the north to Hangzhou in Zhejiang in the 12th century, after the fall of the Northern Song. Because of its geographical proximity to the capital, Quanzhou in Fujian became as busy a port as Guangzhou.

In the Yuan dynasty, it completely took over as the main port of call for trading vessels. The Philippines is flooded with Fujian ceramics dating from Southern Song, Yuan, Ming, to Qing. Although it was the official trade in the form of tribute missions that dominated the market in the Song dynasty, it was not a government monopoly. The Song government also exerted great efforts to encourage the Chinese merchants to engage in sea trade.

Towards the end of Song dynasty, the tributary trading system became unpopular because of the overwhelmingly lucrative commercialism and the burden of reciprocating the tribute-bearing envoys with luxury items.

The manner of transacting business in Ma-i was well recorded in *Zhufanzhi*, An Account of Various Barbarians. Strategically situated on the western side of the archipelago, Ma-i was an entrepot where the Chinese merchants docked their trading ships and distributed their merchandise to the local traders who then trans-shipped them to the other islands. Unlike Butuan, Ma-I never sent any tribute mission to China. Trade with China was carried on

mostly by private merchants. Ma-i also acted as middlemen of spice trade between China and the Moluccas, a role overtaken later by Sulu which became very active from the end of the 13th century onwards. The native products fancied by the Chinese were beeswax, betel nut, tortoise shell, cotton, abaca, and kapok and also the famous pearls of Sulu. They were traded for products from China like copper and brass vessels, printed textiles, ivories, beads, pig iron, and iron cauldron. Mindanao and Sulu were buying gold and silver, wine, lacquer and martabans<sup>xix</sup>.

Sta. Ana in Manila, Sta. Cruz and Pila in Laguna are among the archaeological sites with ceramics finds of late Song period. "Uncontrolled" excavations in Puerto Galera in Mindoro have also yielded ceramics of this period.

### **Deep Penetration of Trade Route Into the Archipelago in the Yuan Dynasty**

Foreign trade prospered vigorously in the Yuan Dynasty as the Mongols were all out to exploit the resources purely for monetary profits. Sea traffic was at its peak. Ceramics, which were a highly prized commodity enjoying immense popularity abroad, were exported in unprecedented quantities throughout Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

The Yuan dynasty saw a new development in the trade routes which were divided into the Eastern Route and the Western Route. The Eastern Route passed from South China to Taiwan, Babuyan Island, then to Polilu, an island east of Quezon province, to Luzon, the Visayas, Sulu, and Borneo, and finally to the Moluccas. The Western Route passed down the coast of Vietnam through the Straits of Malacca and westward to the Indian Ocean and on to the Persian Gulf<sup>xx</sup>.

The Eastern Route provided deep penetration into the Philippine archipelago with more outlets for the Chinese trade wares. This resulted in a great number of ceramic yielding sites both in Luzon and the Visayas including Zambales, Sta. Ana, Laguna de Bay, Pila, Los Banos, Leyte, Negros, Dumaguete, Iloilo, and several other sites. The enormous quantity of Yuan ceramics found in the Philippines today are indicative of the volume of trade transacted in the 13th and 14th centuries. There was, however, some change in the trading scene in Mindanao. Butuan is less mentioned in the Yuan records, a reflection of the decline of its trading activities with China. It is Sulu that emerged as an entrepot in the sea route towards Borneo.

### **Fluctuating Trade Relations in the Ming Dynasty**

The founding of the Ming dynasty created significant changes in the trade interactions of China with the Southeast Asian countries. Formal tribute system was once again instituted. To curb the alarming wealth and power of the merchants of South China, private commercial transactions were prohibited. As a measure to discourage foreign trade, certain imports were banned.

In complying with the policy of Ming court, Luzon sent a representative together with the envoys from Java on October 17, 1405.<sup>xxi</sup> According to the Chinese records, Pangasinan sent its chief five times, on September 23, 1406, 1408, 1409, and December 11, 1411<sup>xxii</sup>.

On the last mission, the Pangasinan mission was honored by the Chinese Emperor with a state banquet.<sup>xxiii</sup> Small-scale trade was carried on through these official missions, part of the participation in the Borneo-Luzon-Fujian trade route. There are also reports of Sulu and Brunei sending missions together in 1405, 1408, and 1411<sup>xxiv</sup>. Sulu continued to send various missions to China in the 15th century and enjoyed a rather high status.

Being the "rendezvous point" for ships coming from Moluccas, Sulawesi, and Borneo to and from China, Sulu was the agent supplying China with non-Sulu products like camphor, black pepper, laka wood, and tin<sup>xxv</sup>.

As a result of trade restriction, rampant smuggling occurred. The Chinese merchants of South China oftentimes connived with the tribute missions from Southeast Asia. The smuggling was so extensive that the tributary privileges of Java and some other countries were suspended in 1381<sup>xxvi</sup>. Obviously, the control of the trade ban was hardly effective.

The hiatus in the trade relations between China and the Philippines is reflected in the relatively less quantity of ceramic finds of this period, in contrast to those of the late 15th and 16th centuries.

The trade ban was lifted in 1465. Direct trade contacts between China and the Philippines were resumed. The Spaniards, who arrived in the 16th century, were very impressed with the widespread trading network interlinking the different islands, so that ceramics as well as other goods could reach the far away communities in Luzon and the Visayas. The extensive trading activities were mentioned in Legazpi's letter to King Philip in 1567 advocating the prospects of Spanish commerce in the region<sup>xxvii</sup>.

A large quantity of Chinese ceramics of the late 15th and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries is found all over the Philippine archipelago.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The Chinese ceramics found in the Philippines are remnants from the exchanges of material culture through the maritime trade. Those imported, glazed ceramics were undoubtedly highly valued commodities acquired by the affluent. The fact that they survive in such astounding quantity could be an index to the favorable economic climate that may have prevailed in the archipelago before the advent of colonization. Since those wares, vested with ceremonial functions, are mostly grave goods, they are vestiges of the accepted social life that was a facet of the Filipino culture before its Christianization. Whereas historical records of the Philippines starting from the landing of Magellan in 1521 are bountiful, the pre-colonial data are meagre. The extant ceramics that reached our shores several centuries ago provides with a significant glimpse into our past in the pre-Hispanic era.

p.s. Except for the subtitles, all words underlined should be in italics

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Han dynasty chronicles on geography or Han Shu Dilizhi, vol. 28, as quoted by C.J.Feng in *History of Chinese Transportation in South Seas*, Taipei, 1969, pp. 1-2.

<sup>ii</sup> 2. Ibid, p.18.

<sup>iii</sup> 3. Ibid, p.26.

<sup>iv</sup> R. Fox, 'Chinese Pottery in the Philippines', Chinese Participation in Philippine Culture and Economy, Manila, 1964, s. Liao, ed., p.100. It's actually a theory expounded by H. Otley Beyer who gave no source of reference. By 'North China', Fox could have meant Zhejiang because of the late Tang Yue wares found in the Philippines. To the Chinese sense of geography, North China refers to the part of the land north of Yangtze River.

<sup>v</sup> W.H.Scott, Prehispanic Source Materials For The Study of Philippine History, 1984, Quezon City, p.80. The author claimed that "far from pioneering a new trade route in 758 (another turbulent event in Guangzhou), the Arabs shifted their Asian terminus to Tongkin in northern Vietnam and then in 878 to Kalah in Malaysia after a massacre of foreign merchants in Guangzhou."

<sup>vi</sup> X.M.Feng, personal correspondence to The Oriental Ceramic Society of the Philippines.

<sup>vii</sup> R. Fox, op.cit., p.101. Fox did not specify his source of information. It could be just a romantic tale.

<sup>viii</sup> *Song History* or Song Shi as quoted by W.H.Scott, op.cit., p.65.

<sup>ix</sup> C.S.Zhou, History of Chinese Economics, 1970, Taipei, p.689.

<sup>x</sup> K.K.Kuan & J.Martin, 'Canton, Pulau Tioman & Southeast Asian Maritime Trade', A Ceramic Legacy of Asia's Maritime Trade, Selangor, 1985, p.65.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid, p. 52

<sup>xii</sup> J. Guy, *Oriental Trade Ceramics In Southeast Asia, 9th-16th C.*, Singapore, 1986, p.14.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Song History* or Song Shi as quoted by W.H.Scott, op.cit., p.66.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid, p.66.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid, p.66.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid, p.67.

<sup>xvii</sup> W.P.Ronquillo, 'The Butuan Archaeological Sites: Profound Implications for Philippines and Southeast Asian Prehistory', Guangdong Ceramics from Butuan and Other Philippine sites, Manila, 1989, p.62.

<sup>xviii</sup> J.T.Peralta, 'Pottery and Ceramics Excavated in the Philippines', Kayamanan, Manila, p.2.

<sup>xix</sup> W.H.Scott, op.cit., p.68.

<sup>xx</sup> J. Guy, op.cit., p.29

<sup>xxi</sup> W. H.Scott, op.cit. p.75.

<sup>xxii</sup> W.H.Scott, op.cit., p.75.

<sup>xxiii</sup> W.H.Scott, op.cit., p.75.

<sup>xxiv</sup> G.W.Wang as quoted by A.R.Lim in *Pottery & Ceramics Finds In Southeast Asia With Special Reference to the Philippines*, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, p.44.

<sup>xxv</sup> Ibid, p.45. 26.

<sup>xxvi</sup> J. Guy, op.cit., p.40.