

Ancient Philippine Burial Traditions and Qingbai Ceramics

Jan 19th, 2011 by [Tip Writer](#)

Since much of the Philippines' history was written during and after the Spanish era in the 16th century, in order to look further back to understand the socio-economic conditions of the people in the earlier periods, it is necessary to turn to archaeology.

The dominant artifacts that were found beneath the ground throughout the entire Philippine Archipelago were the imported high-fired ceramics mostly from China, along with those Vietnam, and Thailand in lesser proportions.

What appears to be an inexhaustible supply of these excavated luxury trade goods shows that the Philippines was a vital market for the legendary pottery trade in the South Seas in ancient times.

The Oriental Ceramic Society of the Philippines has been diligently putting up exhibitions of excavated ceramics that were brought to the Philippine shores centuries ago showing evidences of the Filipinos' contacts with their neighboring countries at different chronological periods. These were recovered from burial sites of the pre-hispanic period. Rather than being used for utilitarian purposes as in their countries of origin, they were treated as valuables often interred with the deceased. This was part of the burial traditions of the natives before they were colonized by the European settlers.



image [source](#)

In an exhibition mounted by the Ceramic Society of the Philippines at the Ayala Museum in 1993 entitled "Chinese and Southeast Asian White Ware Found in the Philippines," the materials shown were from the 8th to the 16th centuries. Included were various kinds of white ware produced in China, Vietnam, and Thailand. The majority of exhibit pieces, however, were a special kind of porcelain produced between the 11th and 14th centuries in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province of China known as *qingbai*. It has a white body and a transparent glaze with a bluish tint at where the glaze pools due to the minute presence of iron fired in a reducing kiln atmosphere. This group of delicate ware is among the most exquisite ceramics ever produced in China because of its superb craftsmanship and its immense variety of shapes.

Various shapes of bowls and cups were produced in the Song Dynasty (AD 960-1279). A very unique shape is that with a high foot, rounded sides and slightly reverted rim. This is sometimes referred to as a stem cup.

Silver and ceramics share quite a number of common shapes. The graceful undulating rim on the vase decorated with incised peony design is obviously copied from metalwork tradition. Among the twelve pieces of silver of the late Tang period (AD 618-907) discovered underneath a pagoda in Zhejiang province in China, there is a bowl with a wide mouth, round base and decorated with a net design. It bears a striking resemblance to the “willow basket” *qingbai* bowl with the bluish tint trailing right in the center of the net design.



willow basket design

image [source](#)

Wine drinking was a favored social habit of the Chinese in the olden times. Wine ewers were thus produced in enormous quantity by the ceramic potters. Among the profuse extant pieces, there are exquisite variations that have become collectors' items today. The lobing on the body of the ewer with exuberant incised design is another metalwork-inspired feature. The squat body and a dragon spout exemplify the wide variety of shapes that is a remarkable characteristic of *qingbai*.

There is an interesting array of *qingbai* sculpture pieces found in the Philippines. They are modeled in the forms of human figures and beasts. Most of the pieces are very well articulated, a demonstration of mature skills of the *qingbai* potters.



image [source](#)

Ironically, these beautiful Chinese ceramics survive to this date because they were grave wares. Whereas the dead disintegrated and disappeared, the ceramics stay. That some of these excavated ceramic artifacts which have been buried under the ground for several centuries are still preserved in their pristine conditions is nearly incredible.

Ref.: <http://www.bukisa.com/articles/440285> [ancient-philippine-burial-traditions-and-qingbai-ceramics](#)