

# The Role of Ceramics in Betel Chewing Rituals in Thailand

by

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The custom of betel chewing has penetrated Thai culture since ancient times. All levels of society, male and female, young and old, chew betel and despite a ban on it by the government in the 1930s, the custom continues in Thailand today. Although it is widespread and long enduring, betel chewing is poorly documented. Recent publications by Reichart and Philipsen, Brownrigg, and Rooney have expanded our understanding of medicinal uses, cutters and the oral tradition but the subject still raises questions about ceramics used for betel chewing and their role in the practice.

Textual sources are limited mainly to accounts by early European travelers to Siam (today Thailand). Some of these were not firsthand, all were limited to observations of life in the Thai kingdom between the 17th and 19th centuries, and few of the reports mention ceramics; those that do are not specific as to form, type, or stylistic details. Archaeological research, on the other hand, has yielded quantities of glazed stoneware made in Thailand between the 11th and 16th centuries and used in association with betel. Little supporting evidence, though, has surfaced to explain the function and place of these ceramics in the betel chewing custom.

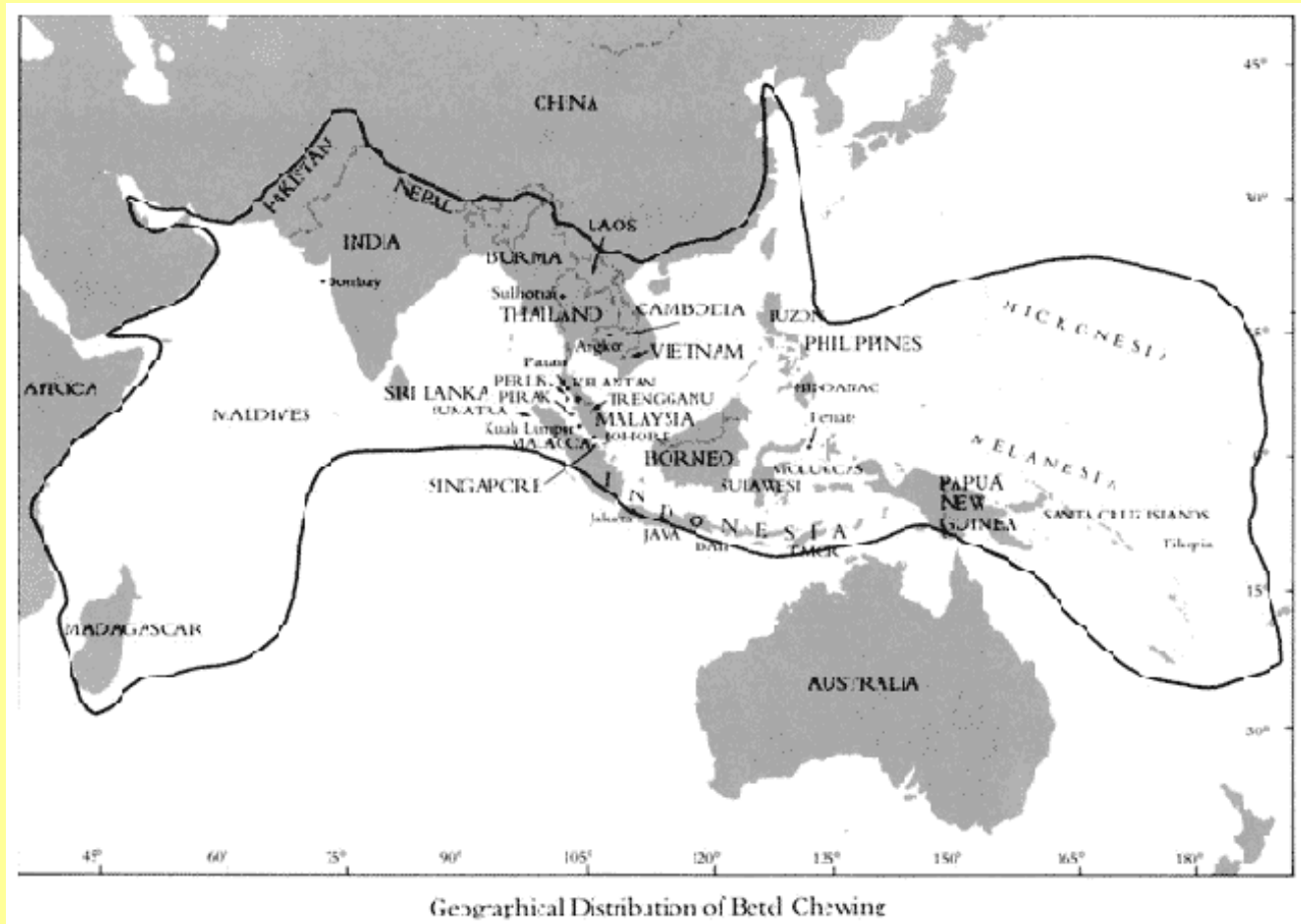
Thus my aim in preparing this paper has been to try to define the role of ceramics in the use of betel in Thailand and to place them in a social context. The ceramics are classified in to two groups based on function—those used in rituals for offerings to supernatural forces and those made to serve as containers for lime paste, a necessary ingredient for betel chewing. However, because of the nature of betel and its multiple uses, some overlapping between the two functions is inevitable.

Although Thailand is the focus of this paper some references are made to the neighboring countries of Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), and, to a lesser extent, Vietnam, as the betel chewing customs, implements, methods, and materials often overlap due to the proximity of these countries, both geographically and culturally.

## **BACKGROUND OF BETEL IN THE THAI CULTURE**

The custom of betel chewing encompasses a vast area of the world extending 11,000 km west to east and 6,000 km north to south. It includes the eastern coastline of Africa to Madagascar in the West; the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka, all of Southeast Asia, Papua

New Guinea, Melanesia to Tikopia (in the Santa Cruz Islands) in the East; and southern China in the North.



Although it is thought that betel chewing in Thailand is an ancient custom, its roots are difficult to trace, partly because three, not just one, essential ingredients are involved and they are all easily transported. Archaeological evidence in Thailand refutes the long held theory that betel chewing is native to India. *Areca catechu*, one of the three essential ingredients for chewing betel, found at Spirit Cave in northwestern Thailand (7000 - 5500 BC) (Gorman 1970:79-107) and similar finds at Ban Chiang (3600 BC - AD 200-300) (White 1982) and other early sites in Thailand have been reported. This organic evidence is supported by pottery finds in the form of low-fired, unglazed, cord-marked pots with a round base and a short, flaring neck, found in association with prehistoric pottery in Buri Ram Province, northeastern Thailand [See Figure 1, right]. On the other hand, the earliest archaeological evidence for betel found in India is the early years of the present era.

Etymological evidence also links the origin of the custom to Southeast Asia, rather than India. The widest range of words in a native language for 'areca' and 'betel' has been found in Indonesia, which suggests that country may be the original location where these words were spoken. The lack of variety of words for 'areca' and 'betel' in India suggests a later date of origin for the plants in that country.

The Ramkhamhaeng (AD 1275-1317) stele of the Sukhothai Kingdom provides the earliest written evidence of betel in Thailand, although scholars dispute the authenticity and the date of this stele. According to the

Click any thumbnail to enlarge it.



Figure 1

inscription, 'The people of this land of Sukhothai... celebrate the Kathin ceremonies... with heaps of areca nuts,' (*The Inscription of Ramkhamhaeng the Great* n.d.). Inscriptions in temples of northern Thailand dating from the Lan Na Kingdom (14th - 16th centuries) also mention the areca nut.

A key to the long and extensive patronage of betel is its use on three levels—a food, a medicine, and a symbol. The most obvious use of betel is to chew it, an action that evokes a general feeling of well-being, or mild euphoria. A betel quid serves as a social denominator and is offered to others and shared in the same way that westerners drink coffee together. Offering a quid to a friend is a sign of hospitality and strengthens social contacts. Chewing betel frequently over a long period often results in blood-colored spittle, black teeth, red lips, and bad breath, characteristics consistently noted by early European travelers to Thailand. Not knowing any other level of significance, they considered betel chewing an alien and repulsive practice. These vignettes have dominated the aesthetic consciousness of Westerners ever since they first appeared in published accounts. Medicinally, the Thais believe that the ingredients of a betel quid act together to keep the human body in balance. The nut and leaf are also used extensively, particularly in agrarian areas, as a medicine to cure a variety of illnesses in both humans and animals.

## CERAMICS AND BETEL AS OFFERINGS TO SPIRITS

With the widespread popularity and use of betel, its powerful symbolical place in Thai culture is not surprising. In this paper I look at one aspect of the symbolism, that which concerns both betel and ceramics. Betel serves as a link in contacting supernatural forces and, as such, is intricately entwined with the rites of animistic worship. Spirits are both revered and feared as they can be protective or destructive. Because of this duality, superstitions surround them and all spirits must be dealt with and controlled through rituals conducted to either invoke or appease the spirits. Today spirits of the land and water are carefully looked after in agricultural areas where adequate rainfall and fertile soil are essential for the cultivation of rice.

*Phra Phum* [Lord of the Land], is given special attention in Thailand. It is believed that if this spirit is taken care of through an appropriate house and offerings he will guard and protect the people who live on the land near his house. A typical house is a miniature replica of an agrarian house and it is elevated on a single pillar with a terrace at the front for placing offerings [See figure 2, right].



Figure 2

It is likely that glazed stoneware figures in human and animal form of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries from the Si Satchanalai kilns in north-central Thailand served as votive offerings for rituals associated with animism. The figures were probably part of the daily offerings given to placate and appease the spirits.

Human figures, either green or brown glazed, range from 8 to 10 cm in height, and have a characteristic bulge in one cheek which I believe represents a betel quid, rather than *miang* [fermented tea] suggested by some ceramists. The figures are crudely modeled with a minimum of decoration. Almost all the heads on the females have been severed. Spinks observed that the heads appear to have been modeled separately and that they were lightly

attached to the body before firing so that they could easily be detached (1973:80-85). Coèdes proposed that the figures were used as substitute effigies by pregnant women for the purpose of sacrifice. An expectant woman, for example, severs the head from a female figure and offers it to the appropriate spirit, an action that transfers any danger or misfortune relating to childbirth or the newborn to the effigy (1938 in Spinks 1973:189-90).

#### CERAMICS USED AS BETEL PARAPHERNALIA

The preparation and serving of a betel quid and the storage of its ingredients gave rise to a variety of implements that are as distinctive as the custom itself. To understand the paraphernalia it is necessary to know what comprises a betel quid. Three essential ingredients are combined to form a quid for chewing betel; others may be added depending on availability and preference. The base for the quid is a broad, green leaf from the vine of the *Piper betle* pepper plant that has been cultivated from cuttings. It likes shade and is usually trained to grow up another tree or pole for support and protection from the sun [See figure 3, right].



Figure 3

Lime paste is then spread on to the leaf using either with a spatula or a finger. The lime, in the form of limestone chalk (calcium carbonate), is obtained from mountain lime in Thailand and Laos, whereas in Indonesia and other island areas sea shells, mollusks, and coral provide the source. After quarrying, the lime is pulverized to a powder-like consistency (calcium oxide) by burning and then crushing it with a hammer or even the hands. Water is added to the lime until a paste-like consistency (calcium hydroxide) is achieved.

In some parts of Thailand cumin or turmeric are added to the lime, which gives a pink or reddish cast to the paste. A 19th century observer describes this process: *'Before the burnt stone has been slaked, an infusion of turmeric root is poured upon it, which causes it to fall into powder taking a fine vermilion color. Enough of the infusion is employed to leave lime in a plastic state. In this state it is brought to market, sometimes in large masses of several hundredweight, ready to be ladled out into little earthen pots, holding less than half a pint each'* (Bangkok Calendar, 1864 in Penzer 1935:259). No further elucidation is given on the 'little earthen pots' but it does indicate that the lime paste used for betel chewing was kept in small, individual containers. This point was also noted nearly 200 years earlier by Simon de La Loubère, Envoy Extraordinary to King Narai of Siam in 1687, who wrote that the *'Indians [Siamese] do always carry this sort of Lime in a very little China dish, for they put so little on every Leaf, that they consume not much in a day, although they incessantly make use of the Areca, and the Betel.'* (1693:23).

The third essential ingredient is a so-called 'nut' that is actually a seed of the *Areca catechu*, a member of the palm family. It is thinly sliced or shredded and placed on top of the lime paste. The tree is one of the tallest of the palms and is distinguished by a slender trunk and a cluster of leaves at the top, which give shade to stalks of the seeds [See figures 4 and 5, right]. The nut itself is round or oval and about five cm long at maturity. It is a matter of preference whether the nut is used at the earliest stage when it is green and soft with a smooth exterior, or later after it ripens, hardens and turns yellowish to



Figure 4

brownish with a tough, fibrous husk [See figure 6, below right]. The young nut is succulent and sweet-tasting whereas the mature one is bitter and savory. This difference between young and old, hard and soft, also determines whether a knife or a betel cutter is used to cut the nut. Tobacco and the shreds of tree bark are popular modern additions to a quid and a stick of clove may be added to secure it.



Figure 5

After the lime paste and the areca nut are added, the leaf is folded, like wrapping a present, or it may be rolled in to a conical shape. When the quid is ready, it is placed in the mouth between the teeth and the cheek and pressed with the tongue to allow sucking and chewing [See figure 7 below, right]. Substances within the areca nut are released during chewing and, when they come in contact with the lime, a red color is produced. Some people hold the quid in the mouth for hours; others sleep with it, but the average time a quid is kept in the mouth seems to be about thirty minutes. Most of the betel juice and eventually the entire quid are spat out.



Figure 6

‘Betel-nut chewing’, a name given to the custom by Europeans, is a misnomer because the nut that is chewed is an areca- nut a betel-nut. Some English language dictionaries continued to retain ‘betel-nut’ as an entry until recently, but today most references to the custom are defined correctly under ‘betel.’



Figure 7

The basic components of a betel set include a receptacle, either a box, tray, or basket, covered containers for the individual ingredients, and a cutter for slicing the nut. Other accessories include a spatula for removing the lime paste from its container and spreading it on the leaf. For those who have no teeth or who cannot masticate the nut, the ingredients are pulverized in a stone mortar and pestle before spreading them on the leaf [See figure 8 below]. A spittoon is usually part of the betel paraphernalia for the elite.



Figure 8

The lime paste is always kept in a separate container and, between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries when ceramic production in Southeast Asia was at a peak, glazed stoneware vessels were widely used in the custom of betel chewing as containers for the lime paste. The hard, dense, high-fired stoneware, unglazed on the interior, was ideal for



Figure 9

keeping the lime paste dry and away from the elements. It is uncertain, though, why stoneware was not popular for other forms such as a tray or leaf container or why lime always has its own, individual container. One theory finds its roots in an ancient Malay belief, handed down orally, that poison could be added to the lime paste. François Bernier tells a story relating one way that it was done. *‘A young nobleman, Nazerkan, was suspected by the monarch Shahjahan of an illicit love affair with his favourite daughter. As a mark of distinguished favour the king presented the betel in the presence of the whole court to the unsuspecting youth, which he was obliged immediately to masticate, agreeably to the custom of the country. Little did the unhappy lover imagine that he had received poison from the monarch, but indulging in dreams of future bliss, he*

*withdrew from the palace. Such however was the activity of the poison that he died before he could reach home.*' (1656-1668 in Penzer 1935:228)

Glazed stoneware containers for lime were produced in three countries of mainland Southeast Asia—Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Each country made only one form and each one is different from the other. The function of these containers is confirmed by traces of hardened lime paste on the interior. The lime has been finely ground and hardened into a white paste, sometimes with a pinkish tinge, and readily disintegrates to a powder when scraped.

The type of lime container made in Vietnam dates to the 14th century and is thickly potted with a spherical body and a heavy strap handle, an opening on the shoulder, and a carved foot-ring. The body is fine-grained and a pale buff color. The handle and shoulder are decorated with a modeled floral or animal form. It is characteristically covered with a transparent cream-colored glaze and dark-veined crazing is typical [See figure 9 right]. On some examples, greenish splashes spill over the handle and shoulder where the glaze has thickened.

## **KHMER LIME POTS**

Quantities of glazed animal-shaped pots used for betel chewing have been found at Khmer kiln sites and nearby temples in northeastern Thailand, an area that during the peak of the Angkor Period the territorial boundaries of the Khmer Empire extended beyond Cambodia to encompass parts of Thailand and other smaller areas of the region.

Remains of temples, ancient roads, kilns, and water systems testify to extensive Khmer occupation in northeastern Thailand. Surveys and excavations conducted in the 1980s by the Fine Arts Department of Thailand identified at least 200 kiln mounds concentrated in two main areas—Ban [village] Kruat and Ban Baranae, both in Buri Ram Province, northeastern Thailand. Subsequent excavations and radiocarbon dating of finds associated with ceramics place the kilns between the 11th and 12th centuries. These dates are consistent with the historical evidence of the Khmer presence in Thailand at that time (Khwanyuen 1985:155).

A typical Khmer lime pot is high-fired stoneware with a buff-colored body that is predominantly iron and sand. The texture is grainy and sandy. The glaze is either brown or green and sometimes the two colors appear on a single piece; in these latter instances the workmanship is of exceptionally fine quality. The nature of the raw materials in the glaze is unstable and crazing and flaking are common defects. Despite the inevitable imperfections there is an earthiness in the Khmer glaze and an appeal in its irregular behavior.

Three types of animals dominate the Khmer menagerie of glazed stoneware vessels. Bird-shaped pots, the most common form, are naturalistic interpretations and probably represent the types of birds seen by the Zhou Daguan, the Chinese emissary who lived at Angkor for nearly one year in the late 13th century and noted that '*...they have vultures, crows, egrets, sparrows, cormorants, storks, cranes,*



Figure 10

*wild ducks, canaries, et cetera...*'. A typical example is a small, globular pot with a narrow mouth, applied eyes, beak, and tail of a bird, and a flat base with a thumb-print scar showing evidence of having been thrown on a potter's wheel. Incised rings around the mouth and wings or vertical lines on the body are characteristic features of a bird-shaped pot [See figures 10 and 11, right]. A bronze vessel with bird-like features was recently found that shows close similarities to the ceramic form.



Figure 11

The elephant is the second most common ceramic form of lime pot. A characteristic vessel has a round body with an opening at the top and is supported either by a broad base or four short legs. Typical modeled features include a head, tail, tusks, caparison, and lug handles on each side of the mouth. Straps around the chest and rump secure the saddle. The rabbit is another popular form of Khmer lime pot and commonly rendered in a crouching position. A handle emulating a tail is typical. Although the comparison is indirect, it is worth noting that the animal theme continued to be used for Khmer lime pots made of silver in the 19th and 20th centuries [See figure 12, right].

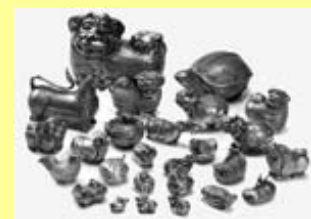


Figure 12

While animal-like forms dominate the arena of lime pots they are not exclusive as other shapes with traces of lime on the interior have also been found. Small globular pots with either a brown or green glaze, minimal decoration, and a base and mouth of approximately the same dimensions are common.

## SI SATCHANALAI LIME POTS AND OTHER CONTAINERS

Quantities of high-fired, glazed stoneware containers for betel chewing ingredients were produced at the Si Satchanalai kilns in north-central Thailand during the peak of production in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries when one thousand kilns were reportedly operating. The majority of the kilns at Si Satchanalai are located in the modern village of Ban Ko Noi, six km north of the old city wall. A second site, Ban Pa Yang, situated just north of the old city of Si Satchanalai, was set up some time after Ban Ko Noi and produced human and animal figures used in animistic worship.

A distinctive form with a tapering, conical profile is the most common type of lime container from the Si Satchanalai kilns. It comprises two parts of about equal height with a lotus-bud or tiered knob shaped like a sacred monument. Both types of knobs are Buddhist-inspired motifs. The form is common in both bronze and glazed stoneware [See figures 13 and 14, right]. The ceramic form was covered with either an unctuous white glaze or painted in iron-black with abstract motifs and horizontal bands around the body and cover.



Figure 13

It seems likely that some other forms from the Si Satchanalai kilns of the same period could have been part of the betel paraphernalia, although no supporting archaeological or textual evidence is available. One such type is a gourd-shaped bottle with a tall, narrow



neck and two ears and covered with either a brown or green glaze.

Figure 14

The shape of the neck suggests it was a container for liquids, so perhaps it was used for storing and pouring the water to mix with the lime powder to a paste-like consistency.

Another ceramic form that may have been part of betel paraphernalia is a covered box that was exported in large quantities to Indonesia and the Philippines. It could have served as an individual container for betel ingredients such as small quantities of clove or other spices. Like the lime pots, these covered boxes have metal counterparts, both in a fruit-shaped version and a more formal, covered box with a lotus-bud knob. Similarities in form and usage of these covered boxes are seen in an early 20th century silver set made in southern Thailand.

## **KALONG LIME POTS**

Burials in mountainous areas of western Thailand, near the Burmese border, discovered in the 1980s, yielded quantities of bronze and ceramic lime pots produced at the Kalong kilns in northern Thailand. The form is similar to the lime pot from Si Satchanalai and was found in association with Chinese wares of the 14th to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. John Shaw, a ceramist who specializes in Northern Thai wares, hypothesizes that because of the quantity of lime pots with traces of lime on the interior and because of their position in burials they fulfilled a symbolical role of identification with the deceased male.

## **CHINESE EXPORT FORMS**

From the 17th century onwards European travelers to Thailand reported on the use of betel amongst the elite and royalty. References to kings welcoming foreign dignitaries with '*all kinds of food as well as betel leaf with areca nuts*' are common. Jan Huygen van Linschoten wrote that there was no greater honor for a Westerner than if the king '*profereth him of the same Bettele that he himself doth eate.*' Royal regalia of King Rama V (Chulalongkorn) includes a royal betel set and a spittoon of gold.

Similarities can be seen between the royal betel sets of metal and certain types of betel chewing paraphernalia made in China for the Thai market in the 19th and 20th centuries. Two relevant types are Bencharong, or 'five-color' ware, and Lai Nam Thong, or 'gold-washed' ware. Both were produced initially for royalty in Thailand and, by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, officials and the elite were also patrons of the colorfully enameled wares from China. White porcelain forms, of the same composition as Chinese Qing were probably made at kilns in Jingdezhen and then decorated in enamels at Guangdong. The shapes and designs, though, were ordered specifically for the Thai market. Lai Nam Thong, a variation of Bencharong, combined the five colors with the addition of gold-leaf, which was probably only used by the aristocracy. Although made during the same time as famille rose and famille verte, these two types reflect the brightly colored palette of the floral prevalent in the tropical climate of Thailand. The name 'Bencharong' derives from two Sanskrit words—*panch* ('five') and *rang* ('coloring plus pleasing or gladdening'). The number five corresponds to the five elements and draws further symbolism from the five precepts of Buddhism and the Attitudes of Life. This layering of symbolism on Bencharong, as porcelain made of five elements and decorated with five colors, renders it highly

auspicious.

Archival drawings of similar shapes and designs in metal correspond to Bencharong forms in modern betel sets that are part of the royal regalia. A royal betel set of gold that belong to King Chulalongkorn contains small, round containers with covers that bear a likeness in form to the Bencharong covered container in a royal set of nielloware in the collection of the late Prince and Princess Chumbhot of Nagara Svarga. Another set, enameled on metal, appeared on a postage stamp commemorating the 60<sup>th</sup> birthday of Her Majesty the Queen of Thailand and shows parallels in form and design between metal and Bencharong ware [See figure 15 right]. The same form is also found in a betel set on the doors inlaid in mother-of-pearl at the ordination hall of Wat ('temple') Phra Jetupon, popularly known as Wat Po, or the Temple of the Reclining Buddha, Bangkok's oldest and largest temple [See figure 15 right].

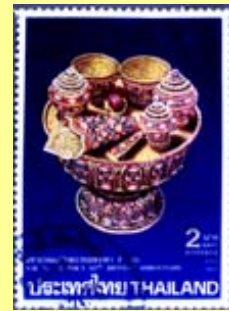


Figure 15



Figure 16

Betel sets for the elite of the 19th century usually included a container for betel leaves made of silver and intricately decorated with floral scrolls or interlocking geometric motifs [See figure 16 right]. It is shaped like a truncated triangle or flattened cylinder and the same form is found in a blue-and-white Chinese Export Ware betel set, made for the Thai market in the 20th century. Porcelain containers painted with narrative scenes are clearly copies of a silver holder for betel leaves, made in southern Thailand and peninsular Malaysia. A complete Chinese betel set of blue and white porcelain with a calligraphic motif is also known with individual boxes in imitation of Chinese silver.



Figure 17

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, archaeological, etymological, and textual evidence suggests a sustained use of betel over a long period in Thailand. Its multiple-level usage undoubtedly accounts for its duration and deep penetration amongst all classes. This layering of betel, as a food, a medicine, and a symbolical element, gives it a richness and validity in the social structure of Thai culture. The custom supported a range of paraphernalia and although fired clay was not a large percentage of the total materials used, it comprised a significant and enduring part. The role of glazed figures, both human and animal, as offerings to supernatural forces, was an important one in the ritualistic and cult practices of the native inhabitants. Quantities of glazed stoneware containers with traces of lime on the interior dating from the 11th to the 16th centuries were found in Thailand and point to a widespread use of ceramics for the exclusive function as containers for lime in the practice of betel chewing. It is plausible that following the closure of the kilns in Thailand in the late 16th, or perhaps 17th, century lime containers were made of bronze in the same tradition and of the same form as stoneware. Then in the 19th and 20th centuries the use of fired clay resurged as a material for lime containers in the form of export ware made in China for the Thai market.

A recurring feature that runs through the reconstruction of the use of ceramics as betel chewing paraphernalia is the close association between the materials of fired clay and

metal. The influence was two-directional, with each one serving as the forerunner in form and design at varying times. Above all, the choice of fired clay as a container for lime through time points to a shared relationship between betel chewing and ceramics that renders them inseparable within the framework of Thai society.

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