When Vietnamese fishermen discovered a historical shipwreck about 90 nautical miles south of Cape Ca Mau in southern Vietnam in 1998, they hauled up more than 30,000 artefacts and 2.4 tons of metal objects in their nets. Subsequently, a Vietnamese diving and excavation company, working in close collaboration with the Ca Mau Provincial Museum and other responsible agencies, began to salvage the ship. In 1998 and 1999 more than 130,000 artefacts were recovered from this 450m² site. Now, four years later, Nguyen Dinh Chien, chief curator at Vietnam’s Museum of Vietnamese History and a leading specialist on ceramics, has published the results of this find in a lavishly illustrated book under the title Tàu Cố Cà Mau (The Ca Mau shipwreck), 1723-1735.

By John Kleinen

S
ome time between 1723 and 1735, a Chinese junk sank off the coast of Vietnam’s farthest point in the South China Sea. Its cargo consisted of chinaware, porcelains, blue and white ware, porcelains decorated in brown, white-glazed porcelains over-glazed with enamels, and various stoneware, all originating from different kilns in southern China. The best-known pieces are the porcelains from Jingdezhen in Jiangxi province, where ceramics have been produced since the fourteenth century; other notable pieces include those from the Dehua kiln complex in Fujian, and from Guangzhou in Guangdong. The variety of the chinaware and the different kilns indicate that this vessel was part of the large Asian porcelain trade that developed in the early fifteenth century and in which the Portuguese and the Dutch played an important role. The exact provenance of the Ca Mau wreck is still not clear, but the author believes that the ship was on its way to Batavia or another port in order to deliver wares for the European market. Similar shipwrecks, such as the well-known Vung Tau (1690) and the one recently discovered off Binh Thuan, north of Saigon, belong to a regular trade route along the coast of Vietnam. Although the VOC was connected to the porcelain trade, private traders had already taken over the exports to the European and Dutch markets at this period. Apart from cataloguing a large amount of Chinese porcelain, the book includes a series of photographs of blue and white dishes, sometimes in sets of five, decorated with the well-known so-called ‘Scheveningen’ landscape (formerly known as the ‘Deshima’ décor), depicting a typical Dutch fishing village. In the background the sails of fishing boats are visible in between the roofs of houses, a church, and a fire beacon (executed in Chinese style). Chinese dishes with European motifs were made to order and are known as ‘Chine de commande’.1

European motifs were app


Notes >

Dr John Kleinen was the IIAS international representative in Hanoi and Visiting SSRC Professor at the National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities in 2002 and 2003. As an anthropologist with long research experience in Vietnam, his current research topics are integrated coastal zone management and fisheries: jg.m.kleinen@usa.net

References >