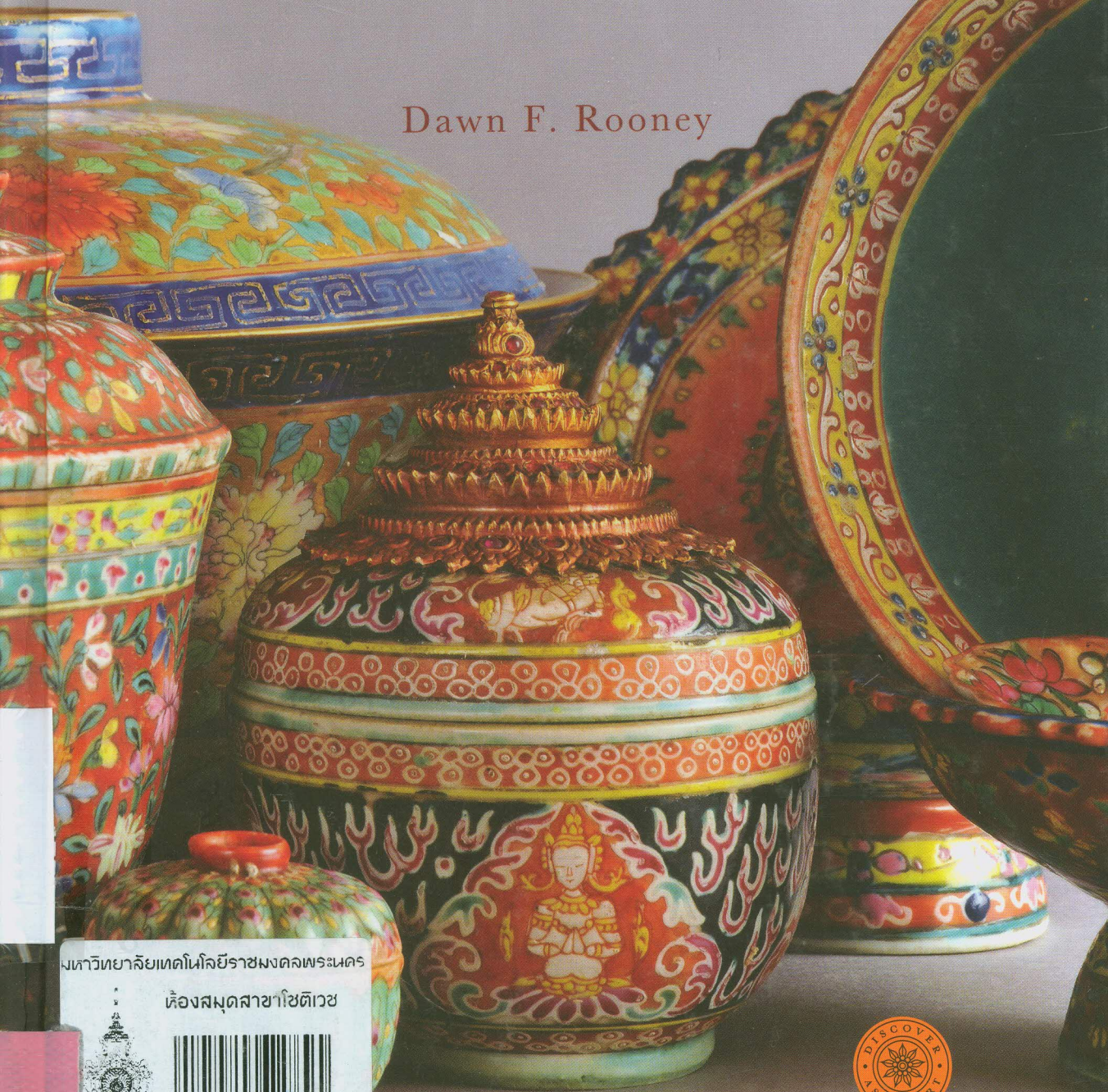


# BENCHARONG

Chinese Porcelain for Siam

Dawn F. Rooney



มหาวิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีราชมงคลพระนคร

ห้องสมุดสาขาโชติเวช



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# CONTENTS

NOTES TO THE READER	6
PREFACE	11
CHAPTERS 1 • HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS	12
CHAPTERS 2 • BENCHARONG DEFINED	38
CHAPTERS 3 • TECHNOLOGY AND PRODUCTION	52
CHAPTERS 4 • MOTIFS	66
CHAPTERS 5 • FORMS AND FUNCTIONS	98
CHAPTERS 6 • BENCHARONG DISCOVERED	122
APPENDICES	
NOTES ON THE TEXT	176
CHRONOLOGY	178
GLOSSARY	180
RECOMMENDED READING	184
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	185
INDEX	186

**Opposite Page :**  
Bencharong and  
Lai Nam Thong, six  
miniature pots with lids.  
(avg. diam. 4.5 cm)  
early 19th century)

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## PREFACE

I am honoured to write the first book in this dynamic new series, *Discover Asian Art*, published by River Books, designed to introduce a broad swathe of topics to the general public. I hope that my book on Bencharong achieves this lofty goal. My objective in writing this book is to provide a single reference source for Bencharong – it is the book I wish had been available when I first became interested in this little-known form of ceramic art twenty years ago. Bencharong is a type of enamelled Chinese export ware made for Siamese (Thai) royalty in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. While aspects of the cultural exchange and trade between Siam and China have been covered elsewhere, and single collections of Bencharong have been chronicled, Bencharong as an art form has received little attention and few details about its origins, production, and symbolism have been published. This book addresses that gap. Chapter one covers the relevant historical connections between China and Siam of the period. Chapter two defines Bencharong and discusses its dating. Chapter three explains the technical aspects of producing Bencharong. Chapters four and five are the heart of the book as they provide an illustrated and annotated description of the most common motifs and forms, presented in alphabetical order. This format was chosen for easy reference and as an aide to guide the reader through the intricacies of the subject. Chapter six showcases an array of Bencharong pieces in various combinations of patterns and colours. It is my hope that this book will make Bencharong live again for the reader and generate a greater awareness and appreciation of these unique ceramics.

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# HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS

## PORCELAIN TRADE BETWEEN SIAM AND CHINA (1-1)

Bencharong (five-colours) made in China especially for the Siamese court was the most desirable porcelain in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, but other types of decorated Chinese porcelain were found in Siam at least 400 years earlier. Blue and white from the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) has been excavated at temples of the Sukhothai (1238-1450) and early Ayutthaya (1351-1500) periods.<sup>1</sup> Spectacular 14<sup>th</sup> century blue and white plates were among the Tak finds in the hilltop burials on the border of Thailand and Myanmar (Burma).<sup>2</sup>

As the power of the Sukhothai kingdom declined, that of Ayutthaya rose. The geographical and natural surroundings gave it several advantages. Ayutthaya, located about 80 kilometres inland from the Gulf of Thailand, is situated on a fertile, silted plain fed by three rivers and surrounded by a moat. The journey upstream from the gulf to Ayutthaya is a narrow, twisting river with a difficult bar at the mouth (1-2). So, it requires small vessels and careful navigation. Thus, Ayutthaya is in a relatively good location for defending possible invasions and yet ideally situated for both interior and exterior trade offering protection from the monsoons for ships and plentiful rice and fresh water for the crews. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Ayutthaya was becoming an important commercial centre in Southeast Asia with attractive trading opportunities for other Asian countries. And, archaeological evidence of inscriptions, porcelain, and other artifacts confirms the presence of a sizeable Chinese community in Ayutthaya at that time.

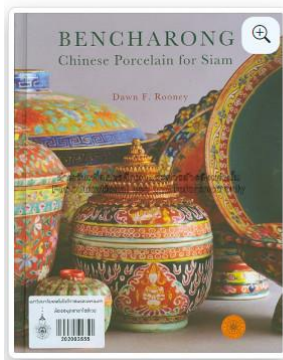
The intrepid Admiral Zheng He, a Chinese Muslim in the service of the Ming emperor Yongle (r. 1403-1424), made seven unprecedented expeditions from China southwards in Asian waters within thirty years beginning in 1405. He sailed with his fleet of so-called 'Treasure Ships', laden with Chinese goods, particularly porcelain. The armada was vast – 317 ships manned by nearly 28,000 men – and it called on thirty kingdoms. On the first three

1-2 Map showing the river route from the mouth of the Gulf of Siam to the *Ville de Siam* [Ayutthaya], *Carte du Cours du Menam, Depuis Siam Jusqu'a la Mer* (c. 1750-1760) by Jacques Nicolas Bellin, French hydrographer to King Louis XV of France (14 x 21 cm). (Private Collection)

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