

Representation of Ancient Chinese Art in the Museums of Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka and China are traditional friendly countries with relations dating back over many centuries. Relations were fostered by thriving trade exchanges along the Maritime Silk Route and far-reaching cooperation in culture and knowledge. In 410 CE, the Chinese Buddhist scholar Fa Xian spent around two years in Sri Lanka. While in Sri Lanka, he translated Buddhist scriptures, which he brought back to China, and wrote a book titled A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms, making a substantive contribution to the enhancement of people-to-people contacts. The Chinese navigator Admiral Zheng He of the Ming Dynasty sailed to Sri Lanka many times between 1405 and 1433. A stone tablet erected by Zheng He is kept in the National Museum of Sri Lanka, standing as testimony to the long history of friendship between Sri Lanka and China. This study explores how ancient Chinese art is represented and interpreted in major Sri Lankan museums, focusing on the Colombo National Museum and the National Maritime Museum in Galle. These museums were strategically chosen because of their large concentrations of Chinese artifacts and serve as suitable case studies for the study of China-Sri Lankan culture and artifact collection by national museums. Following a qualitative research approach, it draws on field observations, semi-structured interviews with museum professionals, and a review of exhibition records to analyze the presentation and interpretation of Chinese artifacts, particularly Tang and Five Dynasties period, Song Dynasty, and Ming and Qing period porcelain. Interviewees were selected using purposive sampling based on their professional involvement in museum curation and exhibition design. Data were further analyzed using thematic analysis to identify emergent patterns in the depiction of Chinese art. These objects present not only as evidence of historical trade but also as cultural symbols reflecting early globalization and artistic exchange between China and Sri Lanka. The findings provide a foundation for future research incorporating additional museums and visitor perspectives to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the educational and cultural significance of Chinese art representation in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Chinese art, Chinese ceramics, Sri Lankan museums, Cultural exchange

INTRODUCTION

Cultural exchange between China and Sri Lanka has played an important role in shaping the island's artistic and historical identity. The presence of Chinese artifacts in Sri Lankan museums reflects the long-standing diplomatic and cultural relations between the two nations. Museums act as key spaces where these shared histories are preserved, interpreted, and presented to the public. This research focuses on how selected Sri Lankan museums represent ancient Chinese art and how these exhibitions contribute to wider understandings of art history and cross-cultural communication.

Historical Context

China holds a leading position in the history of ceramic production. The world's earliest archaeological evidence of pottery was found in China. The oldest known pottery pieces, discovered in the Xianrendong Cave in Jiangxi Province, date to around 20,000 years ago. Similarly, pottery fragments found in the Yuchanyan Cave in southern China date back approximately 17,000–18,000 years. By the later Neolithic period, Chinese potters had developed coiling techniques, and by around 5000 BCE, they began decorating pottery with painted patterns for artistic purposes (Dharmawardhana, 2024).

During China's Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), the opening of the Maritime Silk Route marked the beginning of diplomatic relations between Sri Lanka and China, establishing cultural, religious, and commercial exchanges that continued over subsequent centuries. Historical records from both nations provide evidence of diplomatic missions and cultural interactions. Porcelain and silk products from China, together with pearls and gemstones from Sri Lanka, were exchanged as royal gifts between the rulers of the two countries.

During the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), often regarded as the golden age of the Maritime Silk Route, diplomatic relations between Sri Lanka and China expanded into extensive maritime trade and cultural exchange.

A significant quantity of ancient Chinese ceramic ware, including both complete artifacts and ceramic sherds, has been unearthed from numerous archaeological sites in Sri Lanka. These ceramics mainly belong to six Chinese dynasties: Tang (618–907 CE), Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907–960 CE), Northern and Southern Song (960–1279 CE), Yuan (1271–1368 CE), Ming (1368–1644 CE), and Qing (1644–1912 CE) (Jayasingha, 2014).

Chinese ceramic artifacts have been discovered at both inland and coastal archaeological sites, including Kayts, Mantai, Vankalai, Trincomalee, Anuradhapura, Sigiriya, Polonnaruwa, Yapahuwa, Colombo, Balapitiya, Galle, and Tissamaharama (Jayasingha, 2014). Among these discoveries, the earliest Chinese ceramics belong to the Tang Dynasty. Tang-period ceramics have been identified at important Buddhist monastic centres such as Abhayagiriya, Jetavanaramaya, and Mihintale in Anuradhapura, demonstrating the early presence of Chinese ceramic traditions in Sri Lanka (Jayasingha, 2014). Tang Dynasty ceramics have also been recovered from Mantai, one of Sri Lanka's principal ancient maritime trading ports (Jayasingha, 2014).

Table 1 summarises these archaeological findings over a long period, indicating that the Sri Lanka-Chinese ceramic trade has a historical background. This helps provide an adequate historical background for understanding the display of ancient Chinese art forms in museums in Sri Lanka.

Table 01 - Chinese ceramic artifacts discovered during archaeological excavations in Sri Lanka

No	Period	Types of Ceramics	Location found in Sri Lanka
01	Tang and Five Dynasties (618-960 CE)	Sancai Ware	From archaeological excavations associated with the ancient port of Mantai
		Yue Yao Celadon Ware	From excavations at Anuradhapura, Abhayagiriya, and Jetavanaramaya
		Changsha Yao Ware	From archaeological excavations associated with the ancient port of Mantai and Anuradhapuraya
		Xing Yao and Ding Yao Ware	From excavations at Anuradhapura and Jaffna Dutch Fort
		Dusun Type Olive Green Glazed Stone Ware	From excavations at Anuradhapura, Abhayagiriya, Mantai and Jaffna Dutch Fort
		Green-Yellow Glazed Ware	From excavations at Anuradhapura, Abhayagiriya, Jetavanaramaya and Mantai
		Brown Glazed Ware	From excavations at Anuradhapura, Abhayagiriya, Jetavanaramaya and Mantai
		White Ware	From excavations at Anuradhapura, Abhayagiriya, Jetavanaramaya and Mantai

		Black Glazed Ware	From excavations at Anuradhapura, Abhayagiriya, Jetavanaramaya and Mantai
02	Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE)	Northern Celadon and Yao Lonquan Celadon Ware	Excavations at Kayts Island, Jaffna, and the Alahana Pirivena in Polonnaruwa
		Quinbai Ware	Excavations at Alahana Pirivena in Polonnaruwa
		Jian Ware	Excavations at Alahana Pirivena in Polonnaruwa
		Jingdezhen White Ware	Excavations at Alahana Pirivena in Polonnaruwa
		Dehua Yao White Ware and Olive Green Ware	Excavations at Alahana Pirivena in Polonnaruwa
		Brownish Black Ware	Excavations at Alahana Pirivena in Polonnaruwa
		Shiwan Yao Brown Glazed Ware	Excavations at Alahana Pirivena in Polonnaruwa
03	Ming (1368-1644 CE) and Qing Dynasties (1644-1912 CE)	Blue and White Ware	From excavations conducted on the Avondster shipwreck in the Galle harbor, dated to 1659 CE

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This qualitative case study investigated how ancient Chinese art was presented in museums in Sri Lanka. A purposeful selection of two national museums, the National Museum of Colombo and the National Maritime Museum in Galle, was made as the research sites, as they both possessed substantial Chinese collections and had historical significance related to China-Sri Lankan cultural interactions.

Data were collected through field observation, semi-structured interviews with the museum professionals, and analysis of museum publications, exhibition records, and relevant archaeological documents. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their professional knowledge and involvement in museum collections, exhibition management, and cultural heritage interpretation. The data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis to reveal key themes related to the display and presentation of, and the interpretation of, ancient Chinese art in exhibitions in Sri Lankan museums. An overview of the institutional context of the selected museums considered in this study is provided in the following section.

Institutional Context

This study focuses on the Colombo National Museum and the National Maritime Museum in Galle because they contain significant collections of Chinese artifacts and historical records related to China–Sri Lankan cultural exchanges. These museums provide appropriate case studies for examining the representation and interpretation of ancient Chinese art within the Sri Lankan museum context.

National Museum of Colombo

The National Museum of Colombo is the largest and principal museum in Sri Lanka. It is located in Colombo, the commercial capital of the country. The museum was founded by the British Governor, Sir William Henry Gregory, in 1877. Today, the museum is one of the most important institutions for preserving and presenting Sri Lanka's cultural identity.

The museum presents the historical development of the country through Galleries 1–6, which cover the Prehistoric and Protohistoric periods, the Anuradhapura Period, the Polonnaruwa Period, the Medieval Period, and the Kandyan Period. Furthermore, Galleries 7–13 display collections organized by subject, including paintings, coinage, ancient technology, textiles, jewelry, weapons, and folk arts. Galleries 14 and 15 are newly developed galleries dedicated to traditional beliefs and customs and agriculture.

The museum also features a trilingual inscription highlighting the historical connection between China and Sri Lanka along the ancient Maritime Silk Route. Moreover, one of the permanent galleries displays Chinese ceramic artifacts recovered through archaeological excavations at various sites across Sri Lanka, providing important evidence of historical, cultural, and trade exchanges between the two countries.



Figure 01 - National Museum of Colombo, Sri Lanka

National Maritime Museum in Galle

The National Maritime Museum is the only museum in Sri Lanka dedicated to raising public awareness of the marine, biological, and anthropological heritage of the country's southern coastal region. It is located within the old Dutch warehouse inside Galle Fort, originally constructed in 1671. The museum was officially opened to the public on 9 May 1992.

The first gallery illustrates the various types of watercraft formerly used for passenger transport and maritime trade in southern Sri Lanka. The traditional lifestyle of fishing communities and their fishing techniques are presented through models and replicas. The second gallery focuses on marine ecosystems and their flora and fauna. Marine artefacts recovered through underwater archaeological explorations are also displayed, including maps, naval craft, ropes, earthenware, beer mugs, smoking pipes, barrels, artillery guns, sailors' shoes, and many other objects.

Another gallery presents archaeological and historical evidence of Sri Lanka's maritime trade networks, including records of Chinese visitors, trade activities, and Chinese artifacts. The National Maritime Museum in Galle is an important site for studying the representation of ancient Chinese art in Sri Lanka because the southern coast served as a major centre of maritime trade along the Maritime Silk Route. The museum also exhibits Chinese ceramic wares recovered through archaeological excavations conducted at different locations across Sri Lanka.



Figure 02 - National Maritime Museum in Galle, Sri Lanka

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Separate museum galleries are reserved for the display of Chinese ceramic art at the Colombo National Museum and the National Maritime Museum in Galle. The ceramics are arranged in an attractive and organized manner within these galleries. Each ceramic is accompanied by labels in both Sinhala and English, providing information about the historical period to which it belongs and the location in Sri Lanka where it was discovered during archaeological excavations. The bilingual interpretation provided by the museums enables visitors to understand both the historical context and the cultural significance of the displayed artifacts.

The main artistic features observed in the ceramics displayed at the Colombo National Museum and the National Maritime Museum in Galle include the use of plant and floral patterns in early ceramic decoration. In later periods, human figures, animals, and landscapes were also used as decorative motifs. Among the porcelain exhibits are flower vases of varying sizes and shapes, and jars decorated in different styles, including blue-and-white ware, underglaze red ware, and glazed ware. These objects demonstrate the sophistication and artistic skill of ancient Chinese ceramic production and are displayed in ways that highlight both their aesthetic qualities and historical importance. The exhibition arrangement emphasizes not only the artistic value of these artifacts but also their role as evidence of the long-standing cultural and maritime connections between China and Sri Lanka.



Figure 03 - Gallery displaying ancient Chinese ceramics at the National Museum of Colombo



Figure 04 - Gallery displaying ancient Chinese ceramics at the National Museum of Colombo



Figure 05 - Gallery displaying ancient Chinese ceramics at the National Maritime Museum in Galle



Figure 06 - Gallery displaying ancient Chinese ceramics at the National Maritime Museum in Galle



Figure 07 – This ornamented and colored flower vase was a 17th century product of China.



Figure 08 – This vessel is a product of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 CE) in China. It used to store juice.



Figure 09 – This vessel belongs to a type called Blue and White porcelain which was during the period of Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 CE) in China.



Figure 10 – This porcelain vessel is a 17th Century product and was used for storing ginger juice.

The Trilingual Inscription is another important artefact representing ancient Chinese art in Sri Lankan museums. This inscription was carved in Nanjing, the capital of China, in the seventh regnal year of the Yongle Emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1409 CE). It was brought to Sri Lanka by the renowned navigator Zheng He (1371–1433) and was later erected in Galle. The slab was discovered in 1911 by District Engineer H. F. Tomalin in Galle and subsequently transferred to the Colombo National Museum, while a replica is displayed in the National Maritime Museum in Galle.

The inscription is written in three languages: Chinese, Persian, and Tamil. Its content records the offerings presented by Admiral Zheng He to the deity Vishnu. The use of Tamil reflects the active role of Tamil-speaking merchant communities in regional maritime trade, while the Persian text demonstrates the participation of Persian merchants in the Indian Ocean trading network. Through its multilingual content, the inscription highlights the Silk Route's multicultural nature and the close relationship among religion, trade, and diplomacy during the Ming period. The slab is an important cultural symbol of the ancient Maritime Silk Route. These findings are based on the analysis of museum exhibitions, artifact displays, exhibition records, and interviews with museum professionals, illustrating how Sri Lankan museums interpret and present ancient Chinese art within their historical and cultural context.



Figure 11 - The Trilingual Inscription displayed at the National Museum of Colombo

CONCLUSION

The museums of Sri Lanka, especially the Colombo National Museum and the National Maritime Museum in Galle, play an important role in preserving and explaining the long-standing cultural and artistic connections between China and Sri Lanka. These museums display Chinese ceramics from the Tang to Qing periods, along with other trade-related artifacts. They provide tangible evidence of centuries of maritime trade, diplomatic contact, and artistic influence. The museum galleries are elegantly arranged to highlight artistic features, historical context, and cross-cultural significance. This helps visitors to appreciate both the beauty and the historical importance of the objects. Overall, Sri Lanka's museums not only protect ancient Chinese art but also promote understanding of the island's role in early globalization and intercultural exchange. They demonstrate the enduring legacy of China–Sri Lankan relations.

This study focused on two national museums that hold significant collections of Chinese artifacts and therefore provides a case-based understanding of the representation of ancient Chinese art in Sri Lanka. Future research

could expand the scope by including additional museums and cultural institutions across the country, while also examining visitors' experiences and perceptions to better understand the educational and cultural impact of these exhibitions.

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