



## SOUTHERN VIETNAM CULTURAL IMPRINTS THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE FROM THE COLLECTION OF SAIGON POTTERY STATUES AT THE HO CHI MINH CITY MUSEUM

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### Abstract:

The article focuses on the Saigon pottery collection at the Ho Chi Minh City Museum, introduced in the thematic exhibition "Saigon Pottery and the Nearby Region - Characteristics of Southern Vietnam Culture". By systemizing product types, analyzing typical crafting techniques, and decoding the layers of meaning of the decorative pattern system, the article sheds light on the unique values of this ceramic line. The research results demonstrate that Saigon ceramics are not only diverse in types (household, construction, decoration, worship) but also reflect a sophisticated technical process, which is the result of a strong intertwining between indigenous traditions and the industry of the Chinese community. In particular, decorative topics from plants, holy beasts, religions, to literary figures and the Sino-Nom civilization system have transformed each artifact into an "authentic document", recording the economic, social, and spiritual life of Saigon - Cho Lon from the 18th century to the mid-20th century. This study confirms that Saigon pottery is a significant cultural heritage that needs to be preserved and promoted within the diverse cultural landscape of the South and Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Saigon ceramics, Ho Chi Minh City Museum, cultural imprints

### 1. Introduction

The land of Saigon - Ho Chi Minh City and its surrounding areas holds a particularly important strategic position in the historical process of exploration and development of Southern Vietnam. From the earliest stages of settlement, when Vietnamese migrants from the northern and central regions joined the indigenous communities, the area

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quickly developed affluent residential communities. A significant turning point occurred in 1698, when Lord Nguyen entrusted the responsibility to Commander Marquis Nguyen Huu Canh, who was tasked with establishing the land of Dong Nai as an administrative, economic, and cultural center. The convergence of immigrant flows, especially from Vietnam and China, brought with it traditional craft skills, including pottery.

Pottery quickly and strongly developed, becoming a famous craft of Saigon - Gia Dinh from the 17th century to the beginning of the 20th century. Production centers were concentrated in areas still marked by landmarks such as Lo Gom Hamlet, Lo Gom Canal, and Lo Sieu. Ceramic products not only carry the value of use but also contain profound cultural values, reflecting the economic, social, and religious life of the region, and thus they create the unique identity of Saigon ceramics within the context of Southern Vietnamese culture.

These ceramic artifacts, part of the collection at the Ho Chi Minh City Museum, are a valuable source of historical and cultural insights into the land. However, under the pressure of urbanization, traditional pottery in Saigon has largely ceased to exist, running the risk of becoming a lost art.

Therefore, this article focuses on an in-depth analysis of worship and decoration artifacts in the collection at the Museum, in order to decipher the characteristics of crafting techniques and decoration styles. Thereby, the study contributes to illuminating the unique cultural imprints of Saigon - Southern Vietnam and affirming the value of ceramic heritage in the contemporary context.

## **2. Collection of Saigon Ceramic Statues**

The theme of religion and folk beliefs is quite prominent in Saigon pottery, profoundly reflecting the cultural identity and community mentality. These topics were not only decorative but also reflected the spiritual needs and universal beliefs of the residents of Vietnam-China in the context of Southern Vietnam's urbanization from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. In terms of symbolism, the religious and belief images on Saigon pottery were a combination of the cosmological ideology of the East, folk beliefs about the soul-gods, and the system of religious images, Buddhism, and ancestral worship that have been localized and adapted in the urban space of Saigon - Cho Lon.

The collection of Saigon pottery worship statues at the Ho Chi Minh City Museum is not only a collection of artistic artifacts, but also a lively artistic repository, reflecting the multi-dimensional spiritual life of the residents of Southern Vietnam in such a historical period and illuminating the typical "Southern Vietnam cultural imprints". *Firstly*, the characteristics of "Southern Vietnam cultural imprint" are reflected in the theme of intersection and transference between the Vietnamese and Chinese communities, creating a distinct spiritual identity. *Second*, the study will analyze how images in ceramics create a worldview of cosmic order and morality, contributing to shaping social norms. *Third*, the artifacts will reveal people's everyday aspirations and

ideals of life, ranging from fortune and prosperity to family happiness. Through these three lenses, the Southern Vietnam cultural imprint will appear in a specific and profound way, affirming the value of Saigon's pottery heritage.

## **2.1 The Intersection and Continuation of Vietnamese-Chinese Belief Transformation**

Saigon pottery is a place of lively cultural dialogues, where the Vietnamese and Chinese communities not only worship many gods in common but also interpret the meaning of those gods in their own ways, creating a unique religious identity for Southern Vietnam. This process of intersection and continuity is evident through popular groups of worship statues, where folk beliefs are localized to fit the spiritual life of a multicultural metropolis.

### **2.1.1 Statue of Guan Gong - Guan Ping - Zhou Cang (關公- 關平 -周倉).**

In Chinese-Vietnamese culture, especially the folk beliefs of the Chinese community in Southern Vietnam, the image of Guan Gong (Guan Yu) is a symbol of loyalty, integrity and protection of justice, worshipped as a guardian deity, and at the same time a symbol for the martial arts, traders, and also in Buddhism (in the form of Dharma Protector). Together with two other guardians, Guan Ping (adopted son, symbolizing loyalty) and Zhou Cang (general guard, symbolizing strength), this trio formed a symbolic combination of the three legal guardians commonly found in temples, guilds, and the architecture of overseas Chinese worship in Saigon's Cho Lon. The symbol of Guan Gong in the Saigon ceramic space represents not only the legend of the Three Kingdoms but also the embodiment of moral ideals: loyalty, righteousness, resilience, and integrity. The worship of Guan Gong also has the meaning of protection against evil spirits and demons, as well as the protection of the dharma. This is especially true in Chinese trade circles, where he is considered the God of Trade, or the god who sponsors transportation and trade. The common and solemn presence of the Guan Gong - Guan Ping - Zhou Cang trio on Saigon ceramics reflects the convergence of martial arts symbolism, Confucian - Taoism - Buddhist ethics, and aesthetic identity in the architectural space and beliefs of the Chinese - Vietnamese community.



**Picture 1:** Statue set of Guan Gong - Guan Ping - Zhou Cang (關公- 關平 -周倉).

On Saigon pottery, Guan Gong - Guan Ping - Zhou Cang statues are often arranged in a centre-bodyguard position, with Guan Gong in the middle in a majestic posture, holding a dragon blade or stroking the beard, head wearing a border hat and dragon armor. On either side are Guan Ping (erudite face, serious expression, seal in hand) and Zhou Cang (muscular physique, blade in fist, aggressive expression), creating a protective position for the center. The set of statues is usually arranged at the altar at shrines and synagogues.

The fact that a Chinese historical figure is widely worshipped as a guardian deity in both the Hoa temple and the Viet communal house has crossed ethnic boundaries, affirming the shared values of loyalty and patronage in a community that was building a new life together.

## **2.2. Worldview on Cosmic Order and Life Ethics**

Beyond the single function of worship, Saigon ceramic statues also constitute a complete symbolic system, reflecting the ancient worldview of cosmic order and moral compass. From the basic elements of the universe to the ruling gods of heaven and earth, all form a tangible moral code that serves to monitor, teach, and maintain the stability of the social order.

### **2.2.1 Lady of the Five Elements Collection**

The collection of Lady of the Five Elements is an extremely unique artistic and religious heritage, deeply reflecting the spiritual life and cultural identity of the Southern Vietnam region. These are not only exquisite pottery works but also expressions of a complex belief system, formed from the intersection of many different cultures.

The belief in the Lady of the Five Elements is a typical example of the process of religious integration (syncretism) in the South. Its origin comes not from a single religion but from the crystallization of at least three main cultural currents. *Firstly*, the belief in worshipping the mother goddesses among Vietnamese people originated from the tradition of worshipping goddesses and Mother Nature, who governs all things. *Second*, the Five Elements philosophy of Taoism, a Chinese philosophical system, provides a theoretical framework for systematizing the five goddesses, associating each of them with a basic element of the universe: Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth. *Thirdly*, the influence of Champa culture is evident due to its similarity and interference with the worship of the Goddess of the Realm (Po Ino Nogar) among the Cham people, which has deep roots in the southern lands.

The collection of Lady of the Five Elements statues at the Ho Chi Minh City Museum is designated by code (BTTPHCM.584) and comprises a set of statues from the ancient Saigon pottery line (Buu Nguyen kiln), characterized by extremely valuable artistic features. Each Lady is shown in a dignified sitting position on the altar, exuding compassion and power, yet also conveying a sense of intimacy. The ladies wore elaborate court attire, with an emphasis on a polygonal, wide-flared gown collar called "ruffles" (cloudy shoulders) and a large badge in front of the chest, often featuring a phoenix. Each

statue is a miniature universe. The color of the pedestal usually corresponds to the deity's element (red pedestal for the Fire Goddess, green pedestal for the Wood Goddess...). Interestingly, on the base of the statues, the title of the Taoist god "Star Deity" (The Star Lord of Fire) was inscribed. This detail illustrates the natural fusion of belief systems, where artisans adopted a formal Taoist title to demonstrate the highest reverence for the folk goddesses.

The Lady of Five Elements statue embodies Southern Vietnam's cultural identity. The South has historically been a region of convergence for many streams of population and cultures. This belief reflects the process of exchange and transformation, creating an open faith, not unattached classics, but one more aligned with what is closest and most practical to life. For an agrarian society that is highly dependent on nature, the worship of the five deities who govern the five core elements of life expresses a deep desire for harmony between man and heaven and earth, for a harmonious rain and wind, a bountiful harvest, and a peaceful life. Therefore, the Lady of Five Elements is not only a deity in the temple, but has also become an indispensable part of the people's mind, a symbol of their faith and culture.

### **2.2.2 Sun - Moon Statue (日-月)**

The image of Sun-Moon, as a pair of cosmic symbols in East Asian dialectical monism, deeply reflects the philosophy of yin and yang regulation, the cycle of time-space operation, and the relationship between people and heaven and earth. In Vietnamese-Chinese folk religion and beliefs, the Sun and the Moon are not only astronomical symbols but also personified as protective spirits: Ong To (Mr. Sun) and Ba Nguyen (Ms. Moon). For the Chinese in southern Vietnam, these two gods represent a heavenly couple that coordinates the cosmic order. In the traditional Vietnamese concept, the Sun-Moon couple embodies heaven and earth in harmony, protecting the people's stable life and ensuring good crops. The transformation of the two ideologies of Vietnam - Chinese is clearly reflected in religious architectural works such as communal houses, pagodas, and assembly halls, where the image of the duo Sun - Moon is often placed at the highest position - the top of the front roof - in order to dispel evil, protect the building, and pray for peace across the nation.

The Sun-Moon statue often appears in the form of a double statue, depicting two gods in a solemn posture, holding the symbols of the sun and the moon in the shape of a round disc, decorated with designs of cloud dragons, water waves, or stylized fire dots. Not only limited to architecture, but this theme is also evident in incensories and ornamental pots used in worship spaces, demonstrating the widespread use of the Sun-Moon symbol in the art of religious pottery.

The placement of the Sun-Moon statue in a formal position within the architectural and worship spaces demonstrates that the concept of the harmony of the universe and the Yin-Yang order forms the foundation of the worldview of the people of the South. This is the expression of a natural order, which embraces both the divine and the human realms, before being concretized through the ruling gods below.

### **2.2.3 Statue of Jade Emperor - Nam Tao - Bac Dau (玉皇- 南斗 -北斗)**

According to Vietnamese-Chinese customs and culture, the Jade Emperor (玉皇上帝) is the supreme god in the world, governing the universe, governing destiny, and bringing blessings and disasters to the world. He is aided by two civil officials who recorded human destiny: Nam Tao (or Nam Dau Star Lord) (南斗) - in charge of birth records, and Bac Dau (or Bac Dau Star Lord) (北斗) - in charge of death records, forming a powerful trio in East Asian cosmological thought. This is a typical symbolic system for the philosophy of yin and yang, representing life and death, as well as the operation of social morality. This trio is placed in the space of worship as the center of moral oversight and power, embodying belief in justice, cause and effect, and the operation of heaven and earth.

In the art of shaping Saigon pottery, the image of the Jade Emperor - Nam Tao - Bac Dau often appears on altars. The collection of statues of the Jade Emperor worship at the Ho Chi Minh City Museum has the code BTTPHCM (1975). The Jade Emperor is often depicted sitting on a royal throne, wearing an ornamental crown and exuding a stately, dignified presence. He wears a robe adorned with a dragon, his hands holding the Jewel - a symbol of immense authority. The two civil officials, Nam Tao and Bac Dau, stood on both sides, wearing formal uniforms, holding pens and life-and-death books, reflecting their sacred responsibility for human fate.

Saigon artisans use multi-layered linocuts, combining raised borders and flat plaques, to highlight the sanctity and tranquility of the gods. Facial details and costumes are depicted meticulously, fitting the style of Buddhist-Taoist art in the Late modern period. The presence of the Jade Emperor, Nam Tao, Bac Dau on Saigon ceramics is not only a religious decorative element but also contributes to shaping the relationship between ceramic art and the East Asian cosmological system, reflecting the mixture of Chinese ideology and its localization in the religious activities of the inhabitants of Southern Vietnam.

### **2.2.4 Yanluo Wang - Judge Deity (閻王-判官)**

In the Chinese-Vietnamese folk belief system, Yanluo Wang (閻羅王) is regarded as the lord of the underworld, the keeper of the life-and-death book, and the enforcer of the law of cause and effect. With him was the Judge deity, who recorded and proclaimed the deeds of the dead. This pair of images holds a significant place in worship in relation to the afterlife, reflecting the concepts of causality, reincarnation, and the control of moral order through death. The image of Yanluo Wang, the Judge deity, is often shown in decorative complexes with spiritual colors, especially at assembly halls worshipping Guan Yin, Chinese pagodas, Five Elements shrines, or architectural spaces with Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian elements.

Surveying the collection of Yanluo Wang - the Judge deity statues at the Ho Chi Minh City Museum (BTTPHCM.1733) including 01 statue of Yanluo Wang and 03 Judge deities shows that the statue of Yanluo Wang is shaped to sit neatly on the throne, with the head wearing a judge's cap, a fierce face, bulging eyes, a long beard, a hand holding

a life-and-death book or a wooden gavel. The Judge deity stood beside him, looking more elegant, often holding a pen and a notebook, with a serious face. The set of statues at the Ho Chi Minh City Museum is made with unglazed ceramic and colored paint.

In addition, the image of Yanluo Wang, Judge deity, sometimes appears on the wall-hanging relief, often as part of a set of scenes depicting the world of Hell or the court judging people after death. Sometimes, they come with motifs such as the sentence "Good deeds pay rich dividends, evil is repaid with evil", the image of good demons - evil demons, or other dharma protectors (Diamond Dharma Protectors, Flaming-Faced Ghost King...). This symbol not only reflects the clear influence of Taoist and Buddhist ideologies from China, but also shows the process of Vietnamization of spiritual elements when combined with the concept of "worship for manifestation" and spiritual beliefs popular in Vietnamese life. The introduction of Yanluo Wang, the Judge Deity, into Saigon pottery is not only an artistic medium but also the embodiment of the function of teaching and protecting community morality in traditional society.

#### **2.2.5 The Statue of Diamond Dharma Protector - Flaming-Faced Ghost King Statue (金剛護法-消面大士)**

The themes of the Diamond Dharma Protector (金剛護法) and the Flaming-Faced Ghost King (消面大士) represent the forces that uphold the dharma, exorcise, and protect the sangha and sentient beings. These are two fierce gods, symbolizing the energy of oppressing malicious spirits, eradicating evil, and protecting good people. They often appear in pagodas, Chinese assembly halls, or shrines of Guan Yin, Dizang, and the Jade Emperor. The theme of Diamond-Faced dharma protectors is both a moral spirituality and an expression of the art of protecting sacred space, emphasizing the qualities of deterrence, purification, and protection. Their appearance on Saigon pottery reflects the localization of Buddhist images in Southern Vietnam urban culture, where religion, folk beliefs, and visual arts are closely combined in the community's spiritual life.

The Diamond and Flaming-Faced dharma protectors in Saigon pottery were often depicted as majestic standing statues, resembling strong martial generals, wearing armor and holding weapons such as maces, hammers, and swords, with angry facial expressions, wide-open mouths, and glaring eyes to suppress evil spirits. Meanwhile, the Flaming-Faced Ghost King, according to legend, is the evil incarnation of Guan Yin Bodhisattva, and is described as having a red face with fangs and a long tongue. He often carries a hammer or trident and has a threatening though benevolent nature. This image conveys the intertwining of compassion and punishment, common in Buddhist-Taoist syncretic beliefs in Southern Vietnam.

In general, the system of gods governing the celestial court and the earth prison, as depicted on Saigon pottery, has created a tangible moral framework that clearly reflects the fusion of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian ideas. The figures of the Jade Emperor, Nam Tao, and Bac Dau establish the order of the heavenly world, while Yanluo Wang and the Judge deity govern the laws of the underworld. The Diamond and Flaming-Faced dharma protectors play a role in protecting the law and punishing evil.

This combination not only reveals a rich worldview of the universe but also the materialization of a moral control system within the community, reminding people of the law of causality, fair reward, and just punishment. This is the "imprint" of a mechanism designed to maintain social order, contributing to the stabilization of spiritual life in a rapidly growing and diverse city like Saigon in southern Vietnam.

### **2.3 Life Aspirations and Ideals**

Besides the powerful gods, Saigon pottery is also a vessel to preserve the most idyllic and intimate dreams and aspirations of the people. Fairy tales, metaphorical stories, are portrayed on ceramics not only to decorate but also to materialize the wishes for a prosperous, happy, long-lasting, and harmonious life. This is the clearest "mark" of a rich spiritual life, where faith and the values of daily life merge into one.

#### **2.3.1 Wishes of Happiness, Wealth, Longevity - Symbols of a Fulfilled Life**

In addition to religious images and heroic monuments, the Saigon pottery decoration system also presents an array of topics imbued with philosophy and metaphorical symbols, reflecting the ideology of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in human life. These themes serve as a moral-educational model, conveyed through the visualization of fairy tales, and represent a profound exchange between Chinese culture and indigenous beliefs and aesthetics in Southern Vietnam, particularly in the architectural spaces of the Chinese diaspora.

The desire for a fulfilling life with three core values, Phuc (happiness), Loc (prosperity), and Tho (longevity), is expressed through many classics.

One of these themes is the Bat Tien (Eight Immortals), a group of eight immortal fairies in Chinese Taoism, representing eight social classes, eight forms of superhuman powers, and eight symbols of auspiciousness. Each immortal has their own dharma instruments and exhibits a characteristic form of quality and ability. In Chinese culture in Vietnam, especially in Southern Vietnam, the image of the Eight Immortals is not only a religious symbol of Taoism but also a symbol of longevity, dharma protection, family protection, and blessing. The introduction of the Eight Immortals into the architectural space, particularly on decorative ceramics, reflects the continuation of Chinese-Vietnamese folk beliefs in the Southern Vietnam cultural landscape of the 19th-20th centuries.



**Figure 2:** Collection of Eight Immortals - Saigon pottery (BTTPHCM.18567 to BTTPHCM.18574). Dated at the end of the 19th century - at the beginning of the 20th century



**Source:** Author *et al.*, taken in 2024

On Saigon pottery, Eight Immortals is often shown as a combination of eight characters arranged in a row, each person has a characteristic figure with his or her own instrument: Lü Dongbin (leader, with a sword), He Xiangnu (the only woman, with a lotus), Cao Guojiu (with jade tablets), Li Tieguai (with an iron crutch and gourd), Lan Caihe (with a basket of flowers), Han Xiangzi (with a flute), Zhang Guolao (with a drum and castanets), and Zhongli Quan (with a fan). Each immortal is shaped with vivid facial expressions and a flexible posture. This combination is usually arranged horizontally or vertically on the facades (front roof/front hall) of the assembly hall, the roof of the Chinese temple, altars, incensories, large vases, or decorative pedestals.

In terms of meaning, the Eight Immortals motif symbolizes comprehensive protection, brings blessings - peace – longevity, and is an expression of the "yin and yang" ethic, popular in assembly hall architecture such as Nghia An, Nhi Phu, Quynh Phu, as well as in ceramic products used in worship or decoration. The representation of the Eight Immortals on Saigon ceramics exhibits a close combination of Taoist religious symbols, folk beliefs, and traditional ceramic art, contributing to the shaping of a unique style in Southern Vietnam's architectural ceramics. The mythology of "*Immortal Liu Hai Plays with Gold Toad*" (刘海戏蟾), Belonging to the group of symbols of fortune, it expresses folk belief in abundant wealth and prosperous maneuvering. Liu Hai - the god of fortune, along with the image of three-legged toads (Thiem Thua) sucking gold coins - symbolizes the ability to wield talent, and to protect the house. This topic is often arranged at the assembly hall spaces, shops or family chapels of Chinese traders in Cho Lon, in order to pray for luck and prosperity.

This philosophical and metaphorical topic on Saigon ceramics not only demonstrates the subtle transformation and localization of Confucian-Taoist ideology in the Chinese community, but also reveals the multi-layered symbolic role of ceramics in the architecture of urban beliefs in Southern Vietnam. Through stories of wisdom and a

highly intentional layout, Saigon pottery has transcended its purely decorative function, becoming an important spiritual and cultural artifact in community life during the late 19th to early 20th centuries.

### **2.3.2 Pray for Family Happiness and Community Solidarity**

The group of images of the goddess of happiness, such as the "Vase Offering by Jade Maiden" (玉女奉瓶) (BTTP.11820) or the "Immortal Maiden Sends a Child" (仙姑送子), expresses their belief in the ability to bless, to give birth smoothly, and to have peace and auspiciousness in the family. The image of the Jade Maiden is a pure symbol, often standing alongside the Jade Boy in front of the Jade Emperor's altar, as a sacred "assistant" from heaven. Meanwhile, the story "Immortal Maiden Sends a Child" is often associated with worshiping the Mother or the shrine of Kim Hoa Lady, serving as a clear symbol for praying for lineage continuation, giving birth to a son, and preserving the family name.

Thus, Saigon pottery works have become a means to materialize social values, strengthening cohesion from the smallest cell, the family, to a larger scale, the community, exquisitely reflecting the spiritual life of the residents of Southern Vietnam in the past. It can be seen that the system of classic stories on Saigon ceramics has created a rich symbolic world, reflecting the multidimensional aspirations of people, from the most basic wishes, such as happiness, fortune, and longevity, to higher ideals of family, community, and personal dignity. These ceramic artifacts are not just decorations or symbols of worship, but rather actual "documents" that vividly record the spiritual life and value system of the inhabitants of Southern Vietnam during a crucial historical period, making each product a tangible wish for materialization.

## **3. Characteristics of Shaping and Glazing Techniques of Saigon Pottery Bearing the Southern Vietnam Imprint**

The traditional pottery of Saigon - Cho Lon, a quintessential craft of southern Vietnam, flourished from the 19th century to the early 20th century. This development has a close relationship with the availability of natural raw materials, especially clay and fuel sources, reflecting the flexible adaptation of the potter community to local geographical and social conditions. The study of these raw materials not only sheds light on the technical production process but also reveals the transformation of pottery in response to urbanization pressure.

### **3.1 In-situ Clay Material Area**

In the initial period, Saigon-Cho Lon pottery kilns primarily utilized on-site clay materials. Famous ceramic production clusters, such as Lo Gom Hamlet, Phu Dinh, Cay Mai, and Hao Luc, were all located along an intertwined system of canals in the downstream area of the Saigon - Dong Nai River, where there was an abundant source of ancient alluvial clay. According to researchers such as Huynh Ngoc Trang and Nguyen

Thi Hau, this clay has high plasticity, stable mineral composition, and is suitable for the production of both earthenware and crockery.

Traditional clay mines were exploited along important canals, such as the Ruot Ngua Canal and Lo Gom Canal. The Ruot Ngua Canal was not only a source of clay but also an important arterial waterway, facilitating the transportation of raw materials, firewood, and ceramic products. The clay in Phu Dinh, described as dark gray with smooth plasticity, was very suitable for making household products such as stoves and pots. When the clay source along the canal gradually dried up due to continuous exploitation and increased pollution in the late 19th century, the potter showed adaptability by mining neighboring fields such as Ba Tang Bridge and transporting the material to the workshop through the canal system (Nguyen Thi Hau, 2000, pp. 129–133).

Another special source of raw materials was located in the Xom Dat - Giac Vien area, which provided smooth, white clay of high fineness, making it very suitable for the production of high-grade colored ceramic products. The presence of high-quality raw materials in this area promoted the establishment of art pottery production centers at Cay Mai Fort, with a larger scale and a specialized division of labor (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 1994, p. 40).

### 3.2 Shaping Techniques

The Saigon pottery shaping technique is a delicate blend of indigenous traditions and Chinese influences, clearly reflecting the flexible, pragmatic, and open personality of Southern Vietnamese culture. Not constrained by a single method, the Saigon potter had flexibly used three main techniques: handbuilding, wheel throwing, and mold casting, depending on the production purpose.

Handbuilding was preferred for large products, such as jars and pots, which served the essential living needs of residents during the reclamation period. This technique demonstrates ingenuity and personal experience, creating highly crafted, unique products. According to Nguyen Thi Hau, *"In the initial period, Hung Loi pottery kiln mainly produced water jars with brown crockery material, oblong shape to the bottom or rounded gourd, the size is quite large: often called "3-pair water jars" or "5-pair water jars" (each pair can hold 2 barrels or about 40 liters of water). Ceramic water jar made by handbuilding using "roll strips combined with pressing and rubbing tables"* (Nguyen Thi Hau, 1998, p. 40:43). The spinning wheel was used as a support tool, making the product more balanced and complete. This auxiliary role demonstrates selective adaptation, avoidance of technology copying, and the application of solutions suitable for the small-scale production model, which relies on family labor. In particular, the printing mold technique was utilized to produce decorative products and household appliances, catering to the tastes of the urban market. Instead of outright copying, however, the potter "localized" the patterns, motifs, and designs that fit the local culture.

In general, the Saigon ceramic shaping technique is a unique blend of traditional craft techniques and advanced production methods. By combining the flexibility of handbuilding for large products with spinning wheels to complete the balance and

casting molds for mass production, the potter demonstrated high adaptability. The meticulous process of embedding every detail further accentuated personalization and creativity. Overall, this process not only reflects the development of pottery but also serves as a testament to the dynamism and openness of Southern Vietnamese culture in the context of urbanization.

### 3.3 Glazing Technique

The glazing technique of Saigon ceramics is extremely rich, reflecting the deep cultural intersection. In addition to traditional enamel lines such as brown enamel (similar to eel skin) made from local raw materials such as kitchen ash and ochre, artisans also develop high-grade enamel lines imported from China, such as bourbon green enamel, blue enamel (using cobalt oxide), and multicolor enamel, often found on architectural and worship decoration products. According to Huynh Ngoc Trang and Nguyen Dai Phuc, ceramic products of this period showed a remarkable abundance of enamel color, including cobalt blue, green from brass powder, yellow from ochre, black from lead oxide, and red from hematite, colors commonly used in ceramic worship and architectural decoration (Huynh Ngoc Trang, Nguyen Dai Phuc, 1997, p.11).

In the period from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, the technique of multi-colored glazing using multi-colored enamel on the type of worship and decorative ceramics developed strongly in Saigon-Bien Hoa, becoming one of the most prominent features of the Southern Vietnamese urban ceramic line. This technique not only showcases the high level of craftsmanship but also reflects the cross-cultural adaptability to the aesthetic tastes of Saigon's Cho Lon residents. Multicolored enamel, unlike traditional monochromatic enamel lines, requires a sophisticated combination of dispensing techniques, heating temperature control, and symbolic thinking.

Multicolored enamel in Saigon ceramics was typically created by applying a transparent or earthy enamel background, which was then covered with various metal oxide enamel colors. The enamel formula was researched and adjusted to create diverse shades such as Cobalt (Co) to create a dark blue color, often used for costumes or accent details; copper (Cu) to create a green or blue color, giving a fresh and natural feeling; Manganese (Mn) to create a purple-brown color, adding warmth and antiquity to the product; Tin (Sn) to create a milky effect, helping other enamel colors to stand out more. For some greenish-green or mossy products, surface analysis revealed the coexistence of CoO and small amounts of copper oxide (CuO), which serve as tone modifiers (Bekir Karasu & Servet Turan, 2001, pp. 41-45).

The glazing process was carried out meticulously, and each glaze color was coated separately on each piece of the product. In particular, with products in the form of embossing, the potter must align the thinness and adhesion of each glaze so that they do not smear or mix with each other during the heating process. The heating temperature of multi-colored enamel ranges from 1150 to 1200 degrees Celsius in an oxidizing environment, ensuring that the enamel color remains stable and unchanged, and the

enamel surface achieves the required smooth gloss. The multi-colored enamel line was primarily applied to products of a religious nature, architectural decoration, and high-end displays, rather than popular household products. Artifacts such as dragons, unicorns, phoenixes, or worship statues are the pinnacle of multi-colored enamel technology. Enamel was overlaid with small details such as armor, clothing, or facial expressions, creating a lively and symbolic whole. The complex layout features many layers of blue, green, yellow, and white, interwoven to recreate folk tales or religious images, reflecting the rich spiritual life of the residents.

### **3.4 Furnace and Firing Process**

The firing was carried out in two main types of furnaces originating from China: dragon kiln (tube kiln) and bao kiln (gourd-shaped kiln). The dragon kiln is a large-scale kiln that calcines a large number of products at high temperatures, while the bao kiln is a smaller kiln that allows for easy control of the calcining environment, creating complex enamel effects. According to the excavation results of Hung Loi pottery kiln (District 8, Ho Chi Minh City), although the structure of the kiln was no longer complete, it has been clearly identified that the relic has three layers of kilns overlapping at different times and the structure is in the style of tube kiln (also known as dragon kiln) and bao kiln (also known as gourd kiln) originating from China. The two types of furnaces mentioned are commonly used in China. The Chinese brought them to countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia for production. However, through the production process, the tube furnace gradually disappeared (Nguyen Thi Hau, Tran Sung, and Lai Ngoc Huy, 1999, pp. 34-37). This is the clearest archaeological evidence of the existence and role of this type of furnace in the Saigon-Cho Lon ceramic industry system during the early 20th century.

The use of fire sacks (refractory ceramic boxes) to protect products from direct fire and ash dust is an important technique, demonstrating the high level of production organization and professionalism of the old Saigon pottery kilns. The material is a heat-resistant clay with a high alumina content, preheated to enhance its durability. The cylinder cover saves space in the furnace chamber and ensures the safety of the enamel product. Surveys of the Hung Loi relics reveal that the cylinder covers were often accompanied by ash enamel and monochromatic enamel products (Nguyen Thi Hau & Dang Van Thang, 2001, pp. 101–122). This type of bag kiln was most commonly used in Chinese pottery kilns in Cho Lon, reflecting the transition of technique from the Guangdong – Chaozhou model to the South. It is the flexibility in techniques (combined with handbuilding, wheel spinning, and mold casting) that reflects the open, pragmatic, and adaptive personality of the Southern Vietnamese people.

## **4. Conclusion**

Through the analysis of technical characteristics and symbolic meanings, the Saigon ceramic collection at the Ho Chi Minh City Museum has demonstrated that typical

Southern Vietnamese cultural imprints are flexible, open, colorful, and consistently oriented towards everyday aspirations. Saigon ceramics is not only diverse in types, from household ceramics, construction, decoration, to worship ceramics, but also reflects a sophisticated technical process that demonstrates flexibility through the simultaneous use of handbuilding methods (for large-sized products), wheel spinning (to complete the balance), and mold casting (for mass production), along with a meticulous mounting process.

The outstanding feature of Saigon ceramics also lies in its glazing technique. Besides the traditional monochromatic enamel lines, the development of multi-colored enamel since the late nineteenth century has created a distinct aesthetic imprint. This technique, utilizing metal oxides such as cobalt, copper, manganese, and tin, has yielded brightly colored, vivid compositions that frequently adorn high-end religious and decorative products. This glazing technique, combined with methods of firing in dragon kilns and bag kilns, reflects the selective acquisition and localization of ceramic production technology from China.

Saigon pottery is a special "pottery material", reflecting the economic, social, and spiritual life of Southern Vietnam urban residents. The rich system of decorative topics, from religious images - folk beliefs (Sun - Moon, God of Fortune - Lord of the Soil and the Ground, Guan Gong, Yanluo Wang), to literary relics and holy beasts (Dragon, Qilin, Phoenix), all show the deep cultural mixing and indigenous culture between the Vietnamese and Chinese communities. These artifacts are not only of aesthetic value but also a vivid testimony to the formation and development of a bustling economic and cultural center.

The collection of Saigon pottery statues at the Ho Chi Minh City Museum is not only a treasure trove of precious artifacts but also a testament to the development of pottery and the value of indigenous culture. Through the museum's display activities, this cultural heritage is vividly recreated and continues to play an important role in educating the community, preserving traditional culture, and raising social awareness of the value of Saigon pottery in the contemporary context.

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### Conflict of Interest Statement

This research was conducted entirely by the authors. The authors affirm that the study was carried out independently, in a transparent manner, and was not influenced by any external factors. The authors declare that there are no personal, financial, or other conflicts of interest related to this work.

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