

Fang Lili

CHINESE CERAMICS

A History of Elegance

Translated by William W. Wang



CHINA
INTERCONTINENTAL
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Author: Fang Lili

Translator: William W. Wang

Polisher: Chen Bingmiao

Executive Editor: Zhang Hong

Art Director: Tang Ni

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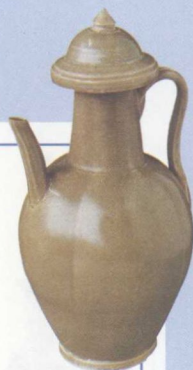
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Preface

The introduction of pottery ware signified man's subjugation of water, fire and earth. It was only possible when a certain level of technology has been attained and there was the power to transform the natural material environment. The process from emergence to application of pottery marked important milestones in the course of the refinement of living for humankind; incessantly expanding man's capacity to create applications using technology and wisdom. Ultimately, artistic objects with both functionality and aesthetic value were created.

In this age-long land, pottery brought to the people not only advancement in material culture, it also infused them rich spiritual life. Although those who created the art of pottery around ten thousand years ago have long since faded into the past, their creations left us with information of the ancient societies. If you are fascinated by history, these pieces of age-old pottery serve as the most credible evidences to history, bearing witness to an age long ago.

Around three thousand years ago was the time of the Xia and Shang Dynasties (11th–21st centuries BC) in China. The early Chinese discovered Gaoling clay, or Kaolin, from which exquisite white pottery were made. Soon after, the discovery of plant ash glaze, and by achieving higher firing temperatures, people were able to create the primitive form of porcelain based on

China Clay

It is the raw material to make earthenware. It is an aggregate of a number of powder or soil minerals, often containing sand or silt grains. China clay contains organic matters and may be in grayish white, yellow, brownish red and grayish black, plastic and absorbing water. When blended with water, china clay can be made into wares of different types. In ancient times, raw materials to make ceramics were generally referred to as china clay.



white pottery.

By the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–250 AD), in today's Zhejiang Province, people mixed high quality glutinous clay and pottery stone, and created a body that could be modeled and fired to create a vessel. It pale blue-green vessel was sturdy and it could be engraved or painted on for extra decoration. That was the birth of the world's earliest porcelain. Prior to the transpiration of the event, almost all early civilizations had mastered the making of pottery, but none had ever made porcelain. The rest of the areas of East Asia all learned of porcelain-making crafts from the Chinese. The Europeans did not learn of the craft until the 18th century. Thus we can proudly proclaim that China is the birthplace of porcelain and it is such a fine gift for the rest of the world indeed. The production of porcelain signified not only technological prowess, it also represented an aesthetic concept and a milestone in the orientation of cultural values. The pale green porcelain glaze, as clear as jade, is the manifestation of the Chinese tradition of "jade worship." It also represents the pursuit of "natural beauty" for the Chinese. As such, the craft of Celadon porcelain continued for more than two millennia in China and was once the dominant product of Chinese porcelain art.

By the Song Dynasty, Chinese classical aestheticism was at its peak. There was a kind of mature rationality and self-awareness in the development and inheritance of culture. It was exactly during this time, when Han classical culture was at its prime, the art of porcelain entered an era of unprecedented prosperity. There were porcelain kilns set up all over China. Each porcelain kiln, or school of the craft, made its unique product, including the Ru kiln's celadon in sky-blue glaze and ice crackle patterns; the Imperial kiln celadon with "purple mouth and iron base;" celadon fitted with gold and iron linings by the Ge kiln; celadon of Longquan kiln that is smooth and glistening; the ever-changing and with a sunset glow porcelain from the Jun kiln; the jade-like clear celadon from Jingdezhen; the natural porcelains from Jian



kiln; the shiny as silver white porcelain from Ding kiln and much more. The technology in porcelain-making enhanced tremendously, and it no longer adhered to functionality alone. The form, quality, colors, graphic designs in porcelain were all aimed for elegance, so that it had even more aesthetic appeal. Porcelain at this time fully embodied the concept of “living as an art” which was the philosophy of the elite.

As time passed, during the Yuan Dynasty (1206–1368 AD) when China was under the rule of the Mongols, Qinghua porcelain appeared. Under the same cultural influence as Yuan Dynasty music had, themes of popular arts, city folk arts and the multi-faceted ethnic arts soon saturated porcelain-making crafts. Although it was still not the mainstream, the newer colored porcelain which emphasized synthetic decorations was on totally opposite extremes with plain porcelain, in which people once looked for natural beauty and subtleness. The newer style gained ground in the Ming (1368–1644 AD) and Qing (1644–1911 AD) Dynasties to follow, and became fully refined. With an ever expanding foreign relations effort by the Chinese regimes, the brilliant and richly adorned colored porcelain gained not only the favors of the imperial courts, but were also exported to Europe and America far across the seas.

During the thousand years after the advent of porcelain by the hands of Chinese craftsmen, European pottery makers were never able to fully understand the art of porcelain. But the Southeastern Asian countries were taught the craft quite early on; by the 18th century, the craft was finally introduced to the Europeans. The Yuan Dynasty Qinghua porcelains were made especially for export to Islamic nations.

Kaolin

It is the raw material for porcelain body, and is also called porcelain clay. It is named after Gaoling Village of Fuliang County, Jiangxi Province, where it is produced. Kaolin is in white or light gray color, lusterless with a soapy feeling, and can be pinched into powder with hand, able to absorb water when dried and well plastic when wetted. It is a product of crystalline rocks after weathering and thermal transformation, hence an important raw material for porcelain body. In China, Kaolin is also produced in Suzhou of Jiangsu and Dadeling of Hunan in addition to Gaoling of Fuliang in Jiangxi. Starting from the Song Dynasty, Kaolin was used to make porcelain in kilns in Jingdezhen.



Since the great geographical discoveries made by the European navigators in the 15th and 16th centuries, merchant fleets from European countries began to arrive at the shores of this distant, mysterious and developed civilization of the Far East, a place where they have long been interested in. The navigators from Europe saw infinite business opportunities here, with China's elegant silk and embroidery, fine tea and consummate porcelain ware mesmerizing the Europeans. Many European countries established their trade companies in India and the Far East. The Dutch East India Company played a special leading role in porcelain trade. At the end of the 16th century, porcelain ware exported to Europe through Portuguese merchants aroused so much interest, that the demand far exceeded supply and production capabilities. Through all of the 17th century, the increase in commercial exchange between Europe and China helped to promote porcelain ware as an object of exotic flare within the European upper social class. A new trend that echoed the passion for Chinese tea started to spread throughout the continent. All the way until before the 19th century, China was still the most advanced maker of porcelain. People today are able to witness the many exported fine Chinese porcelain in the museums of many countries across the world. At the same time, it is not difficult to see the impact of Chinese porcelain-making. Chinese porcelain export brought forth communication and understanding between Eastern and Western cultures and arts, and is a crucial link in the cultural development and the history of economics and commerce of humankind.

The village of Gaoling is situated near the town of Jingdezhen. On the hills behind the village is the source of clay used for porcelain making since the late-Ming Dynasty, which propelled the little village to international fame. All the way until the mid-Qing Dynasty, Jingdezhen's porcelain all relied on this porcelain clay from Gaoling Hill. It was exactly around this time that Europeans made the most frequent visits and purchase orders to Jingdezhen for importing porcelain to Europe. Since then, the entire world's



porcelain-making industry universally refer to all porcelain clays as Kaolin, a tradition that has been carried on for over 200 years.

Ceramic products are not only an important cultural heritage of human civilization; they are still very much a part of everyone's lives, and in a very lively and colorful way. A beautifully crafted and tastefully formed ceramic piece not only is a fruit of the technology and craft of its times, it also records the bits of history and life. Sometimes, it can even carry paintings, poetry, calligraphy, sculpture all on its tiny body; or serve as a medium of information for society. A piece of ceramic ware can transcend its identity, and be a collection of the old and the new, Chinese and foreign, wholly and partial, science and aesthetics all in one; its value far exceeds its exquisite form and beautiful glaze. It is the concept of "tangible objects reveal more than the material."



The Primitive Types of Ceramics



Primitive Colored Pottery

Of the early civilizations in the world, almost all had gone through an age of pottery-making. The Chinese culture as one of the earliest civilizations is no exception. In the art of pottery-making in China, the most spectacular works created would be the colored pottery, which had its introduction dating from 6,000 to 7,000 years ago. The best known examples of colored pottery are those of the Yangshao culture (around 5,000–3,000 BC, covering the northwestern part of China, with center at the middle reaches of the Yellow River); the surviving specimens today are of a red-orange color or reddish brown with maroon or black patterns. Thus the Yangshao culture is also known as the “colored pottery culture.”

Colored pottery was an outstanding achievement of the *Yangshao* culture. The making process involves drawing or painting the patterns on the clay before the pottery vessel is fired. After firing, the colored designs are fused with the surface of the pottery and are quite resistant to fading and peeling. Colored pottery uses mostly black coloring, sometimes together with red coloring. Some areas are applied with a layer of white as the background so that painted patterns will become even more appealing. Colored pottery motifs contain subject matters including flora, geometric shapes and animals. These patterns or images are often applied to the mouths and bellies of fine-clayed alms bowls, bowls, pots and jars. Usually there would be no painted images on the underside or contracting portions of the pottery ware. This kind of design was related to the living habits of people at the time. Since people in the Neolithic Age were subject to restrictions



Neolithic animal-shaped red earthenware pot.



by their living conditions, they often sat on mats directly placed on the ground or squatted. Therefore, the designs on the potteries needed to be placed at the spots most visible from such a position and angle.

Through spectral analysis of *Yangshao* culture pigments, the most prominent element in the red pigment was iron; the key elements in black coloring were iron and manganese. In white pigment, aside from small quantities of iron, there are hardly any traces of coloring. Based on these analyses, some scholars suspect that the red color was from ochre; the black pigment was made from a kind of earth with high iron content; and the white coloring was probably a derivative of porcelain clay with solvent additives.

Yangshao culture's pottery forms concentrate on both functionality and aesthetics. Its exteriors are usually fluid and balanced; with richly colored decorations, it appears unusually beautiful and has a highly artistic presence. There are many different kinds of colored pottery objects, including cups, alms bowls, bowls, pots, jars, urns, flasks, vases, cauldrons, stoves, cooking pods, and the lids and bases of vessels. Among which the small-mouthed and pointy-based vase is the most outstanding. These potteries usually show a difference in form or decorated patterns with respect to their times and places of origin.

There are many ways of shaping pottery, with the main methods being the following:

1. Pinching

This is the original and most simplistic way for making pottery. Pinched pots usually result in relatively rough and inconsistent form, but it is very flexible and convenient. Therefore is often used for



Neolithic red earthenware *he*, a cooking vessel.

Firing of Earthenware in Open

In early days, earthenware was fired in open – the sun-dried greenware was put on a bonfire for firing, so intact earthenware was rarely seen, even less were those left over. Later, people gradually got to know to fire the greenware on firewood by surrounding it with firewood and then ignite it, and earthenware was obtained after firing for 2-8 hours. Sometimes, the firewood was covered with a thin layer of slurry, with suitable ventilation holes provided to prevent excessively quick burning. After the fire was put off, the earthenware was covered with a thick layer of wood ash to maintain temperature. With this method, the greenware was exposed directly to the air when the firewood was burning, as it was difficult to control the temperature rising rate, the earthenware obtained was normally red or brown. Also because of smoking and the act of the wood ash, it was locally gray or black. Therefore, the earthenware obtained during this period was normally not homogeneous in surface color; and it was not so firm in texture.





Colored earthenware *bo*, H 20cm. Unearthed from Dahe Village, Zhengzhou.



small clay sculptures and only rarely employed for pottery vessels for daily use.

2. Stack-and-Shape

As with hand-pinched pottery, stack and shape is also one of the earliest ways of making pottery. By applying layers of wet and sticky clay on the outside of something akin to an inner mold, a whole vessel is shaped. Usually the pieces of clay are applied in order from bottom to top, with at least a double-layer composition; some vessels are multi-layered. Potteries made through this technique appeared thick and hefty; the shapes and especially the mouths of the vessels were not very even. From archeological findings and studies, evidence supports that stack and shape was used more than six to seven thousand years ago and was gradually replaced by the coiling technique.

3. Coiling

Pottery clay is first made into coils and then placed on top of one another in a circular fashion. Paddles other tools were used to flatten and smooth the exterior and interior, and to accurately shape the vessel. Not only were most Neolithic pottery made this way, some minority nationality groups in China today still employ this method for pottery-making.

The making of the pottery body, in the beginning, was perhaps done on top of wooden boards, bamboo mats or bamboo baskets, to that it could be easily turned or rotated. Some were fitted with tree leaves at the bottom, thus the imprints of veins of leaves on the base of pottery vessels. Later on, a wheel that could spin was developed (slow potter's wheel), used as a rotating platform to facilitate coiling and adding decorative patterns all around the pottery.

Banpo Category

Banpo Culture is a part of the Neolithic Yangshao Civilization in the middle reaches of the Yellow River. Located in Banpo Village of Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, Banpo Culture has a history of 6,300 to 6,800 years. Its original residents established villages in clan or tribe, creating an egalitarian primitive society.



Colored earthenware vase unearthed from Gansu province, H 38.4cm, Dia. at mouth 7cm.



The spinning action also made the shaping and smoothing of the mouths much easier. The slow potter's wheel had drawbacks as well, as partial wheel marks are often left on the body of the pottery. This technique began roughly during the middle of the Yangshao cultural period.

Colored pottery has rich decorative images and patterns; most commonly seen are the motif of fish, birds, frogs, deer and so on, as well as some images of flora and human and deity figures. Some scholars believe that these decorative patterns were related to totem worship. In the myths and legends of ancient China, we find evidence of fish and birds being clan totems in parts of China. Among the colored potteries uncovered from the area of Banpo (6,800–6,300 years ago), a kind of large-mouthed, flare-lipped, shallow-bellied and circular-based earthen pot was found. These earthen pots usually sport black drawings with red clay coating all over the body. The interior walls of these vessels show two motifs, one with a human face and fish, the other being just a fish, all painted in black and in alternating arrangement. The human face was round; above its eyes was a black or negative triangular area. The ears either bent upwards in a symmetrical fashion or were in the shape of fishes. The fish motif was in the shape of a tall triangle, and the head of the fish was in a triangular shape as well. A round spot marked the eye of the fish and rows of diamond shapes denoted the scales. The human face and fish images alternated and interacted as two intersecting lines formed the corners of the human mouth where a fish was shown on either side. Short lines and dots decorated the body of the fish.

Birds were the subject matter of pottery found in areas along the lower reaches of the Yellow River. From literary records found in this region, the totemic symbolism that birds carry in clan legends and records can be confirmed. Colored potteries of the later periods of the Yangshao culture show a dual-headed bird with multiple feet. Its body was elongated and usually appearing alongside motifs of the sun. This indicates that the clan with such a bird as its totem might have also worshipped the sun. Even though

