PERANAKAN CHINESE PORCELAIN

Vibrant Festive Ware of the Straits Chinese

KEE MING-YUET

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A FEAST FOR THE EYES

'Exuberant', 'ornate', 'vibrant' … these are just some of the words used to describe Peranakan Chinese porcelain, a type of overglaze polychrome enamelled porcelain made to order in a variety of functional forms at the Jingdezhen kilns in China in the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century for the exclusive use of the Straits Chinese or Peranakan Chinese community in the Malay Peninsula and Singapore. Sometimes called Nyonya ware after the Nyonyas, the womenfolk of the Straits Chinese men or Babas, who commissioned the wares, the porcelain was primarily ordered and reserved for use on festive occasions and for special functions such as birthdays, weddings and anniversaries, and was thus decorated with suitable Chinese motifs symbolizing marital harmony and longevity. It was not only fashionable but also a status symbol among the Nyonyas and Babas in the Straits Settlements to own elaborately composed and matching services of Nyonya ware, some designed for serving meals, others for serving tea, and yet others for ceremonial functions. People who could afford to buy such finery lived in style in grand houses. Many of them owed their wealth to trade.

My love affair with Peranakan Chinese porcelain began some forty years ago in Singapore when, as a new wife, I would browse the stalls in the open-air night market along the well-known Orchard Road with my husband in search of items to furnish our home. When I first spotted – and promptly acquired – my very first spoons and bowls, I was less interested in the fact that they were authentic antiques than in their wonderful colours and decoration. There was a distinctive air of feminine beauty about them. They puzzled me but attracted me at the same time. They were unmistakably of Chinese provenance, reminding me of all the beautiful and symbolic Chinese calligraphy scrolls and brush paintings adorning my childhood family home and the 'lessons' my grandmother taught me about the meanings and motifs in them, yet they were vastly different from the minimally elegant monochrome and blue and white porcelain that most Chinese around the world prefer and esteem so highly. The spoons and bowls were full of character, with auspicious Chinese symbols such as the phoenix and peonies splashed on the inside and out and the Eight Buddhist emblems painted in stunning enamels around the rim. 'Why buy old? Buy new. No bad vibes,' quipped the stall operator, who also informed me that these 'peculiar' pieces were family heirlooms being sold off by the descendants of old, rich families in Malacca, part of the Peranakan community in Malaysia, who were simply moving with the times, disposing of vestiges of the past which they considered old-fashioned in favour of fashionable Western imports or cheap imitations. Thus began my years of rummaging through the junk stores in Penang, Malacca and Singapore, themselves the product of the wave of mass consumerism engulfing the region in the early 1960s, in search of these beautiful objects. Little did I know at the time that they would one day become much sought-after collectors' items and would also form part of the resurgence of interest in the history and material culture of the Straits Chinese in the region.

To learn more about Peranakan Chinese porcelain, I embarked on a study of the history of ceramic production at Jingdezhen in Jiangxi Province, China, the porcelain making capital of the world, learning about the technical processes involved and the three main types of porcelain produced there – those made specially for the imperial court, those made for domestic consumption and those destined for export – as well as other technological and artistic innovations in China, including the evolution of *famille rose* enamels following on from the earlier monochrome and blue and white wares. The commercial and transportation aspects of ceramic production, including the nature of the export trade in ceramics from China and their transportation and transshipment from the kiln sites, were other fascinating aspects. I also engaged the services of Professor Qin Xi Lin and Dr Cao Jian Wen from the Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute to examine and authenticate my collection of Peranakan Chinese porcelain and confirm the Jingdezhen provenance of the pieces.

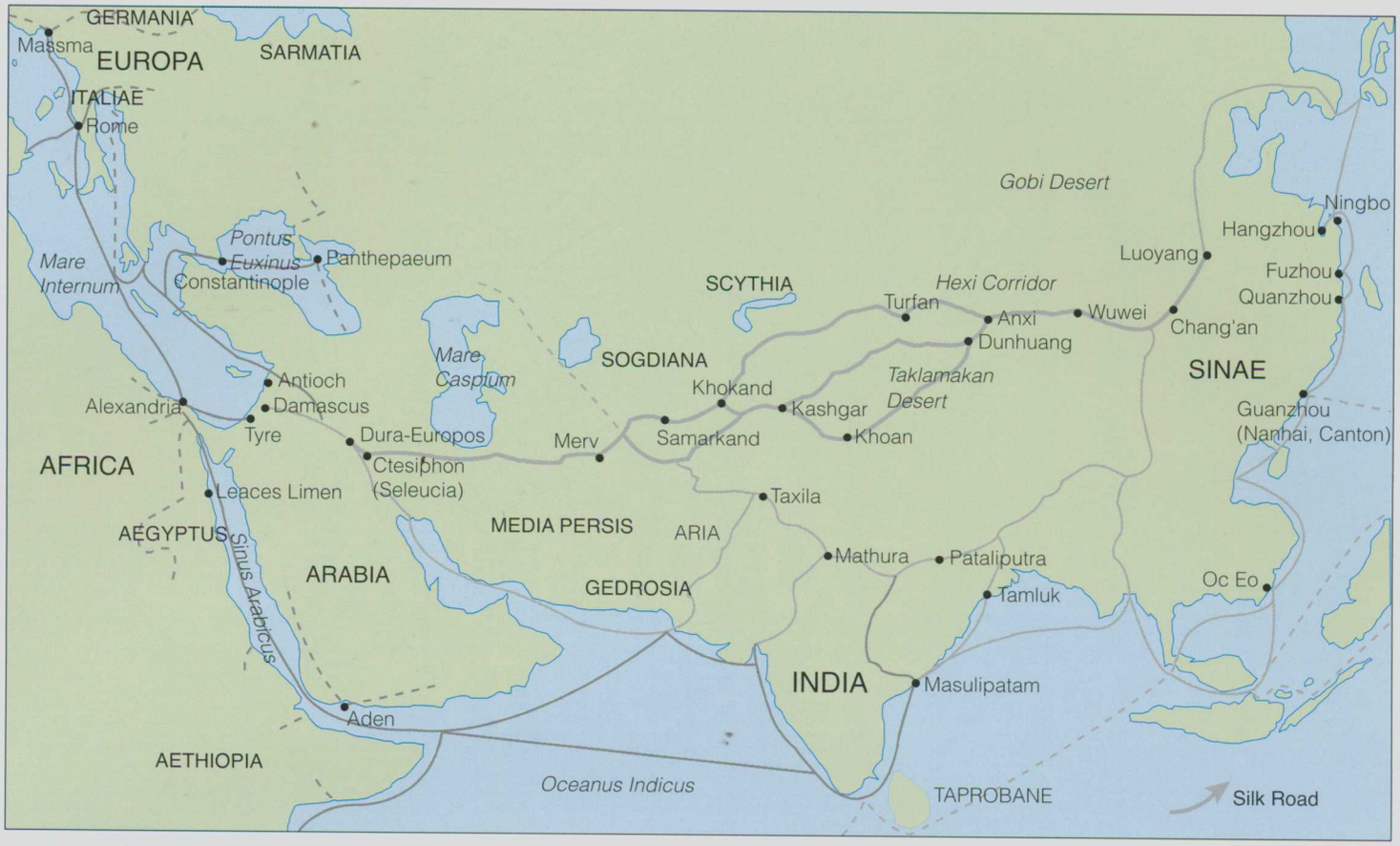
Very importantly, I delved into the rich and fascinating history of the colourful people who make up the Peranakan community in the Malay Peninsular towns of Penang and Malacca and in Singapore – their origins, traditions and material culture – to discover a confluence of immigrant and indigenous influences, products of globalization and multiculturalism even before these terms became fashionable. I was intrigued by the way in which Peranakan Chinese porcelain, although rich in Chinese-style motifs rendered in robust colours, fitted in with the lifestyle and aesthetic needs of the Nyonyas. To me, the porcelain epitomized the Straits Chinese, providing an index of the taste and fashion prevalent in the community at the time and showing that its people were unafraid to embrace new cultures and new ways.

I was urged on in my research by a dear friend, the late Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, wife of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi, a passionate proponent of the arts and crafts of Malaysia who actively led the drive to revitalize and promote the local batik and *songket* industries as well as the Peranakan heritage. She also spurred my interest in putting pen to paper following the successful publication of her own book, *The Nyonya Kebaya: A Century of Straits Chinese Costume*, which showcased her outstanding collection of Nyonya *kebaya* (Straits Chinese blouses) and the accessories that go with them.

Peranakan Chinese porcelain is a durable, mute and evocative reminder of a small, specialized but often overlooked segment of Chinese export ware. It is my hope that the porcelain pieces illustrated in this book and the accompanying text will add to the small pool of documentation currently available on a subject that is so rich in history and meaning.

Chapter One

CHINESE EXPORT WARES AND TRADE ROUTES



CHINA'S TRADE WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD

Chinese trade with the outside world is believed to have begun in the middle of the Zhou Dynasty (c. 1050–256 BCE) when China's beautiful silk and other products were sent to central Asia and Europe mainly through the narrow 1000-kilometre-long Hexi (or Gansu) Corridor and a braid of interconnected passages in what is now Xinjiang. Given the wonderfully evocative name 'The Silk Road' by modern German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, the ancient caravan routes linked inland China with its western border and, beyond that, western countries. The trails all started from the ancient capital in Xi'an, headed up the Hexi Corridor, and reached Dunhuang, on the edge of the Taklamakan Desert, before branching off into several major and minor routes running through different oasis settlements before passing the important trade cities of Samarkand and Baghdad, all the way to Rome in the Mediterranean. Silk was one of the most prized commodities at the time and the Romans, who greatly coveted its sheen and softness, were prepared to pay up to an ounce of gold for an ounce of silk. Lured by this lucrative trade, thousands of caravans pulled by hundreds of camels carrying bales of silk made the journey, trekking over 8000 kilometres across treacherous landscapes controlled by various kingdoms that demanded high taxes.

Despite the dangers inherent in traversing the Silk Road, for many centuries it was China's most important trade link to the West. In addition to silk, the route carried many other precious commodities. Caravans heading from China towards central Asia and Europe carried furs, monochrome glazed pottery, jade, bronze objects, lacquer and iron. In the opposite direction, those heading towards China carried gold and other precious metals, ivory, precious stones, and glass (which was not manufactured in China until the fifth century). Many of these goods were bartered for others along the way, and objects often changed hands several times.

Advances in shipbuilding and sea navigation, however, soon eclipsed the Silk Road. Transporting goods by sea also proved to be safer and easier to control. Moreover, demand for Chinese silk fell as Middle Eastern countries began producing their own silk. Nevertheless, the Silk Road remained important until the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), and many travellers from Europe, the most famous being Marco Polo (1254–1324), made the journey to China via the Silk Road.

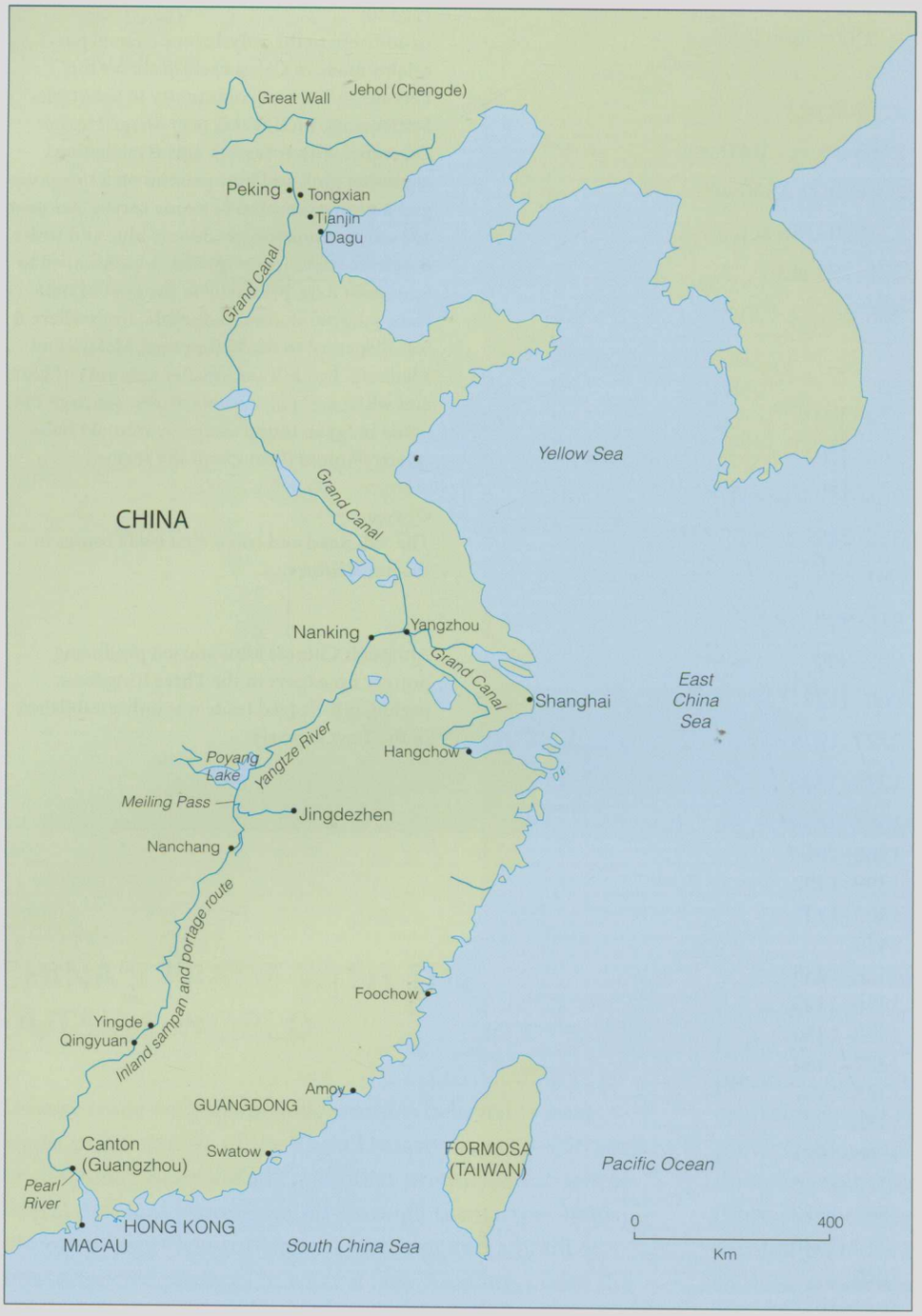
It is believed that Chinese kilns started producing monochrome glazed pottery for export, mostly to the Middle East, around the Three Kingdoms period (220–280 CE). However, evidence of pottery from the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–CE 220) has been uncovered in central Java, proof that the Chinese ceramic trade with the Southeast Asian region could have started as early as 2,000 years ago. Moreover, tales of the Qin Emperor Shihuangdi's desperate efforts to seek an elixir of

Neolithic Cultures	c. 5000–2000 BCE
Yellow Emperor Huang Di (legendary)	c. 2700 BCE
Xia Dynasty (legendary)	2100 BCE–C. 1600 BCE
Shang Dynasty	c. 1600–C. 1050 BCE
Zhou Dynasty	c. 1050–256 BCE
Qin Dynasty	221–207 BCE
Han Dynasty	206 BCE–CE 220
Western Han	
Eastern Han	
Three Kingdoms period	220–280
Jin Dynasty	265–420
Six Dynasties period (in south)	265–589
Sixteen Kingdoms period (in north)	316–589
Sui Dynasty	581–618
Tang Dynasty	618–906
Five Dynasties period	907–960
Northern Song Dynasty	960–1127
Southern Song Dynasty	1127–1279
Yuan Dynasty	1279–1368
Ming Dynasty	1368–1644
Hongwu	1368–1644
Jianwen	1399–1402
Yongli	1403–1424
Hongxi	1425
Xuande	1426–1435
Zhengtong	1436–1449
Jingtai	1450–1456
Tianshun	1457–1464
Chenghua	1465–1487
Hongzhi	1488–1505
Zhengde	1506–1521
Jiajing	1522–1566
Longqing	1567–1572
Wanli	1573–1620
Taichang	1620
Tianqi	1621–1627
Chongzhen	1628–1644
Qing Dynasty	1644–1911
Shunzhi	1644–1661
Kangxi	1662–1722
Yongzheng	1723–1735
Qianlong	1736–1795
Jiaqing	1796–1820
Daoguang	1821–1850
Xianfeng	1851–1861
Tongzhi	1862–1874
Guangxu	1875–1908
Xuantong (Puyi)	1909–1911
Republic of China	1912–1949
Hongxian	1916
Republic of China (in Taiwan)	1949–present
People's Republic of China	1949–present

Page 10:
In addition to the polychrome enamel porcelains made in China exclusively for the Peranakan Chinese community in the Straits Settlements, such as this pear-shaped teapot decorated with rose pink ogival medallions enclosing pink and blue peonies on a turquoise green ground covered in peony sprays (see page 135), vast quantities of Chinese blue and white domestic wares (see page 236) were shipped to Southeast Asia, primarily to the port of Batavia (now Jakarta) in Java, Indonesia, from where it was dispersed to the Philippines, Malaya and Thailand. In addition, smaller amounts of blue and white and polychrome wares (see page 244) made in Japan found their way into old Baba Nyonya homes throughout the region.

Opposite:
The Silk Road and trans-Asia trade routes in the first century CE.

Left:
Although Chinese kilns started producing pottery for export in the Three Kingdoms period, full-fledged trade was only established in the Tang Dynasty.



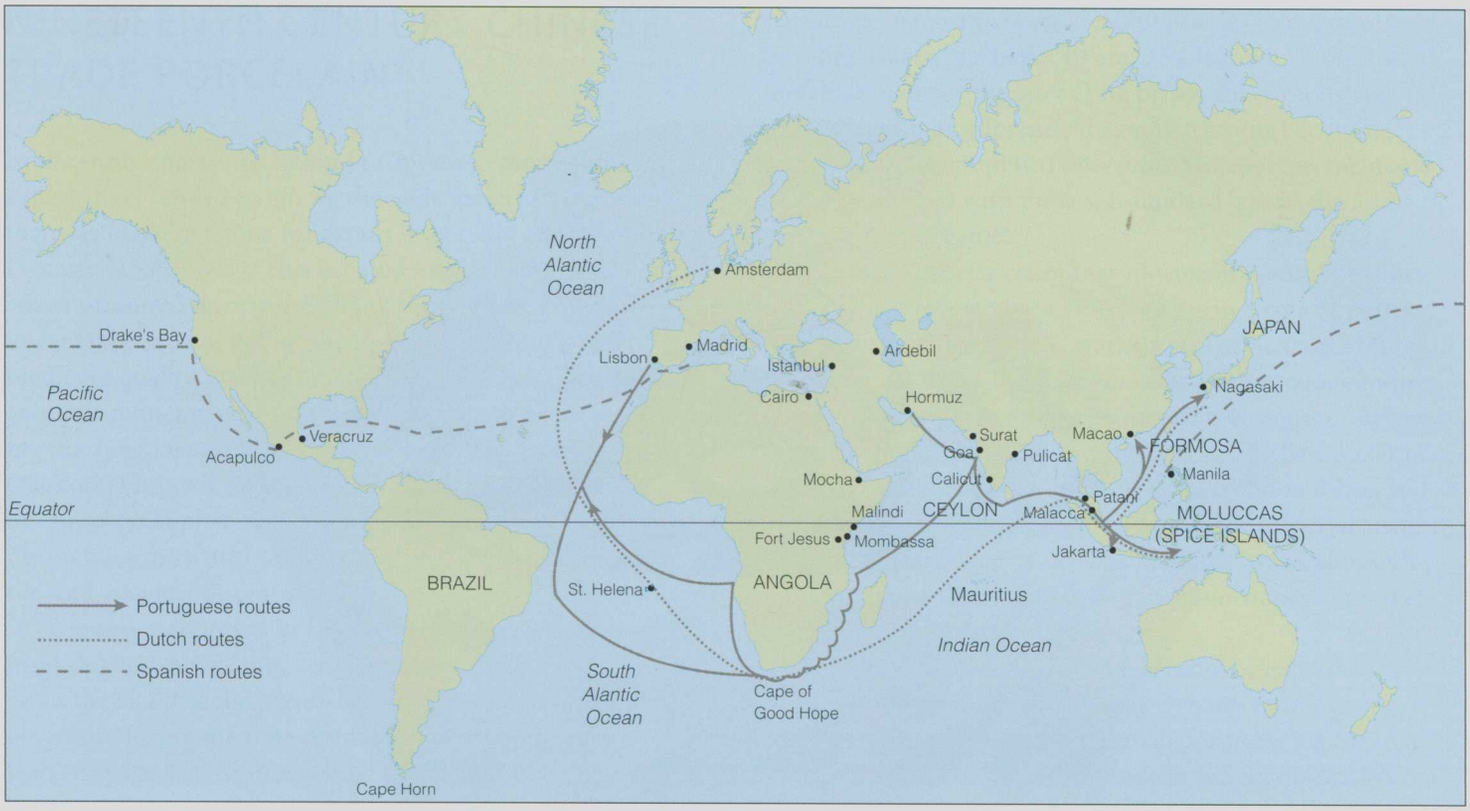
Left:
If goods from Jingdezhen were destined for Peking, they were transported on sampans to Lake Poyang, then north up the Yangtze River, then towed by teams of men 2000 kilometres up the Grand Canal. Starting in 1825, ocean freighting to Peking became routine. If destined for Canton, goods were first shipped, then portaged on either side of the Meiling Pass, then reloaded on sampans and shipped downriver to Canton (Guangzhou).

Right:
International maritime trade routes were dominated by the European powers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

immortality by sending an untold number of boats of Chinese soldiers into the uncharted waters of the South Seas reveal that perhaps the Chinese were already equipped for maritime travel as early as 200 BCE. Most historians, however, believe that full-fledged trade between China and the outside world was established only during the Tang Dynasty (618–906 CE).

The Tang is regarded as the golden age of China's four-millennia-old rule by a series of dynasties, each representing a familial lineage of emperors, and, in the last century, republics (see table page 13). It was the first time since the Han Dynasty that China was a unified country. The relative peace between the provinces made the domestic movements of people and goods easier. Glazed pottery wares were transported from kilns in the interior of China to the coast along rivers and lakes, mainly in smaller vessels like sampans (see map above). When water routes were not navigable, such as the Grand Canal, which became impassable after 1849 because of maintenance problems due to flooding of the Yellow River, goods had to be portaged, involving extraordinary toil as thousands of men hand-carried the boxes of porcelain up and down steps on either side of the Meiling Pass. The frequency of shipments would depend on the seasons. During winter, when the water levels of rivers and lakes were lower, and land travel was more difficult, a smaller number of items made it to the coast.

Trade with the outside world was also encouraged during the Tang period. Imperial officials were appointed in Guangzhou to oversee sea navigation, shipbuilding and foreign trade, making the city not only an important port



for the export of Chinese goods but also a major point of entry for the many foreign diplomatic envoys, pilgrims and merchants who visited China. Chinese shipbuilding technology thrived during the period. Tang ships could easily transport 600 to 700 passengers between Guangzhou and the Persian Gulf, and ceramics were an important cargo on many of these trading vessels.

Despite dynastic changes in subsequent periods, the ceramic trade remained strong, with firmly established links to various ports in Korea, Japan, the Southeast Asian region, India, the Middle East and Africa. During the reign of the third Ming emperor, Yongle (r. 1403–24), Admiral Zheng He, a Chinese Muslim and a close confidant, embarked on the first of seven voyages between 1405 and 1433, sponsored by the Ming government and designed to establish a Chinese presence, impose imperial control over trade, and impress foreign peoples in the 'Western Ocean' (Indian Ocean) basin. The huge fleet and armed forces that undertook these expeditions to over 30 kingdoms consisted of between 41 and 317 ships, many of them huge nine-masted 'treasure ships', and 27,500 to 30,000 men. On the first three voyages, Zheng He visited Southeast Asia, India and Ceylon. The fourth expedition went to the Persian Gulf and Arabia, and later expeditions ventured down the east African coast. Throughout his travels, Zheng He liberally dispensed Chinese gifts of silk and glazed monochrome pottery (greenwares or celadons, *blanc de Chine* and red-brown wares) and other goods. In return, he received rich and unusual presents from his hosts. His missions did not, however, lead to significant trade, and barely three years after his death in 1433, during his last voyage, the Ming Dynasty suspended naval expeditions and issued an imperial ban on the construction of ocean-going ships. This was a major turning point in the way China dealt with the outside world.

Meanwhile, in Europe, demand for goods from China, India and Southeast Asia increased significantly. Dissatisfied with the virtual monopoly held by Middle Eastern traders, European kingdoms sought to find an alternative route to the Far East. The Portuguese, led by Vasco da Gama, were the first to reach India, rounding Africa's Cape of Good Hope and arriving on China's coast in 1498. The Portuguese were thus the first Europeans to import ceramics direct from China during the Ming Dynasty. By this time, the Chinese had succeeded in developing high-fired, dense, impermeable porcelain, which resisted chipping and could also be moulded into delicate and elegant shapes and on which glazes and enamels could be applied directly. Moreover, the discovery of cobalt mines had led to the evolution and perfection of blue and white underglaze decorated wares at both imperial and private kilns in Jingdezhen. Later, in the transitional period between the end of the Ming and the establishment of the Qing (1644–62), bold attempts were made with overglaze polychrome enamelling. The Portuguese were soon overtaken by the Dutch, who had established the East Indies Company in India in 1602 (near the end of the Ming Dynasty), specializing in importing porcelain and other valuable goods such as silk and tea. East Indies Company records reveal that between 1602 and 1682, at least 16 million porcelain items were exported to Europe. Actual numbers are thought to be much higher. So much porcelain was transported to Europe that the maritime trade route between China and Europe came to be known as 'The Porcelain Road'.

The Portuguese and Dutch were soon to be followed by the Spanish and English. Slowly, the European powers, whose military prowess had increased significantly, began to take control of the major trading routes, eventually becoming China's most powerful trading partners (see map page 15). Despite European interest in Chinese goods, the Qing Dynasty restricted the presence of European traders, opting instead to trade with only a few officially designated merchants in Guangzhou. This restriction caused the English to wage two Opium Wars (1839–42 and 1856–60) against China in the mid-nineteenth century in an attempt to open China to foreign trade, which would enable foreign traders to settle down and trade freely in China.

Ironically, the insatiable European demand for porcelain and other Chinese goods indirectly led to the downfall of the Qing Dynasty and the subsequent demise of the Chinese porcelain trade. Already troubled by weakening military power and internal rebellions against its Manchu imperial lineage, the Qing Dynasty was eventually torn apart and overthrown in 1911 by a rising band of nationalists led by Dr Sun Yat-Sen, whose actions indirectly freed the merchant classes from imperial control. However, the nationalists' failure to stabilize the political climate of China in the decades following sent the country into turmoil, causing many industries to collapse. Coupled with the independent discovery of porcelain making in Europe, China's porcelain industry and trade fell into obscurity.

Above and right:
The painting styles of this stack of bowls decorated with the ancient Chinese Flowers of the Four Seasons motif and the covered bowl with the classic phoenix and peony design are more characteristic of Nyonya wares made towards the end of the Tongzhi period than those made beginning from the Guangxu, which have the ubiquitous ogival panels and more thickly applied enamels and heavier outlines around the motifs.