



A Visit to Jingdezhen

By Cynthia O. Valdes

Background Information

Literary sources have recorded that ceramics were produced at Jingdezhen as early as the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to A.D. 220) when the district was known as Xinping.¹

It is widely believed however, that ceramic production accelerated during the 10th century. In 1979, the site of the former Imperial factory was located and excavated in the Zhushan District in the center of the city. The earliest sherds (which appear to be of Yue-type vessels) found at the kiln sites belong to this period. Some of these sherds were of bowls fired in stacks, each one resting on spurs of pure kaolin on an unglazed ring at the interior center of the piece. Kaolin was readily available at the Hutian area not too far away from the kiln sites. However, there is as yet no evidence from the finds that the kaolin was mixed with porcelain-stone during this period of manufacture. The bowls did not always stand up well during the firing and some of them collapsed in spite of the “turned-over” lip, a device employed to prevent warping. The foot likewise had to be made strong enough to support the weight of the vessel.²

During the Northern Song Dynasty, the Five Dynasties tradition was simply carried on. It was during this period that the Emperor Jingde (AD 1004-1007) ordered that the reign mark of “Jingde” be inscribed on the fine-quality wares being made for official use. Henceforth, the wares produced came to be known as Jingde wares and the place where they were made was called Jingdezhen (the town of Jingde)³.

The 2004 Society of Ancient Chinese Ceramics Millennial Anniversary Conference

2004 marked the millennial anniversary of Jingdezhen. The Society of Ancient Chinese Ceramics held its annual conference with an attendance of 200 delegates. This conference brings together archaeologists, scientists, museum officials, potters, art historians, as well as collectors, scholars, and other interested persons in a fruitful exchange of ideas, information, and the latest research in the furtherance of ceramic studies.

The 2004 Conference drew the participation of well-known international ceramic specialists such as Regina Krahl, Rosemary Scott, Rose Kerr, Jan Stuart, Ming Wilson, and Monique Crick, now Curator of the Baur Museum in Geneva. Other interesting English-speaking professionals I met were Tatsuo and Hanae Sasaki from the Center for Archaeological Research, Kanazawa University in Japan. Some of these ceramic specialists delivered papers on various topics related to Jingdezhen and ceramic production in China.

¹ “Joined Colors” by Louise Allison Cort and Jan Stuart.

² John M. Addis, in *Jingdezhen Wares, Yuan Evolution*, Oriental Ceramic Society of Hong Kong, 1984.

³ “Joined Colors” (*Decoration and Meaning in Chinese Porcelain*), published by the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. together with Tai Yip Company, Hong Kong; 1993.

Other people I was privileged to meet were Sabrina Rastelli of the Department of East Asian Studies, Dorsoduro, Italy, an active participant, Jane Beamish, researcher, and Cyril Beecher, collector, from London; Borje Forssell from the Oriental Ceramic Society of Sweden and Frank M. R. Ryan, Solicitor/Partner of Courts & Co.

A highlight of the Conference activities was a ceramic “handling session” conducted by Liu Xinyuan, a well known personage in ceramic studies in China. He now heads the Jingdezhen Institute of Ceramic Archaeology. This most interesting session was held at the old headquarters of the Fouliang Porcelain Bureau, now given a new name. It was set up in 1278. Sherds and ceramic pieces were passed around for the select group around the table to handle and examine. Liu Xinyuan spoke in Mandarin, of course, but the proceedings were kindly translated by Bao-ping Li a PhD student specializing in Ceramic Archaeometry at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia.

Most of the speakers (even a few of the Westerners) spoke in Mandarin. Some of the talks were simultaneously translated into English. In any event, the visuals (mostly slides) were quite interesting. I enjoyed the talks by Regina Krahl on a shipwreck off the Red Sea and that of the Japanese “rising young star”, Sarah Sato, Chinese ceramic specialist from Tokyo, Japan.

Sarah Sato’s talk was about the Chenghua period Doucai wares and she focused on the evolution of five-clawed dragon, symbol of the emperor, which is actually a rare find on Chenghua period doucai wares which usually feature three types of dragons with a “strange-looking” appearance. Sarah thoughtfully provided an English translation of her talk which she distributed to interested participants.

Coverage

Aileen Lau, publisher and editor of Oriental Art Magazine from Singapore was there and I hope she covered the event for her magazine. Some of the delegates came through Shenzhen from Hong Kong and others flew in from Nanchang but I myself found it quite convenient to take a small plane from Shanghai enroute to Jingdezhen. It is always a “treat” to visit the Shanghai Museum. Fortunately, we have old family friends who host me when I happen to be in Shanghai.

Wang Qing Zheng, Director of the Shanghai Museum and the year’s President of Society was indisposed and could not attend the Conference. I would have liked to see him again as I hosted a dinner for him at my residence in Quezon City, Metro Manila when he visited as a Guest of the Oriental Ceramic Society of the Philippines. This was many years ago. Our paths crossed again when we both participated in a Ceramic Symposium organized by the Asian Ceramic Research Organization (ACRO) jointly with the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. The organizers were of course, Dr. Bennet Bronson of the Field Museum and Dr. Chuimei Ho who were supported by a well-organized and energetic volunteer crew. This was such a highly successful conference that they held a similar one the following year. This time Allison Diem, independent scholar from the Oriental Ceramic Society of the Philippines was the invited participant.

Summing up the 2004 Jingdezhen Millennial Anniversary Conference

If you take your ceramic studies seriously, you ought to have visited Jingdezhen, an acknowledged leader in ceramic production in China, at least once. To actually see the places you only read about in books and to view the actual processes that go into producing the *qingbai* sometimes also called *yingqing* (bluish-white) wares of the Song and Yuan Dynasties; and the *shufu* wares with its opaque white glaze also called “*luanbai*” or egg-white ware of the Yuan Dynasty; “Blue and White” (locally referred to as “Early Blue”) of the Yuan Dynasty. Most of “blue and white” wares were produced during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). Jingdezhen has come to be famous for the aforementioned ceramic wares as well as for being the major ceramic producing center in all of China.

I thank an old friend and colleague Peter Lam, Director of the Art Museum, Chinese University of Hong Kong at Shatin; Lillian Chin of London for arranging my trip to Jingdezhen as well as the Carlos Chan family of Manila and Shanghai for hosting me at their factory site in Qingpu, just outside of Shanghai. My trip to Jingdezhen proved to be an exciting and unforgettable experience.
