

# Chinese pottery

**Chinese pottery**, objects made of clay and hardened by heat: earthenware, stoneware, and porcelain, particularly those made in China. Nowhere in the world has pottery assumed such importance as in China, and the influence of Chinese porcelain on later European pottery has been profound.

## Stylistic and historical development

### The formative period (to c. 1600 BCE)

The earliest evidence for art in any form in ancient China consists of crude cord-marked pottery and artifacts decorated with geometric designs found in Mesolithic sites in northern China and in the Guangdong-Guangxi regions. The dating for prehistoric culture in China is still very uncertain, but this material is probably at least 7,000 or 8,000 years old.

Painted Pottery funerary urn, Neolithic Banshan phase, c. 3000 BCE, from Yangshao, Henan province, China; in the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm. Height 13.2 inches (33.5 cm).

The art of the Neolithic Period represents a considerable advance. The Yangshao (Painted Pottery) culture, named after the first Neolithic site discovered (in 1920), had its centre around the eastern bend of the Huang He (Yellow River), and it is now known to have extended across northern China and up into Gansu province. Yangshao pottery consists chiefly of full-bodied funerary storage jars made by the coiling, or ring, method. They are decorated, generally on the upper half only, with a rich variety of geometric designs, whorls, volutes, and sawtooth patterns executed in black and red pigment with sweeping, rhythmic brushwork that foreshadows the free brush painting of historical periods. Some of the pottery from the village site of Banpo (c. 4500 BCE), discovered in 1953 near Xi'an in Shaanxi, have schematized fish, bird, deer, and plant designs, which are related thematically to hunting and gathering, and what may be a human face or mask. Dating for the dominant phase of the Yangshao culture may be put roughly between 5000 and 3000 BCE. Over this span of two millennia the Yangshao culture progressed generally westward along the Huang He and Wei River valleys from sites in central China, such as Banpo, to sites farther west, such as Miaodigou, Majiayao,

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Banshan, and Machang. The art produced at these villages exhibits a clear and logical stylistic evolution, leading from representational designs to linear abstraction (the latter with occasional symbolic references).



Neolithic Longshan pottery: stem cup

Black pottery stem cup, Neolithic  
Longshan culture, c. late 3rd  
millennium

BCE

, from Rizhao, Shandong province,  
China; in the Shandong Provincial  
Museum, Jinan. Height 10.4 inches  
(26.5 cm).

The last major phase of the Neolithic Period is represented by the Longshan culture, distinguished particularly by the black pottery of its later stages (c. 2200–1700 BCE). Longshan is named after the site of its discovery in 1928, in Shandong province, although evidence increasingly suggests origins to the south along the China coast, in Jiangsu province. Its remains are widely distributed, in some sites lying directly over a Painted Pottery stratum, indicating that the Longshan culture replaced the Yangshao. In other areas there is evidence of a mixed culture, including elements of both Yangshao and Longshan, that occurred between these stages. This mixed culture is called “Longshanoid” or, after one of the sites in Hubei, Qijiaping. By contrast with the Yangshao, the fully developed Longshan pottery is wheel-made and especially thinly potted. The finest specimens have a dark gray or black body burnished to a hard,

smooth surface that is occasionally incised but never painted, giving it a metallic appearance. The occasional use of open-worked design and the simulation of lugs and folded plating all suggest the highly skilled imitation of contemporary valuable copper wares (no longer extant); the existence of such copper wares heralded the transition from a lithic to a metallic culture. At this point, the superior calibre of Chinese ceramics was first attained.

In Yangshao pottery, emphasis was on funerary wares. The delicate potting of the Longshan ware and the prevalence of offering stands and goblets suggest that these vessels were made not for burial but for sacrificial rites connected with the worship of ancestral spirits. Ritual vessels, oracle bones (used by shamans in divination), ceremonial jade objects and ornaments, and architecture (pounded-earth foundations, protective city walls, rectilinear organization) reflect an advanced material culture on the threshold of the Bronze Age. This culture continued in outlying areas long after the coming of bronze technology to the central Henan–Shaanxi–southern Shanxi region.

## The Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE)

The Shang dynasty saw several important advances in pottery technology, including the development of a hard-bodied, high-fire stoneware and pottery glazes. A small quantity of stoneware is covered with a thin, hard, yellowish green glaze applied in liquid form to the vessel. Shang potters also developed a fine soft-bodied white ware, employing kaolin (later used in porcelain); this ware was probably for ceremonial use and was decorated with motifs similar to those on the ritual bronzes. The only known complete specimen of a fine

white stoneware dating from about 1400 BCE is decorated with chevrons (linked V-shapes) and a key-fret pattern, the shoulder motifs being reminiscent of those seen on contemporary bronze vessels. Much cruder imitations of bronze vessels also occur in the ubiquitous gray pottery of the Shang dynasty.

## The Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE)

Early Western Zhou pottery, like the bronzes, continued the Shang tradition at a somewhat lower technical level, and the soft white Shang pottery disappeared. Stemmed offering dishes, *dou*, were made in a hard stoneware dipped or brushed over with a glaze ranging from gray to brownish green. The fact that some of the richest finds of high-fired glazed wares have been made not in Henan but at Yiqi in Anhui shows that the centre of advance in pottery technology was beginning to move, with the growth of population, to the lower Huai and Yangtze (Chang) valleys. Crude attempts also were made to give pottery the appearance of bejeweled metal by covering *dou* stands with lacquer inlaid with shell disks.

In the second half of the dynasty the range of pottery types and techniques was greatly extended. A low-fired pottery was produced in Henan primarily for burial. Some of it is white, and some is covered with slip, or liquid clay, and painted, reviving an ancient tradition of northern China. A soft-bodied, black, burnished ware, sometimes decorated with scrolls and geometric motifs scratched through the polished surface, has been found at Huixian. In the period of the Warring States, a soft earthenware covered with green lead glaze was made in northern China for burial. In the lower Yangtze valley an almost porcelainous stoneware developed, covered with a thin feldspathic glaze, the ancestor of the celadon glaze of the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) and later. Another technique, which appears in the glazed wares of Zhejiang and Jiangsu and was to persist in the southern pottery tradition for many centuries, was the stamping of regular, repeated motifs over the surface of the vessel before firing.

## The Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE)

The first pottery to survive in appreciable quantities belongs to the Han dynasty; most of it has been excavated from graves. Perhaps the commonest form is the *hu*, a baluster-shaped vase copied from bronze vessels of the same name and sometimes decorated with relief ornament in friezes taken directly from a bronze original. The hill jar, which has a cover molded to represent the Daoist “Isles of the Blest,” is another fairly frequent form, and many models of servants, domestic animals, buildings, wellheads, dove-cotes, and the like also have been discovered in graves.

Han glazed wares are chiefly of two types. Northern China saw the invention, presumably for funerary purposes only, of a low-fired lead glaze, tinted bottle-green with copper oxide, that degenerates through burial to an attractive silvery iridescence. High-fired stoneware with a thin brownish to olive glaze was still being made in Henan, but the main centre of production was already shifting to the Zhejiang region, formerly known as Yue. Yue ware kilns of the Eastern Han, located at Deqing in northern Zhejiang, produced a hard stoneware, often imitating the shapes of bronze vessels and decorated with impressed, bronzelike designs

under a thin olive glaze. Other important provincial centres for pottery production in the Han dynasty were Changsha (in Hunan province) and Chengdu and Chongqing (in Sichuan province).

Yue *yao* (“Yue ware”) was first made at Yuezhou (present Yuyao), Zhejiang province, during the Han dynasty, although all surviving specimens are later, most belonging to the Six Dynasties (220–589 CE). They have a stoneware body and an olive or brownish green glaze and belong to the family of celadons, a term that looms large in any discussion of early Chinese wares. It is applied to glazes ranging from the olive of Yue to the deep green of later varieties. These colours were the result of a wash of slip containing a high proportion of iron that was put over the body before glazing. The iron interacted with the glaze during firing and coloured it.

## The Three Kingdoms (220–280 CE) and Six Dynasties (220–589 CE)

The increase in population in the lower Yangtze valley was a great stimulus to the pottery industry in the Six Dynasties. Kilns in Zhejiang (the old kingdom of Yue) were producing a stoneware with an olive brown or greenish glaze. Examples of Yue ware—jars, ewers, pitchers, and other grave goods—have been found in 3rd- and 4th-century tombs in the Nanjing region. They were made chiefly at Shaoxing, at Shanglin Lake, and at Deqing, north of Hangzhou, which also produced a stoneware with a glossy black glaze. During the Six Dynasties potters freed themselves from the influence of bronze design and produced shapes more characteristic of pottery.

While most of the Zhejiang wares are plain or simply decorated, “northern celadon,” produced in Hebei and Henan in the 6th century, is exotic in style, reflecting the taste of Turkish rulers and other cultural contacts with western Asia. Heavy funerary jars are adorned with acanthus and lotus leaves, and flowers and round decorative plaques are molded or applied to the surface in imitation of Sāsānian repoussé metalwork. Tomb figurines of this period are often made of dark gray earthenware and unglazed, though sometimes they are painted.

## The Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) dynasties



Buddhist guardian deity

Buddhist guardian deity, three-colour painted ceramic sculpture from Zhongbaocun, near Xi'an, Shaanxi province, China, 8th century, Tang

After the comparative sterility of the Six Dynasties, this was a great period in the development of Chinese pottery. Although a white porcelain perfected early in the 7th century is called Xing *yao* (Xing “ware”) because of a reference to the white porcelain of Xingzhou in the 9th-century essay “Cha Jing” (“Tea Classic”) by Lu Yu, as yet no kilns have been found there. Kilns near Dingzhou in Hebei, however, were at this time already producing a fine white porcelain, which was the ancestor of the famous Ding ware of the Northern Song. In the late 7th and the 8th century, ceramists in northern China, working primarily at kilns at Tongchuan near Chang'an and at Gongxian in Henan province,

dynasty; in the Shaanxi Provincial Museum, Xi'an, China.

also developed “three-colour” (*sancal*) pottery wares and figurines that were slipped and covered with a low-fired lead glaze tinted with copper or ferrous oxide in green, yellow, brown, and sometimes blue; the bright colours were allowed to mix or run naturally over the robust contour of these vessels, which are among the finest in the history of Chinese pottery. Northern Chinese kilns in Shaanxi also produced a stoneware with a rich black glaze, and a type of celadon was made north of Xi'an, in Shaanxi. The northern Chinese potters borrowed shapes and motifs from western Asia even more freely than had their 6th-century predecessors: foreign shapes included the amphora, bird-headed ewer, and rhyton, and foreign motifs included hunting reliefs, floral medallions, boys with garlands or swags of vines, and Buddhist symbols adapted and applied with characteristic Tang confidence. Some forms were also borrowed from metalwork or glassware.



ceramic horse

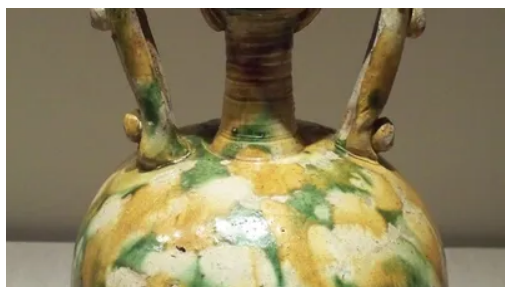
Figure of a horse with saddle, earthenware with traces of pigment, China, Northern dynasties, late 6th century; in the Brooklyn Museum, New York.

Tomb figurines were produced in such enormous quantities that attempts were made through sumptuary laws to limit their number and size; such efforts met with little success. The figurines were made, generally in molds, of earthenware covered with slip and painted or glazed or both. Among the human figures are servants and actors, female dancers, and musicians of exquisite grace. The 7th-century figurines are slender and high-waisted, while those of the 8th century are increasingly rotund and round-faced, reflecting a change in fashion. There are also many figurines of Central Asian grooms and Semitic merchants with caricatured features such as deep-set eyes and jutting noses. Of the camels and horses, the most remarkable are glazed camels bearing on their backs a group of four or five singers and

musicians. After the middle of the 8th century, there was a sharp decline both in the quantity and in the quality of tomb wares and figurines in northern China.

The great southward movement of population in the Tang dynasty stimulated the development of many new kilns. Celadons were now made in Jionglai (Sichuan), Changsha (Hunan), and several areas of Guangdong and Fujian. A kiln producing whitewares was active at Jizhou in Jiangxi, and at Jingdezhen in the same province two kilns were producing celadons and whitewares. From these humble beginnings, Jingdezhen was destined to become, in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911/12) dynasties, the largest pottery factory in the world. In Lu Yu's essay the “Cha Jing,” the celadons of Yuezhou in Zhejiang are ranked for their jadelike quality first among the wares suitable for tea drinking, followed by the silvery Xing ware. Yue celadons from kilns at Yuyao and a number of other sites in Zhejiang were also exported, and quantities of fine Yue ware have been found at Al-Fusṭāṭ in Egypt and at Sāmarrā' in Iraq, the luxurious summer residence of the 'Abbāsid caliphs—notably al-Mu'tasim (son of Hārūn al-Rashīd)—between 836 and 883. Tang wares, consisting chiefly of celadons from southern Chinese kilns, have also been found in Indonesia and the

Philippines, marking the beginning of a vast export trade in Chinese pottery that has continued almost without interruption into modern times.



Tang twin dragon vase

Twin dragon vase, stoneware and three-color glaze, China, Tang dynasty, 8th century; in the Indianapolis Museum of Art. Height 32.70 cm.



Tang dynasty: ceramic tomb figure

Ceramic tomb figure decorated in characteristic colored glazes, Tang dynasty (618–907); in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Height 28 inches (71 cm).

Perhaps the most important single development was the use of coloured glazes—as monochromes or splashed and dappled. The Tang wares commonest in Western collections are those with either monochrome or dappled glazes covering a highly absorbent, buff, earthenware body. The dappled glazes were usually applied with a sponge, and they include blue, dark blue, green, yellow, orange, straw, and brown colours. These glazes normally exhibit a fine crackle and often fall short of the base in an uneven wavy line, the unglazed surface area varying from about one-third to two-thirds of the vessel.

Dappled glazes are also found on the magnificent series of tomb figures with which this period is particularly associated. Similar figures were made in unglazed earthenware and were sometimes decorated with cold pigment. Although the unglazed specimen or those covered only with the straw-coloured glaze are occasionally modeled superbly, many are crude and apparently made for the tombs of the less affluent and influential. Most of the glazed figures are much better in quality and occasionally reach a large size; figures of the Bactrian camel, for instance, are particularly impressive, some being nearly three feet high. The Bactrian pony, introduced into China about 138 BCE, is to be found in many spirited poses. This fashion for tomb figures fell into disuse at the beginning of the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE) but was revived for a short while during the Ming period (1368–

1644), when Tang influence is noticeable.

Marbled wares are seen occasionally. The effect was achieved either by combing slips of contrasting colours (i.e., mingling the slips after they had been put on the pot, by means of a comb) or by mingling differently coloured clays. Another type of Tang ware (probably from Henan) had a stoneware body with a dark brown glaze streaked by pale blue. Most vessels stand on a flat base; although later Tang wares sometimes were given a foot ring, for the most part this can be regarded as evidence in favour of a Song dating.

## The Five Dynasties (907–960) and Ten Kingdoms (902–978)

The confused state of northern China under the Five Dynasties was not conducive to development of the pottery industry, and some types, such as the Tang three-colour wares, went out of production completely.

White porcelain and black glazed stonewares, however, continued into the Song dynasty. In contrast, the flourishing southern courts and the massive increase in the population of southeastern China were a great stimulus to the craft. A large complex of kilns that had been established at Yuyao, around Shanglin Lake in Zhejiang, which lay in the territory of the kingdom of Wuyue, sent its finest celadons to the court of Li Houzhu (Li Yu) until his realm fell to the Song in 978; after that they were sent as tribute to the Song court at Bianjing. The finest pieces, with decoration carved in the clay body under a very pale olive-green glaze, were called *biseyao* ("secret," or "reserve, colour ware") by 10th-century writers. It is not known whether this referred to a secret process or to the fact that the ware was reserved for the court.

## The Song (960–1279), Liao (907–1125), and Jin (1115–1234) dynasties

### Song dynasty

The Song dynasty marked a high point in the history of Chinese pottery, when technical mastery, refinement of feeling, and a natural spontaneity of technique were more perfectly balanced than at any time in Chinese history. Unlike the sometimes lifeless perfection that marks the palace wares of the Qing dynasty, the beauty of Song wares is derived from the simplicity of the shapes and purity of glaze tone and colour. In Song wares the touch of the potter's hand can still be perceived, and glazes have a depth and warmth that was later lost when a higher level of manufacturing skill was attained.

It is convenient to group Song wares geographically: the chief northern wares are Ding, Ru, Jun, northern celadon, Cizhou, and brown and black glazed wares; those of southern China include Jingdezhen whiteware (*yingqing*, or *qingbai*), Jizhou wares, celadons, and blackwares of Fujian. (Other varieties from local kilns will be mentioned later.) This relatively simple approach, in some cases allotting one ware to one kiln, has been greatly complicated by discoveries made first by Japanese and then by Chinese archaeologists during and since World War II. Many new kiln sites have been located, and it is now known that one kiln often produced several different wares and that decorated stonewares named from the principal factory at Cizhou in southern Hebei were made in many kilns across the breadth of northern China.

White porcelain made at Jiancicun in south-central Hebei was already being produced for the northern courts in the Five Dynasties (907–960) and continued as an imperial ware to the beginning of the 12th century. Very finely potted and sometimes decorated with freely incised plants, fish, and birds under the glaze or later with mold-made designs in relief, this Ding ware is directly descended from the northern whitewares of the Tang dynasty. Supposedly because of Huizong's dissatisfaction with Ding ware, it was replaced in the late Northern Song by another official ware known as Ru, the rarest and most highly prized of all Chinese ceramics (until the mid-1980s, only some 60 examples were known). Representing Huizong's celebrated aestheticism, the low-fired Ru stoneware is distinguished by a seemingly soft, milky glaze of pale blue or grayish green with hair-thin crackle. The glaze covers a pale gray or buff body that is usually simple in shape yet highly sophisticated and exquisitely tasteful in effect. Ru ware was produced for only a few years before Huizong's sudden demise. The Ru kilns defied identification until 1986, when they, along with the remains of a



workshop, were located at Qingliangsi, more than 160 km (100 miles) southwest of the capital. Another 37 intact examples were soon afterward excavated there. Typical of other kilns, the Ru kilns varied their productions, turning out Cizhou stoneware and Yaozhou-type celadons like those discovered at Yaoan, north of Xi'an.

A sturdy stoneware covered with a thick lavender-blue glaze was made at Junzhou in Henan. This Jun ware is sometimes marked with splashes of purple or crimson produced by copper oxide. On the finest Jun wares, which are close to Ru in quality, these splashes are used with restraint, but on later Jun-type wares manufactured at Jingdezhen and near Guangzhou (Canton) too much purple often gives vessels or flowerpots a mottled, lurid hue that Ming connoisseurs were wont to label "mule's liver" or "horse's lung."

Somewhat related to Jun wares are sturdily potted jars, vases, and bowls with lustrous black or brown glazes. Those that are decorated with flowers and leaves painted in an oxidized rust brown constitute an enormous family of Cizhou wares made for domestic and funerary use in numerous northern China kilns, and they are still being produced in some factories today. Cizhou techniques of decoration included free brush painting under the glaze, carving or scratching (sgraffito work) through one slip to another of a different colour, and painting over the glaze in low-fired colours. The earliest known example of overglaze painting in the history of Chinese pottery bears a date equivalent to 1201. The technique was more widely used for the decoration of Cizhou wares in the 14th century. In both the variety and the vigour of their forms and decoration, Cizhou stonewares present a strong contrast to the restraint and exquisite taste of the courtly wares. Chinese connoisseurs and imperial collectors considered them beneath their notice, and it has taken the interest of Western collectors and the concern for the arts of the masses shown in China since 1949 to elevate them to the honoured place they deserve.

## Late Song, Liao, and Jin dynasties

The pottery produced in northeastern China (Manchuria) under Liao occupation continued the tradition of Tang whiteware and three-coloured ware, with some influence from the Ding and Cizhou wares of Northern Song. Five kilns that produced pottery for the Liao and Jin courts have been located. In addition to imitations of Tang and Song wares, Liao potters produced their own unique shapes, which included long-necked vases, cockscomb vessels, ewers with phoenix-headed mouths, and flattened flasks made in imitation of animal-hide bags for liquor or milk carried at the saddle. These were then slipped and covered with a low-fired brown or rich green glaze or a beautiful white glaze almost as fine as that of Ding ware. In general much less finely potted than Song wares, those of the Liao have the interest and charm of a vital provincial tradition.

After the Song capital was reestablished at Hangzhou, the finest wares obtainable were once more supplied to the court. These southern Guan wares were made for a short time in kilns close to the palace under the direction of the Office of Works. Later the kilns were established near Jiaotan, the altar for sacrifices to heaven and earth, outside the south gate of the city. Jiaotan Guan ware had a dark, opaque body and a beautiful bluish gray layered glaze. A deliberately formed crackle, caused by the shrinking of the glaze as the vessel cooled



after firing, is the only ornament on this exquisite ware.



Longquan celadon wine jar and cover

Longquan celadon wine jar and cover with light bluish green glaze, Song dynasty, 12th century, Longquan, Zhejiang province, China; in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Height 10 inches (25.4 cm).

The southern Guan was the finest of a huge family of celadons produced in an increasing number of kilns in southeastern China. Longquan in southern Zhejiang made a fine celadon with bluish green glaze, the best of which was almost certainly supplied to the court and may hence be classed as Guan. A variant with strongly marked crackle became known as Ge ware in deference to the tradition that it was made by the elder brother (*ge*) of the director of the Longquan factory. Among the wide range of shapes made in Song celadon are those derived from forms of archaic bronzes, such as *li*, *ding*, and *zun*, testifying to the increasingly antiquarian taste of court and gentry.

Meanwhile, a small factory at Jingdezhen in Jiangxi was growing to meet the vast increase in the population of southern China. In

the Song its most characteristic ware was a fine, white, sugary porcelain covered with a transparent, slightly bluish glaze; the ware has been known since Song times as *qingbai* ("bluish white"), but modern Chinese dealers call it *yingqing* ("shadowy blue"). *Yingqing* ware is very thinly potted, the decoration carved in the clay body or applied in raised slip or beading under the glaze. Song *yingqing* wares are the predecessors of a vast output of fine, white Jingdezhen porcelain that was to dominate the Chinese pottery industry during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Other whitewares were made at Yonghe near Ji'an in Jiangxi. These Ji'an, or Kian, wares appear to be imitations of Ding, and there may be truth in the tradition that the kilns were set up by refugees from the north. The Yonghe kilns were unable to compete with Jingdezhen, however, and had ceased production by the end of the Song.



Jian-type tea bowl

Tea bowl, Jian-type stoneware with oil-spot effect (*yohen temmoku*) from Fujian province, 12th–13th century, Southern Song dynasty; in the Seikado Bunko Art Museum, Tokyo.

Kilns in the wooded hills around Jianyang in northern Fujian produced almost nothing but heavily potted stoneware tea bowls covered with a thick black glaze. The finest and rarest of these Jian ware bowls have streaky "hare's fur" or iridescent "oil spot" effects that were much prized by Japanese tea masters, who called this ware *temmoku* after Tianmu, the sacred Buddhist mountain in Zhejiang province that was near the port from which the ware was shipped to Japan. Yonghe kilns also turned out a coarse variety of *temmoku* and experimented with novel decorative effects produced by laying floral paper cuts or skeleton leaves under the glaze before firing.

This greatly simplified account of Song wares cannot include the many provincial kilns that flourished in almost every province of China. Most marked was the growth of the

industry in the south (modern Guangdong and Fujian), where kilns turned out variants of celadon and *qingbai* both for local consumption and for barter in China's rapidly increasing trade with Indonesia and the Philippines. Huge quantities of these southern Chinese wares have been found in burial sites in the Philippines and often provide archaeologists with the surest way of dating the remains.

## The Yuan dynasty (1206–1368)



funerary urns

Chinese funerary urns, stoneware with *qingbai* glaze, Yuan dynasty, 1279–1368; in the Indianapolis Museum of Art. 67.31 × 15.24 × 15.24 cm.

While the Mongol occupation destroyed much, it also shook China free from the static traditions and techniques of the late Southern Song and made possible many innovations, both in painting and in the decorative arts. The north was not progressive, and the main centre of pottery activity shifted permanently to the south. The northern traditions of Jun and Cizhou ware continued through the Jin and Yuan, bolder but coarser than before. New shapes included a heavy, wide-mouthed jar, sometimes with decoration boldly carved through a black or brown slip or painted in two or three colours. These new techniques and the overglaze painting already developed in the Jin dynasty prepared the way for the three- and five-colour wares

of the Ming.

While no Yuan celadon has the perfection of colour of Song Guan and Longchuan wares, being more olive green in tone, the quality is high. And the variety of decorative techniques used is far wider than that of the Song. These include raised relief designs molded under the glaze, fish and dragons raised “in the biscuit” (that is, unglazed) in relief, and iron-brown spots that the Japanese call *tobi seiji* (“flying celadon”). Vases and dishes were now sturdily potted in porcelain, often mold-made, and of considerable size.

Factories at Jingdezhen were expanding rapidly. While their products included celadon, their chief output, as before, was white porcelain, including richly modeled figurines of Guanyin and other Buddhist deities. *Qingbai* was now decorated with floral motifs and beading in raised relief or incised under the glaze, the most elaborate pieces combining flowers and vines in appliqué relief with openwork panels. A stronger, less sugar-white porcelain with molded or incised decoration was produced; called *shufu* ware, it sometimes bore the characters *shufu*, meaning “central government palace,” for the ware was often ordered by imperial officials.

The earliest evidence of the use of cobalt blue, probably imported from the Middle East, is seen in its application as an underglaze pigment on fragments dating to the late 8th or early 9th century that were unearthed at Yangzhou in 1983. The occasional use of underglazed cobalt continued in the Northern Song. It was not until the Yuan dynasty, however, that underglazed blue decoration began a rapid rise in popularity. It was applied on fine white porcelains of the *shufu* type and combined with Islamic decorative taste. These blue-and-white wares soon became the most popular of all Chinese ceramics, both at home and abroad. A pair

of richly ornate temple vases dated 1351 (in the Percival David Foundation in London) are proof that the technique had been fully mastered by that time. The finest Jingdezhen examples were reserved for the court, but coarse varieties were made in southern China for trade with Southeast Asia or for export to the Middle East.

Experiments also were made with painting in underglaze copper red, but it was difficult to control and soon abandoned. Both the shapes and decoration of Yuan blue-and-white have a characteristic boldness. The motifs are richly varied, sometimes crowded and unrestrained, but at their best they have great splendour and vitality. Favourite motifs include the lotus, vines, and dragons that had already appeared on the *shufu* wares, creatures such as the *qilin* (“unicorn”) and *longma* (“dragon-horse”), and fish and Daoist figures. Also popular for a while were scenes from historical dramas and romances written by unemployed Confucian scholars.

## The Ming dynasty (1368–1644)

While northern traditions of Cizhou and Jun ware continued to decline, pottery production in the south expanded. It was chiefly centred on Jingdezhen, an ideal site because of the abundance of minerals used for porcelain manufacture—kaolin (china clay) and petuntse (china stone)—ample wood fuel, and good communications by water. Most of the celadon, however, was still produced in Zhejiang, notably at Longchuan and Chuzhou, whose Ming products are more heavily potted than those of the Song and Yuan and are decorated with incised and molded designs under a sea-green glaze. Celadon dishes, some of large size, were an important item in China’s trade with the Middle East, whose rulers, it was said, believed that the glaze would crack or change colour if poison touched it.

At Jingdezhen the relatively coarse-bodied *shufu* ware was developed into a hard white porcelain that no longer reveals the touch of the potter’s hand. The practically invisible designs sometimes carved in the translucent body are known as *anhua* (“secret decoration”). In the Yongle period (1402–24) the practice began of putting the reign mark on the base (*see below* marks and decoration in Chinese pottery). This was first applied to the finest white porcelain and to monochrome ware decorated with copper red under a transparent glaze. As aforementioned, a white porcelain with ivory glaze was also made at Dehua in Fujian.



Ming dynasty flask

Flask decorated with a dragon and wave scrolls in underglaze blue, Ming dynasty, 14th century; in the Victoria

In the early decades of the Ming, the repertoire of designs on Yuan blue-and-white was continued and refined. At first, this ware evidently was considered too vulgar for court use, and none bears the imperial reign mark until the Xuande period (1425–35). By this time the often crowded Yuan patterns had given way chiefly to dragons or floral motifs of great clarity and grace, vigorously applied in a thick, deep-blue pigment to dishes, vases, stem cups, and flattened pilgrim jars. Sometimes a richer effect was achieved by painting dragons in underglaze red on a blue ground or vice versa. In the Chenghua period (1464–87), the

and Albert Museum, London. Height 36.8 cm.

blue-and-white designs became somewhat tenuous and overrefined, and the characteristic wares made for the Zhengde emperor (1505–21) and his Muslim eunuchs often bear Arabic

inscriptions. In the Jiajing (1521–67) and Wanli (1572–1620) periods, the imperial kilns were badly mismanaged, and their products were often of poor quality. Private factories, however, turned out lively wares until the end of the dynasty.

Overglaze painting was applied with delicate care in the Chenghua period, chiefly in the decoration of small wine cups with chicken motifs, much admired by Chinese connoisseurs. These “chicken cups” were already being copied later in the 16th century and again, very expertly, in the 18th. Overglaze painting soon became popular; it was applied in the 16th century in stronger colours brilliantly contrasted against a dead-white background. These vigorous *wucai* (“five-colour”) wares, which utilized a wide palette, were especially free and bold in the Jiajing and Wanli periods. Crude but lively imitations of these and of the blue-and-white of Jingdezhen were made in kilns in southern China partly for the Southeast Asian market and are known as “Swatow ware,” named after one of the export sites. Among the most impressive of Ming pottery types are the *sancai* (“three-colour”) wares, chiefly vases and jars decorated with floral motifs in turquoise, purple, yellow, and deep violet blue, the colours separated by raised lines in imitation of the metal strips used in cloisonné work (see below). This robust ware was made in several centres, the best of it between 1450 and 1550.



Yixing ware teapot

Dome-shaped Yixing ware teapot with a six-lobed body, signed Gongchun, dated 1513, Ming dynasty; in the Hong Kong Museum of Art. Height 9.9 cm.

Beginning in the early 16th century, a new ceramic tradition emerged in the town of Yixing, on the western side of Lake Tai, catering to the tea taste of scholars in the nearby Suzhou area. Individually made, sometimes to order, rather than mass-produced, Yixing wares were often signed or even poetically inscribed by highly reputable master craftsmen, such as Shi Dabin of the Wanli era and Chen Mingyuan of the Qing dynasty Kangxi period. The wares were usually unglazed and derived their striking colours—brown, beige, reddish purple, yellow, black, and blue—after firing from the distinctive clays of the region and were known as “purple-sand” teapots. Pieces alternated between two body types: complex floral shapes and

exquisitely simple geometric designs. Produced in relatively small quantities and treasured by Chinese collectors, these vessels attracted little attention outside China until the late 20th century.

## The Qing dynasty (1644–1911/12)

The pottery industry suffered severely in the chaotic middle decades of the 17th century, of which the typical products were “transitional wares,” chiefly blue-and-white. The imperial kilns at Jingdezhen were destroyed and were not fully reestablished until 1682, when the Kangxi emperor appointed Cang Yingxuan as director.





eggshell porcelain bowl

Eggshell porcelain bowl, a copy of a Yongle period bowl, Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign (1661–1722); in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Qing dynasty vase

Vase with *flambé* glaze (*yao bian*) of reduced copper, Qing dynasty, reign of the Qianlong emperor, 1736–96; in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
Height 32.4 cm.



*famille rose* porcelain vase

*Famille rose* porcelain vase of *yangcai* ware, Qing dynasty, Yongzheng reign (1722–35); in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Under his control, imperial porcelain reached a level of excellence it had not seen for well over a century. The finest pieces include small monochromes, which recaptured the perfection of form and glaze of classic Song wares.

New colours and glaze effects were introduced, such as eel-skin yellow, snakeskin green, turquoise blue, and an exquisite soft red glaze shading to green (known as “peach bloom”) that was used for small vessels made for the scholar’s desk. Also perfected was *langyao* (“sang-de-boeuf,” or oxblood, ware), which was covered with a rich copper-red glaze. Kangxi period blue-and-white is particularly noted for a new precision in the drawing and the use of cobalt washes of vivid intensity.

Five-colour (*wucai*) overglaze painted wares of the Kangxi period became known in Europe as *famille verte* from the predominant green colour in their floral decoration. These wares also included expert imitations of the overglaze painting of the Chenghua emperor’s reign. Another variety has floral decoration painted directly on the biscuit (unglazed pottery body) against a rich black background (*famille noire*). Toward the end of the Kangxi reign, a rose-pink made from gold chloride was introduced from Europe. It was used with other colours in the decoration of porcelain (*famille rose*) and in *cloisonné* and overglaze painting.

*Famille rose* porcelain reached a climax of perfection at Jingdezhen under the direction of Nian Xiyao (1726–36) and continued with scarcely diminishing delicacy through the Qianlong period. Meanwhile, the skill of the Jingdezhen potters was being increasingly challenged by the demand at court for imitations in porcelain of archaic bronzes, gold, and jade and for such objects as musical instruments and perforated and revolving boxes, which were highly unsuited to manufacture in porcelain. Although fine porcelain was made from time to time in the 19th century, notably in the Daoguang and Guangxu reigns, the quality as a whole greatly declined.

Michael Sullivan Jerome Silbergeld

## Marks and decoration on Chinese pottery

It is difficult to give much practical assistance on the question of Chinese marks. Most of the Chinese marks give the name of the dynasty and that of the emperor. However, many of them have been used so inconsequentially that, unless the period can also be assigned with reasonable certainty by other means, it is better to disregard them. The dating of Chinese pottery is further complicated by the fact that there were traditional and persisting types that overlapped. Quite often, therefore, dynastic labels cannot be regarded as anything more than an indication of the affinities of the particular object under discussion.

Chinese decoration is usually symbolic and often exploits the double meaning of certain words; for instance, the Chinese word for “bat,” *fu*, also means “happiness.” Five bats represent the Five Blessings—longevity, wealth, serenity, virtue, and an easy death. Longevity is symbolized by such things as the stork, the pine, and the tortoise, the *lingzhi* fungus (*Ganoderma lucidum*), and the bamboo, all reputed to enjoy long life. The character *shou*, which also denotes longevity, is used in a variety of ornamental forms. Together, the peach and the bat represent *fushou*, happiness and long life. The “Buddha’s hand” citron (*Citrus medica* var. *sarcodactylis*), a fruit with fingerlike appendages, is a symbol of wealth, and each month and season is represented by a flower or plant. The *bagua*, consisting of eight sets of three lines, broken and unbroken in different combinations, represent natural forces. They are often seen in conjunction with the yin-yang symbol, which represents the female-male principle and which has been well described by the pottery scholar R.L. Hobson as resembling “two tadpoles interlocked.” The dragon generally is a mild and beneficent creature. It is a symbol of the emperor, as the *fenghuang*, an immortal bird, is a symbol of the empress.

There are three principal religious systems in China: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Daoist figures in particular appear frequently on porcelain as decoration. The most important, Laozi, has a large and protuberant forehead. He is usually accompanied by the Eight Immortals (Baxian), and these are sometimes modeled as sets of figures. The eight horses of the emperor Muwang (Zhou dynasty) are frequently represented. The Buddhist goddess Guanyin and the 18 *luohan* (enlightened Buddhist elders) were also modeled. The “eight Buddhist emblems” appear fairly frequently, as do the “eight precious things” and a collection of instruments and implements used in the arts and known as the “hundred antiques.” The “lions of Buddha” (often miscalled dogs) are frequently represented, as is the *qilin*, which is a composite animal, not unlike a unicorn, that has a fierce appearance but a gentle disposition.

Most of these symbols were not used in pottery decoration before the Ming dynasty, although both the dragon and the *fenghuang*, as well as some floral motifs, are earlier. The *leiwen*, however, which resembles the Greek key fret (an ornament consisting of small, straight bars intersecting one another at right angles) and is sometimes used on the later ceramic wares, appears on bronzes as early as the Shang and Zhou dynasties, where it is called the cloud-and-thunder fret. The *taotie*, which is a grotesque mask of uncertain origin, also appears on early bronzes and on later pottery and porcelain. It is usually extremely difficult to trace the origin of decorations based on Chinese literary sources.

George Savage The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica

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