## Imperial Northern Song Dynasty Ru Ware and the Transition to an Internationally Recognized Art Form

Art in all forms is made with a very important purpose: To appeal to our feelings. It is something inanimate that has the ability to create a deeper connection with someone who is alive, often drawing upon the power of our memories. Thus, when looking into the history of art, we also need to look at the background, how was the political climate in the region at the time, did they live in prosperity or poverty, and how did the artists/craftsmen fit into that society. Since we as a species are not homogenous but exist with vast variations, different pieces of art appeals to different individuals, making the area highly subjective. There are, however, only a few crafts that have left the world speechless for centuries, which has created important trade, and still is in high demand to this day. The Chinese have long considered the art of porcelain making one of the highest levels of craftsmanship. Perfecting it through thousands of years to a degree that even the objects themselves are synonymous with the country. Chinese pottery goods have been found in caves dating back as far as 20 000BC (Miller, 2009), among them existed more ordinary items used for food processing but also thinner types thought used for ritual purposes (Lekenvall, 2007).

We want to research the topic of when the Chinese ceramics started to reach beyond its' borders and appeal to a larger audience. One approach of researching this topic is by looking for any spikes in production in the early dynasties along with an increase in cultural sophistication. There are records showing that during a specific dynasty Chinese porcelain obtained international fame (Pletcher, 2011). This leads us to the Song dynasty 960 - 1279 AD, which saw a very large increase in production and export of ceramics (Rawson, 2015). Being divided into the North and South period, the most celebrated objects were created during the north period while the government was residing in the Henan province in modern day Kaifeng. The North Song dynasty is famously characterized by seeing vast advancements in cultural areas and sophistication while being severely politically weakened leading up to its collapse in 1127 and retreat to the south, reestablishing itself in modern day Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province (Levine, 2012).

The decline of the earlier Tang dynasty in the 10th century had thrown the region into a time of conflict and war lordship. No single entity was powerful enough to unify the fragments under a single government which meant that small sovereign states formed with local rulers and dynasties. This era, which has become to be known as the "Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms" -period, lasted for some fifty years before the military commander Zhao Kuangyin effectively established the Song in 960AD (Rossabi, 2013). Perhaps times of disorder and constant warfare created the need for structure, harmony, and cultural elevation. Instead of trying to expand the empire the Song wanted to maintain their borders and payed off foreign forces with silver and silk, which, rather ironical, they used to buy commodities from the Song Empire. Knowing the political climate, background, and how the Song handled their foreign relations, we want to see how that translates into the making of their ceramics. Examining the Song dynasty ceramic goods we can clearly see an admiration for simplicity, with their famously dignified contours. While not being held back by lack of development in technique, having the knowledge to create far more intricate items, the ceramics show a longing for a more controlled and restrained beauty (Rawson, 2015). Developments in art and ceramics flourished and could reach such elevated heights because they were supported by the government. Many industrial improvements made the Song dynasty very rich, the use of new inventions, such as gunpowder, the magnetic compass, and, from a commerce point of view, most important: printed money. With the introduction of printed money they were able to develop a free market and a truly entrepreneurial economy. Fueled by wealth and enlightenment the demand from the imperial court for even finer ceramic wares was increased and under patronage from the imperial court many kilns around the capital blossomed. History tells us that under one man's reign, the Song dynasty's most famous emperor, art was put before all else (Levine, 2012).

The former Song emperors 11th son, born Zhao Ji, emperor Huizong, probably never expected to one day succeed his father and become emperor. Unfit to rule, Huizong rather spent his time painting, writing calligraphy and indulging in extravagance. The powerful aristocrats at the time used the lack of competence in the emperor and through manipulation of the system was able to put an enormous amount of tax revenues into their own pocket. The emperor poured money into scholarly activities and

commissioned new imperial gardens, leaving, at first, little money for anything else (Pletcher, 2011). This skewed prioritization while the government was full of corruption, gave birth to an extraordinary portfolio of classic ceramic wares. Among the five classic wares which were produced under imperial patronage (China Online Museum, 2009), the ware considered the rarest and most celebrated is the Ru ware. It was the first time in history that ceramic goods were exclusively produced for the imperial court and has from the dawn of its existence been the most collectable item (The British Museum). Only being produced for some 20 years they started to be collectors' items already in the southern Song dynasty. Today only 65 objects of imperial Ru ware are in public existence – the largest collections being 20 pieces in Britain and 23 pieces in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, Taiwan. Since this particular type of imperial porcelain was only actively produced during a short period of time, academic material on the subject is been scarce (Wang, 2012). Expeditions to find the "official" imperial kilns started in prewar China where they initially focused on cemetery sites rather than old settlements and dwelling sites. Since the beginning until today, in the search for the production sites the most widely used technique to date and identify is by "Shard Identification", where they, among other things, compare the local geology, shape, glaze, and how it might have been made (Weldrake). The first successful expedition was led by Harada Gentotsu and the Count Otani Kozui in 1931, where they researched shard specimens from six different kilns just south of Kaifeng in Linru County, Henan Province. Their examinations proved that Linru was a manufacturing site of imperial Ru ceramic goods. However, they could not find a definitive imperial Ru ware kiln at the time, it would take another five decades before anyone was able to determine an official Ru ware kiln. On a field in Qingliangsi village, a pale celadon shard was discovered which would lead scientists to a monastery in 1987, which was established to be the first discovered site that burned Ru porcelain for the imperial court. The excavation was funded by the Shanghai Museum and their results were published as "The Discovery of Ru ware" and resulted in further directing of resources to the area. Leading up to the excavations at Oinglingsi between 1987 and 2002, conducted by the Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, resulting in one of the biggest archaeological finds of all time and was published in a full report September 2008 titled Baofeng Qinglingsi Ru Ware. What they found was a large complex of workshops with the remains of production and kilns. Today, the site is classified as one of China's most important heritages and is protected by the State Council. It was first in the Qing dynasty craftsmen tried to copy Ru ware and wrote anything on the subject, so before the archaeological findings at Qinglingsi scholars had to rely on these ancient texts for research (Tan, 2015). Today imperial Ru wares are considered the crown jewels of ceramics, the latest artifact that went up for auction at Sotheby's Hong Kong sold for 208M HKD (27M USD), completely dwarfing any previous sale price (Sotheby's Hong Kong, 2012).

The characteristics of imperial Ru wares are their delicate forms, thinness, small size, being deliberately modest, appealing to the values of simplicity, purity, and spirituality of the time. However, most importantly, the allurement of the imperial Ru wares lies in its luminous and famously characteristically cracked celadon glaze. The craquelure of the glaze is often described as resembling the crackling of ice. In contrast to previous ceramic goods the craftsmen making Ru ware balanced their pieces on stilts, which left small marks in the bottom, contemporaries comparing the marks to sesame seeds. With this technique they could cover the whole piece with the thick, smooth and rather subtle glaze, making it seem as if it was carved out of jade. This type of glazing technique is considered very difficult to achieve with good results, as any unintentional ripple of the glaze will break the illusion, and the Ru ware craftsmen would only leave a maximum of six impressions on the underside of the piece after firing. Even today, some consider the art of combining the shape and the glaze into such an aesthetically pleasing piece extremely difficult, the song dynasty imperial Ru wares stand without comparison. Each piece is monochrome, with the color nuances ranging from sky blue to blue-green, which is usually described as harmonious, pure, and underrated, while it completely integrates fluidly with the ceramic base which it covers. A paler color means that the firing temperature was low, and a darker nuance means that the firing temperature was higher (Xinmin). The thick texture almost inviting any bystander to palpation (Nilsson) (Wang, 2012) (Tan, 2015). The wares were admired so much by the Qing dynasty's Qianlong emperor that he had his poems inscribed on 16 of his most valuable porcelains, whereas 15 of them were imperial Ru ware (Xinmin).

Emperor Huizong himself was a man that enjoyed simple forms, perhaps seeking fulfillment in beautiful art objects that he did not achieve as emperor. The known shapes of imperial Ru wares includes: brush washers, tea-bowl stands, narcissus bowls, incense burners, dishes, bowls, and vases, whereas

among the excavated items the largest group of items are those meant to be used in daily life. Patterns are scarcely present on the known pieces, but the most frequent pattern is florals, commonly depicting the motif of lotus flowers. Lotus flowers have also been a source of inspiration to the imperial Ru ware craftsmen in creating the shape of the items. The second most common reoccurring pattern were dragon patterns. Sizes are consistently small, ranging in height from a few to a maximum of 30cm, while the diameter of round wares rarely exceeds 20cm (Cultural China).



**Fig. 1**, Northern Song Dynasty Imperial Ru ware lobed bush washer. Picture credit: Sotheby's Auction House Hong Kong; "An outstanding RU Guanyao Lobed Brush Washer Northern Song dynasty". Sold April 2002, Sale Total: 208M HKD (27M USD) (Sotheby's Hong Kong, 2012).

With the five imperially patronized classical wares, Ding, Ru, Jun and northern celadons from Linru and Yaozhou, named after the areas from which they were produced, gaining international fame outside of Chinese borders, the export of ceramics expanded vastly (Rawson, 2015). Famed for their outstanding quality, the ceramic export became an important commodity, particularly shipped by sea, to Southeast Asia, Persia, Arabia, all the way to Egypt, and Korea, with Korea being the largest importer. Especially in Korea, the celadon wares were so popular that they started to copy the items and ultimately started to produce very high quality wares themselves (Rossabi, 2013). From reading the cited materials, many things point to that the time of this increase in export marks the beginning of where in time Chinese ceramics gained their fame outside of Chinas borders. When shipping very high quantities of high quality goods abroad, it is only natural to strive for ever higher perfection when crafting for emperors and aristochrats on the domestic market. This longing for excellence drove the production to a point where it can no longer be considered an ordinary object, but rather art. Made to soothe a troubled emperor and radiate something impalpable, it is something inanimate which has the ability to create a deeper connection with something animate, giving the sensation of harmony and creating an item that will be desirable all over the world for millennia. The transition to higher quality marks the breaking point where craft becomes art, and in my opinion this happened, regarding Chinese ceramic history, for the first time on a wide scale in the imperial kilns of the northern Song dynasty.

Carl-Wilhelm Igelström Lund University, 2015-09-23.

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**Xinmin Sun** Appriciating Ru Ware [Report]. - [s.l.]: Yingge Ceramics Museum. - Author is the Director of Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archeology;.