

# Chinese Porcelain; Popular and Imperial

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Ever since the tenth century, at the beginning of the Song dynasty in 960 AD, two strands have run through the development of Chinese porcelain, with injections of foreign influence to add to the changes that have taken place down the centuries. At first distinctions between popular and imperial types are not easily distinguished. This partly because ceramic wares of the porcelain type as opposed to earthenwares were still in their infancy in early Song times and partly because until about the end of the 10th Century most kilns made a fairly wide variety of wares. It was only during the 10th Century that some kilns began to specialise in the manufacture of only one or two types. This is particularly true of kilns of north China, where not only the sophisticated white porcelain first appeared, but where the main centre of patronage, at Kaifeng, was situated.

In late Tang times, in the 9th Century, the Xing kilns in Honan had attained a fine reputation for high quality white ware, examples of which have been found as far afield as Samarra, the old Caliphate capital near Baghdad in Iraq. In the following century the main centre for fine porcelain moved farther north into Hebei, to the Ding kilns about 80 miles south-east of Beijing, up in the mountains. The kilns at Yaozhou, to the west in Shaanxi province which in Tang times had made earthenwares, stonewares and white wares, began to turn over directly to the production of a very sophisticated ware known under the generic name of Northern Celadon. There were also other kilns, equally famous in history, which had made a variety of types, such as the Jun kilns, which now began to specialise. With such a change in manufacturing practice there came

notable improvements in quality, and by the time the Song dynasty was securely established and their tax system began to operate to the satisfaction of the court, different levels of production became distinguishable.

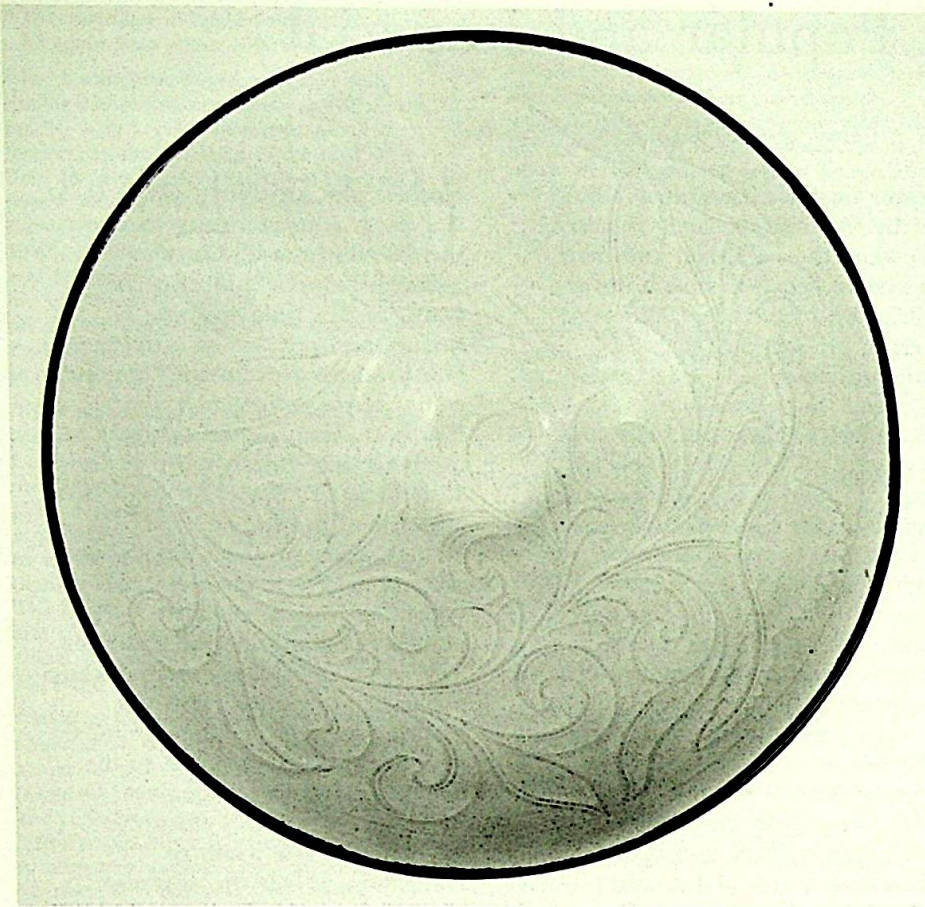
Once there is peace and economic prosperity, the need to satisfy a range of different markets becomes a necessity for survival, unless an organisation is set up under a single wealthy patron. In this respect the Chinese potters knew exactly what they were doing. For the upper end of the market most kilns were able to produce wares of the very finest quality from about 1000 AD onward, while for ordinary general use less good wares were made which included a wide range of black and brown wares, stonewares of Jun and Cizhou types, as well as lower quality Yaozhou celadons and Ding wares. Rejects from the better kilns found a ready market among the ordinary people, as indeed they still do, while in the south, at the Longquan kilns in Zhejiang, the overseas and local domestic markets were well supplied.

There is an added element here. It is that some taxes were paid by the kilns in the form of goods, that is in their own products. Yaozhou, for instance, at the beginning of the 12th Century, sent in to court as part of its tax, or tribute, 12,000 pieces of top class celadon. The Ding kilns were also suppliers of fine ware to the court. But here the situation was slightly different, because the white ware was greatly favoured. The emperor used to appoint a buying commission of eunuchs to go and cream off the best Ding wares at regular intervals. Of all the wares of north China the Ding was not only the technically most sophisticated, but was also for many people the most

aesthetically satisfying. (Plate 1) At this point it is necessary to stress the fact that the distinctions between popular and imperial wares at this time was one of quality and not one of a unique kiln producing exclusively for the court. However, even in the Northern Song period this was to occur, if only briefly early in the 12th Century. Since the court was established in the north, at Kaifeng, just south of the Yellow river, it was perhaps inevitable that with a large and educated population alongside the court, as well as an even larger less educated servicing population, that the production of the kilns enormously increased and in response to the demand improved in quality. Thus up to the year 1127, when the court had to flee south to Hangzhou, it was the northern kilns that were most patronised. Not only this, it became evident that the emperor and his court acquired a strong interest in quality porcelain so that in about 1100 AD, for the first time, a kiln was established to produce a specific ware exclusively for the palace. This was the famed Ru ware, which ceased production abruptly in 1127. Until recently it was believed to have been made at a kiln established within the precincts of the imperial palace at Kaifeng, but it has now been discovered in a remote valley in the western part of Honan. Thus for the first time we can observe a clear distinction between imperial and popular wares.

The existence of such patronage in the north almost inevitably meant that there would be technical and aesthetic refinements. Indeed the improvements in all round quality in Chinese porcelains in the late 11th and early 12th Century were quite remarkable. It is however, characteristic of the period that





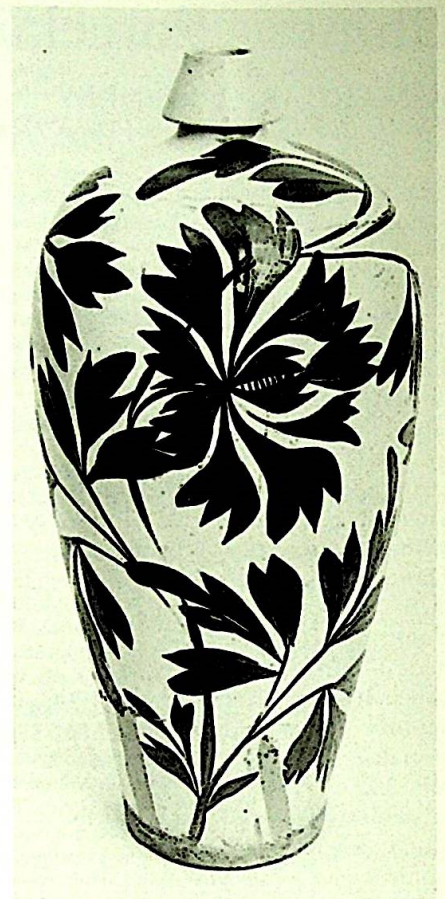
1 Ding bowl with carved decoration. Song, early 12th Century. Diameter 20.7 cm (8 in)  
Formerly Mrs A Clark Collection

subdued colours and restrained, even subtle decoration were the predominant features of the more sophisticated wares. These restraints were in some degree imposed by the very materials themselves. Stoneware glazes are mainly coloured with iron oxides producing all the subdued blues greys and greens in a reducing atmosphere and browns and blacks in an oxidizing atmosphere.

While popular taste was no doubt reasonably content with this, there was also one stream within this that favoured decoration of a more obvious kind than subtle carving and moulding, such as painting and *sgraffito* (Plate 2). This preference was catered for by the Cizhou type kilns, which were numerous and widely distributed. These produced a great variety of sturdy wares suitable for ordinary household use as well as for more ornamental purposes. This, of course, was a

northern ware, but in the south the very popular Jizhou wares were similarly available for the domestic and non-imperial market. These wares were extremely varied both in type and decoration, and were always much admired by ordinary folk (Plate 3). By the end of the 14th Century, in fact, when the kilns were no longer in operation, the products were beginning to be looked on with a degree of favour by the middle class connoisseurs.

Even after the court moved to the south, and with it the patronage of the kilns, it was the monochromes with the restraints and subtleties that continued to be favoured. We can thus affirm that the Song emperor and his court imposed a character on ceramic production in their time, both in the north, before the Jin tartar invasion and in the south when patronage was moved to the Longquan celadon kilns and to a very limited degree

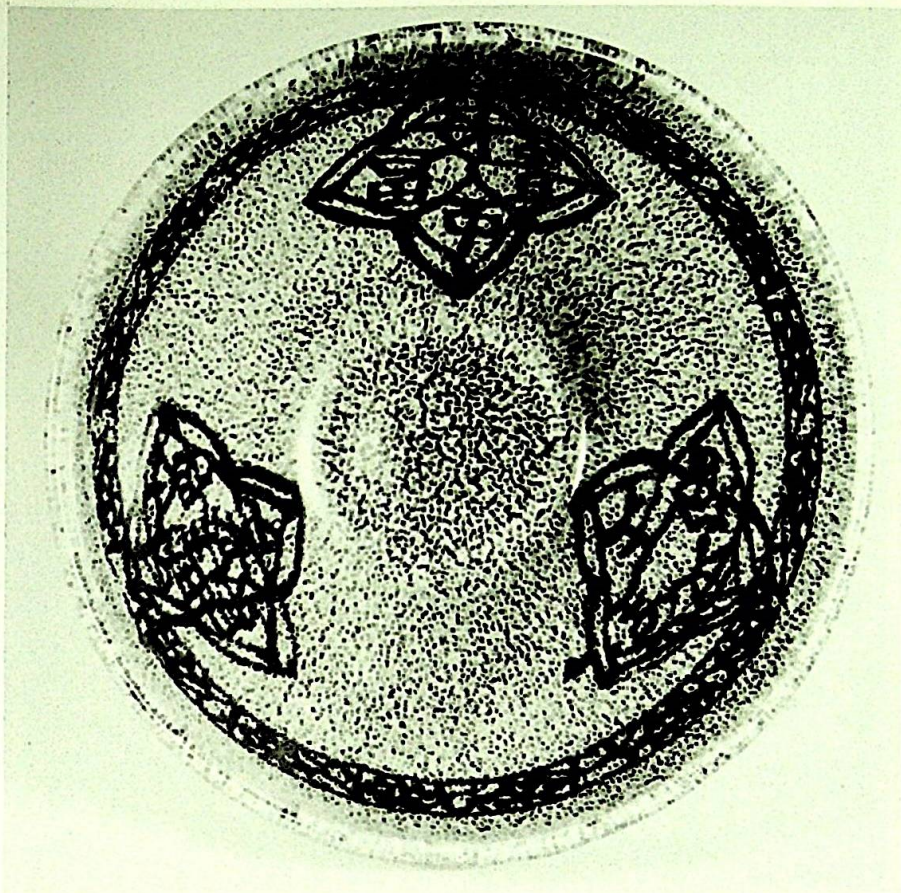


2 Cizhou vase with painted decoration. Song, 12th Century. Height 36.5 cm (14.3 in)  
Victoria & Albert Museum

to Jingdezhen, which was only after the end of the Song to become the dominant centre. During the Southern Song it was to be Guan and Longquan celadon, both made in Zhejiang for the court, domestic use and the overseas markets that held the centre of the stage. Jizhou, south of Jingdezhen, and the other smaller kilns in southern Zhejiang and through Fujian and Guangdong, were almost completely ignored by the court and aristocratic taste.

At the same time as Song imperial patronage continued to favour the Zhejiang kilns above all others, and the quality went on improving, the emperor was experiencing great political and economic problems. During the 13th Century the Jin dynasty holding the north, followed by the Mongols in 1235, put pressure on the Southern Song in both economic and military terms.





3 *Jizhou bowl with blackish paper-cut decoration on a speckled buff ground. Southern Song. 12th–13th Century. Diameter 12.3 cm (4.8 in) Japanese Collection*

This meant the emperor had to find revenue to ward off the potential invaders, either in bribes or by military force. In an attempt to resolve the problems, he and his government set about encouraging the overseas trade for sake of the revenue it yielded. The export of both silk goods and porcelain provided a considerable revenue, as did the import duty on spices, exotics and aromatics, together with Islamic metalwork, glass and certain fine, quality textiles. Concomittant with this increase in revenue was a natural increase in the numbers and prosperity of the merchants, who were to play an important part in the following century.

The full impact of the encouragement of the foreign trade only became apparent after 1275 following the fall of the Southern Song. Suddenly it was no longer the court calling the tune. The

Mongols had little interest in porcelain as such, but they had a good deal of interest in the revenue it brought them, so they continued to encourage the trade. This meant that the merchants and the ordinary people, together with the foreigners with their special requirements now began to control production. Not only this, but many of the Longquan kilns began an extraordinary period of experimentation.

The Longquan celadons had long been popular overseas; they were after all finer and stronger than anything produced outside China. Now the kilns began to produce huge bowls and dishes, useless to the Chinese, but very popular in the Islamic west and among many of the peoples of Indonesia. They also began to experiment with new techniques of decoration. Some were successful, others less so, barely surviving the 14th Century.

The potters changed the glaze recipe, making it more translucent and so less inhibiting to the decorators who now carved and moulded, and added reliefs to the body before glazing, or they floated unglazed decorative reliefs, that changed colour in the firing, on the surface of the unfired glaze on dishes, and on vases they painted areas of richly moulded decoration with a wax resist to produce the same effect, and even went so far as to add gilding in some instances. Some of the traditional utilitarian shapes continued with their restrained decorations for purely practical reasons, but the output as a whole seems to have been dominated by the need to satisfy the overseas customers in Southeast Asia, India and the Near East, and it was from the Near East that the greatest innovation came.

Jingdezhen, unlike Longquan, does not appear to have had a place of any great importance so far as the educated elite was concerned. Production was mainly for local consumption and for the overseas trade. The pure white porcelain known variously as *yingqing* and *qingbai* carried on many of the traditions of the Ding in the north, with carved and moulded decoration, and owed much to the northern kiln in its style of decoration. Despite its rather frail appearance it was in fact quite a strong ware. It became a great deal stronger when the body recipe was changed towards the end of the 13th Century. The pieces then became sturdier and often very much larger, and then suddenly in the early 14th Century cobalt blue pigment was introduced from Persia for the decoration of this wonderful white ware. There followed a period when the potters worked with enormous enthusiasm and changed the whole direction of Chinese ceramic history, away from the subdued and refined Song tradition of monochrome towards rich decoration and colour. The best they made was for the overseas market, in some respects much influenced by Islamic concepts of



design, but almost always using purely Chinese motifs (*Plate 4*). They also made a great deal for the new wealthy middle class merchants. For them were produced the large wine-jars and tall vases painted with scenes from the popular dramas, themes such as would not be acceptable in an Islamic culture.

This was popular taste showing itself on a large scale. Decoration from now on was to be an important element in the evaluation of Chinese porcelain, and initially it was viewed by the more conservative members of the elite as "very vulgar". This is hardly surprising in view of the sobriety of Song production; it must have seemed garish, even if to our eyes it appears rather splendid.

Curiously enough the connoisseurs of the time seem to have thought Jizhou decorated wares quite acceptable, but of course the subdued browns and pale buffs to some degree prolonged the Song tradition while the decorated Cizhou from the north with its overglaze enamel colours, was classed by one critic as of no account and vulgar. It was probably the often brilliant mass of blue on white and the sometimes complex decorations to which the older connoisseurs objected, but which the ordinary people, who always had an eye for colour and richness of pattern, delighted in. They were now the trendsetters.

By the end of the 14th Century the potters had become so enthralled by their new skills and inspiration in decoration that they were very unlikely to abandon the direction in which they were now moving in favour of any return to more reserved artistic expression. There was no turning back. Nevertheless the fall of the Mongols and the establishment of the new native Ming dynasty in 1368 did involve a re-assessment of what they were doing. The main reason for this was the collapse of the overseas trade, partly for economic reasons, but also because the emperor



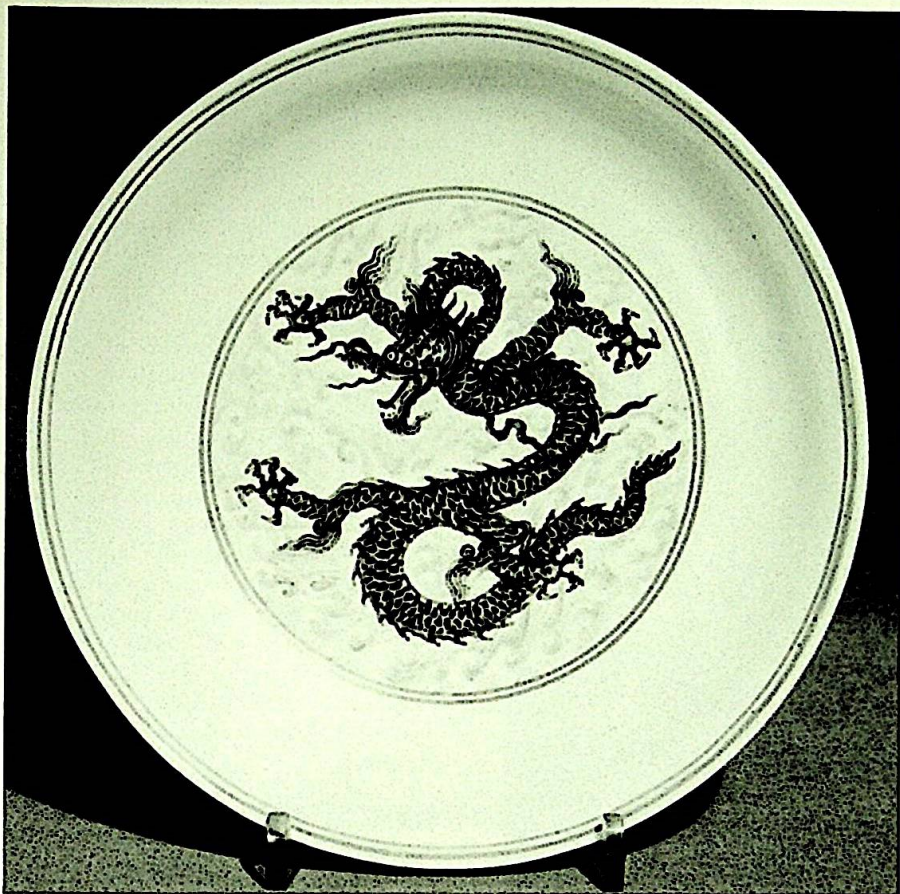
4 Blue and white dish with fish. Yuan, 14th Century. Diameter 45.5 cm (17.9 in) Freer Gallery of Art

forbade foreign trade except under government auspices. So the potters of Jingdezhen, now the chief manufacturing centre, denied the kind of freedom they had enjoyed during the Yuan period had to adjust to the restrictions of the domestic market which now expanded in place of the overseas market. This could probably not have been easily done had not the court taken an interest in the production.

For the period covered by the reign of the first Ming emperor, Hongwu, there is little evidence, but there are indications that some sort of control was exerted. By the reigns of Yongle and Xuande, from 1402 to 1435, however it is clear that imperial control and indeed direction of production and design had become a very positive factor. The first emperor had restored the wealth of the empire to an extraordinary degree, so that by the

beginning of the 15th Century luxuries could well be afforded. The immense prestige of Yongle, especially, justified a large expenditure on fine quality materials of all kinds, and it is apparent from the texts that there was a central design office making drawings available to the different crafts. Most of the drawings would have come from the textile drawing offices and many of them could easily be adapted by skilled craftsmen to the different media. In pursuing the dragon alone through the different media from textiles through carved lacquer, cloisonne enamel, metalwork and blue and white and monochrome porcelain this can be clearly demonstrated. The same dragons are used in all. They are placed in the same positions, and in many cases used facing one way on one of a pair of pieces and exactly reversed on the other, indicating that pounced drawings were frequently used to





5 Blue and white dish with imperial dragon. Ming, Xuande period, 1426–35. Diameter 17.8 cm (7 in) Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art

lay down the main lines of a design. The same treatments can be seen in underglaze blue decoration or in incised decoration on a plain white piece. Alongside dragons were many designs that included highly symbolic fruits and flowers organised either as continuous scrolls or as tastefully disposed detached sprays. The quality of design, materials and workmanship was of the very highest standard, truly fit for kings and emperors, as indeed was intended.

The emperor Yongle's diplomatic and trade relations with Shah Rukh at Herat, Ulug Beg at Samarkand and the princes of Isfahan more than justified the expenditure on fine porcelains, textiles and tapestries, all of which found their way to Islamic lands by land and sea. How else can the great collections of Ardebil and Topkapı be accounted for? The high

level of control and artistic direction continued into the reign of Xuande, during which vast orders were placed with the kilns of Jingdezhen. One of these, for the year 1433, informs us that the court sent down an order for 433,500 pieces of porcelain, "some to be decorated with dragons and phoenix in accordance with designs" taken down by an officer of the Board of Works. (Plate 5).

It is perhaps because of the very strong control at this time that we know relatively little of what was produced for the general domestic market. The main difficulty is that the porcelains were expendable. What does survive tends to be the best and such more general material as has come down to us is much the same as that made for the court, the dragons and phoenix excepted, but of poorer quality in all respects.

After the death of Xuande in 1435 production at Jingdezhen was steadily reduced in the following ten years, but during those ten years and in the succeeding decades until the accession of Chenghua in 1465, new ideas and styles began to make their appearance. Buddhist and Daoist themes can be identified, and a new type of dragon, not of imperial character occurs. The new dragon is in fact the *makaras* of Buddhist origin, having a long trunk-like snout, a fleshy body and a foliated tail, while from the mouth springs a flower spray. There were also ducks and fish in ponds with water weed, some of which looked back to the achievements of 14th Century blue and white. The reasons are not hard to find. During the interregnum between 1435 and 1465 imperial control had lapsed and it was only re-asserted under Chenghua after 1465. This meant that popular taste had an opportunity for expression, and this expression was strong enough to make an impact on the production of the last quarter of the century, even though imperial control was to some extent re-imposed, and it continued to have an effect up to the death of Zhengde in 1521.

The emperor Jiajing's reign saw the merging of imperial and popular taste, combined with a gradual weakening of control, not only of ceramic production but of the whole economy. The quality became rather variable and although the best remained of a very high standard, there was far more middle range material than even fifty years earlier. The subject matter during the 16th Century showed a previously unknown diversity. Formal designs of dragons and phoenix inevitably continued, but the emperor's personal attachment to Daoism was bound to have an effect on the decorations in all media. This is seen in the introduction into the decorative repertory of themes relating to longevity and the Daoist immortals. (Plate 6) Cranes, deer, pine trees, peaches, *shou* characters

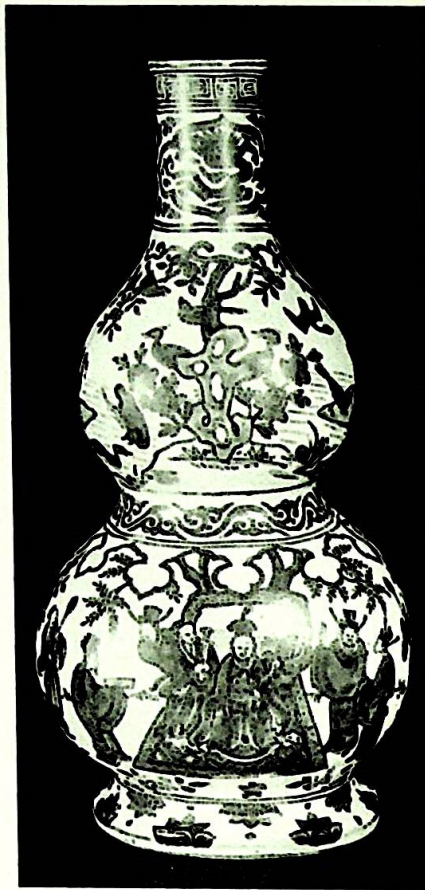


(longlife), *lingzhi* (the fungus of longevity) and trees contorted into shapes of auspicious characters crowd the surfaces in a startlingly different way from the exquisite control of the early 15th Century. Alongside these themes are numerous examples of landscapes. The sudden growth of a profitable export trade in the latter part of the 16th century undoubtedly did much to stimulate popular invention. Not only this, but shapes began to change as much as decoration.

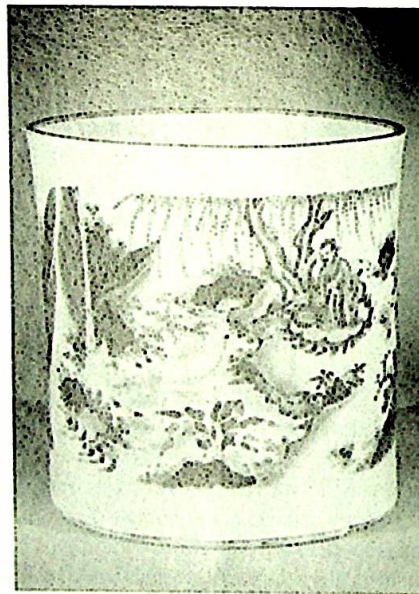
Under the emperor Wanli (1573–1619), whose extravagance was notorious, attempts were made to command material on a large scale, but the demands were often so outrageous that the workmen went on strike and then there were also riots. Then in 1619, when Wanli died, all attempts to control production were given up and the supervising officers were withdrawn. However the overseas trade was thriving with the Japanese, Portuguese and the Dutch and English being the best customers.

Once more foreign and popular taste dominated, and the “Transitional” period from 1619 to 1675 laid the foundations for the early Qing style under the emperor Kangxi. The extraordinary variety of shapes and decorations that appeared during these years and the manner in which they developed are a subject on their own. The old imperial kilns which had produced the finest quality wares, turned to making high quality wares for the upper end of the domestic market and for the Dutch. Decorations were often freely disposed over the surfaces in a very painterly manner, using incidents from well-known dramas or history, sometimes with political overtones that offered criticism of the failing dynasty. (Plate 7)

After the end of the Ming in 1644, there was a decline in production due more to the economic depression in the last years of the



6 Blue and white wall vase with Daoist scene. Ming, Wanli period, 1573–1619. Height 25.4 cm (10 in) Formerly Mrs A Clark Collection



7 Blue and white brush pot with an historical scene of Tai Gong in retirement, fishing. Late Ming, circa 1630–40. Height 20.1 cm (7.9 in) Metropolitan Museum of Art

Ming than to disturbances during the change of dynasty. By 1651, however, there were indications of revival and the variety that appeared has made dating particularly difficult for the early Qing. One thing is clear. It is that the late Ming “Transitional” style had begun to crystallise into a distinctive early Qing style, best seen in the early Kangxi material up to the last twenty years of the 17th Century. Marvellously painted landscapes became an important feature, as did also scenes from that most popular of dramas *Xixiangji*, “Romance of the Western Chamber”. From about 1670 the emperor Kangxi exerted a powerful influence on the kilns and some fine quality material was made, some of it dated and apparently made specifically for the Jonghe Pavillion in the capital. On these pieces the Kangxi style has already matured.

There was then a brief hiatus as the Three Feudatories rebellion brought ruin to the kilns in 1675. The rebellion was finally brought under control and peace restored in 1680 and from then on imperial control was restored. The emperor ordered a complete review of the industry and it was restructured under his personally appointed superintendent. This ensured the future prosperity of the industry and also the dominance of imperial taste well into the 18th Century. The emphasis was now on technical perfection and a result was to be a quite unparalleled virtuosity. (Plate 8).

The pattern of imperial and popular porcelain has been one in which when the central government was strong, imperial taste dominated, and when it was weak, popular taste dominated. But without the popular taste to drive developments forward, the imperial wares would quickly have become sterile; they were too dependent on orders, often given without an understanding of the possibilities.





8 Dish painted in famille rose enamels, with anhua decoration round the sides. Qing, Yongzheng period, 1723–35. Diameter 26 cm (10.2 in) Formerly Sotheby's, London