

The Ming Dynasty Ceramics at the Burrell

The Ming Dynasty is broadly contemporary with the European Renaissance, 14th to 17th centuries.

Just prior to 1368, with China still under control of the Mongol led Yuan Dynasty, Chinese agriculture and economy was in a terrible state with massive inflation due to paper currency over circulation and many years of under investment in infrastructure such as irrigation projects. After serious flooding had occurred along the Yellow River, the peasants were called on to work on repairs and as a result, a rebellion broke out.

Several Han Chinese groups revolted, the most predominant one being the Red Turbans who were led by a peasant, Zhu Yuanzhang. He eliminated his rivals and eventually established the new Ming Dynasty in 1368 with his capital at Nanking, taking the reign title Hongwu ('Vastly Martial'). He called his new dynasty 'Ming' (which means Bright or Radiant). Hongwu emperor organised his administration and army along broadly similar lines to the Tang Dynasty. As a result of his peasant origins, he created laws that improved the peasant's life. He kept the land tax low, and kept the granaries stocked to guard against famine. He also maintained the dikes on the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers.



Hongwu Emperor

While retaining the Confucian view that being a merchant is an inferior occupation, Hongwu discarded the belief that military too was inferior and developed a militant class that ranked higher than any civil servant. The powerful Ming army not only drove off the Mongol tribes (at least temporarily), they extended Chinese control as far as Southern Siberia, further north than any period since the Tang Dynasty, and more extensive than any period before. The fifteen Ming provinces, based on the Tang provinces, survive much the same to this day, with the addition of another three provinces during the Qing Dynasty.

Hongwu died in 1398 and was succeeded by his grandson, the Jianwen emperor. He died in a palace fire and was succeeded by his uncle, The Prince of Yen, who became the third emperor of

the Ming Dynasty in 1403, giving himself the name of Yongle (Lasting Joy). Yongle moved the capital back to Peking. Under his rule, a well-known grand eunuch, Zheng-he, headed seven naval expeditions that went as far as the east coast of Africa. These trips followed established routes for trade and diplomatic purposes. As a result, China retained its dominant position in terms of the economy, the military and naval power.



Location of Jingdezhen (Imperial Kilns of Qing-te-chen)

The Imperial Kilns at Jingdezhen (or Ching-te-chen), are located in Northeast Jiangxi province on the Yangtze (Ch'ang) River. Jingdezhen has been a world famous centre of ceramics making since the beginning in the Han Dynasty, when the city was called 'Xinping'. During the first year (1004, of the Jingde Era) of the reign of Zhenzong Emperor of the Song Dynasty, it was decreed by the court that the porcelain wares made there were for imperial use, and would be marked with the wording "Made during the Jingde Reign" on the bottom of every piece. As a result, the city got its name "Jingdezhen". It is an ideal location for fine ceramics production being close to the source of raw materials; the white China clay, kaolin, found near Poyang Lake to the west, China Stone (feldspar), tungsten, gold dust, cuprum, fluorite, sulphur, limestone, marble, coal, cobalt and of course water for production and transport. The area is also heavily forested. It is estimated there are sufficient Kaolin deposits to sustain a further 300 years of porcelain production.



Yuan Underglazed Blue-and-White dish for export to the Middle East (38-658)

From the Yuan Dynasty onwards, officials from the court were sent to oversee the manufacture of royal porcelain. It was also during the Yuan Dynasty that blue-and-white porcelain production started and this development continued for the next 350 years. The Yuan blue-and-white wares were for export to the Middle East and show a strong Islamic Influence **(38-658)** in the design. It has been suggested that blue-and-white wares were first developed in the Middle East and taken up by Chinese potters to exploit this market opportunity. Throughout the 14th century, this form of decoration was regarded as rather vulgar amongst the Chinese themselves. At the same time as the Yuan Dynasty was coming to an end, Tamerlane (Timur the Lame) was devastating large

parts of Iran and Central Asia. For a time, the trade routes out of China were disrupted and production at Jingdezhen ceased, and did not recommence until some five years into the Ming Dynasty.



Ming 'Heaped and piled' Effect

Late Yuan and early Ming blue-and-white wares are heavily potted and the bases are usually left unglazed and burnt orange. They have a darkish blue enriched with blackish spots, described as having a 'heaped and piled' effect, which was caused unintentionally. In later 18th century copies, the spots are applied deliberately.



Bowl with Xuande Mark and Period - Porcelain with Mark in Underglazed Cobalt Blue (38-???)



Pair of Candlesticks - Jiajing Mark and Period
Porcelain with monochrome cobalt blue glaze and design reserved in biscuit.
Traces of red lacquer and gilding remain on reserve decoration (38-458 and 38-459)

Above right, Jiajing Mark located on the rim

The Ming Dynasty was the first to display the reign title (nian hao) of the Emperor on the majority of their porcelain. The reign title usually consists of six characters written in underglazed blue on the base of a piece of porcelain and enclosed inside a double ring. However, it can also appear as a decorative element in its own, on the inside of a bowl(38-???), on the lip(38-458 and 38-459), neck or waste of the object. The use of reign titles prior to the Xuande period is relatively unusual.

Whilst sometimes crude, Ming ceramics are both brilliant and colourful. More complex pieces such as jars and vases are made up of two or more pieces joined together with fluid clay slip, called luted joints, a process developed in the Yuan Dynasty. Soame Jenyns (an 18th century author and politician) remarked on Ming ceramics, "The drawing is swift and certain, if sometimes violent, and often delightfully impressionistic in the coarser pieces. Like of the Renaissance, ...there was more than a hint of vulgarity and lack of repose". Ming ceramics are often quite roughly finished with little or no retouching, and little attempt to smooth the way seems. Few pieces were rejected as a result of kiln shrinkage.

The work at the Imperial Kilns was highly organised, with some degree of specialisation amongst artists being used, but by no means as much as during the Qing Dynasty. However, by the beginning of the 16th century, artists were copying designs given to them, so individuality and the identity of individual potters was lost.



Meiping Vase - Yuan-early Ming 14c - Cizhou stoneware, painted and glazed (38-402)



Vase - Guangdong province, 18c Stoneware with speckled glaze (38-342)



Octagonal bowl - Guangdong province, 18c Stoneware with speckled glaze (38-343)

Some of the private kilns at Jingdezhen did maintain records of who worked for them and allow the use individual potter's marks, such as at the I-hsing (Yixing) kilns, Te-hua 'blanc de chine', Cizhou(38-402) and Guangdong(38-343 & 38-342) stoneware.



*Linglong bowl from Wanli Period, Daoist Immortals on Roundels.
Porcelain with Pierced and Relief Decoration Under Transparent Glaze (38-587)*



Vase - Stoneware with Relief Decoration Under Cream Glaze (38-272)

Monochrome wares formed an important part of the production and were in tune with the simpler tastes of the Ming Dynasty. They include the red wares(**38-728**) with a rich copper-red glaze (not achieved in Europe until the 19th century), Imperial Yellow(**38-646**), turquoise, cobalt-blue(**38-638**) and green glazes.



Bowl - Xuande Mark and Period Porcelain with copper red glaze (38-728)



Dish - Hongzhi Mark and Period - Porcelain with yellow glaze (38-646)



Dish - Jiajing Mark and Period - Porcelain with Monochrome Cobalt blue glaze (38-638)

Yongle Emperor died in 1424 and was succeeded by Hongxi emperor who died after only one year in power but introduced many good reforms that made lasting improvements, and his liberal policies were carried on by his son, Xuande (also known as Hsüan-te) Emperor. Xuande ruled until 1435, a time regarded by many as the Ming Dynasty's golden age. It was a period of peace and prosperity.



Bowl - Xuande Mark and Period - Porcelain with Underglazed Cobalt Blue Decoration (38-448)

It was during the period just prior to Xuande that the Chinese began to develop a taste for blue-and-white decoration, with a slow development in designs towards more Chinese motifs. From 1410-25 there was an increase in the variety of decoration, with the use of detached sprays showing six or eight flowers(38-448) forming a running scroll rather than the continuous scrolls of flowers used before. Landscapes were introduced. The central band of decoration was replaced by freer, uncluttered, more open designs. These developments led to the classical age of Chinese blue-and-white during the 15th century and particularly during the reigns of Xuande and Chenghua. It was the Ming dynasty that saw the change from stoneware to porcelain and the development of decoration in polychrome enamels(38-468).



Jiajing Mark and Period, Porcelain with overglazed red and green enamels (38-468)



Bowl of Kraak Porselein Type - Wanli Mark and Period - Porcelain Underglaze Cobalt Blue Decoration (38-451)

Porcelain exports continued to all parts of the world, including Europe, where it was much admired. A lot of the porcelain produced for export was of a poorer quality to that produced for Chinese consumption. It became known as Kraak porselein(38-451), after the Portuguese carracks that were used to transport it. One of these vessels was captured by the Dutch in 1603, and the pottery caused a sensation when it was displayed in Amsterdam. These ceramics were

highly valued in Europe and were quite often mounted in silver as can be seen in Dutch paintings of the 17th century such as the still life by Jan Janz Treck which includes two Ming dishes.



Still life by Jan Janz Treck (1606 - 1652) showing two Ming dishes with a pewter flagon

Xuande was succeeded by his son, Zhengtong Emperor. Zhengtong ruled for one year before being captured in battle against the Mongols. During captivity, he developed a good friendship with the Khan, but in China chaos broke out so his brother was made emperor with the name Jingtai. After one year of captivity, Zhengtong was released but then placed under house arrest on his return by Jingtai. After seven years, Zhengtong managed to over-throw his brother and ruled as emperor for a further seven years.

There is little or no information on porcelain production in the Chinese records for the turbulent period from the end of the reign of Xuande (1435) to the classical reign of Chenghua (1465). No blue-and-white porcelain of Imperial quality bearing the nien hao of the emperors Zhengtong and Jingtai exists. Some cloisonné (an enamelling technique developed from metalworking) of this period bearing the reign-name of Jingtai indicates that despite the disturbances fine works of art were being made.



Chenghua Emperor

At the age of 17, Chenghua became emperor on the death of his father, Zhengtong. Chenghua Emperor ruled for 23 years during which time Chinese culture flourished. Unfortunately it also saw an increase in corruption and poor government.

The Chenghua period is famous for its Palace bowls which have a subtle, refined and delicate quality and are decorated with floral scrolls of lilies, poppies or fruiting melons. The 'heaped and piled' effect of the earlier wares is less obvious, and the glaze is smoother and thinner.



Pear Shaped Ewer - 14th Century, Porcelain Underglazed Copper Red Decoration (38-455)

The local cobalt was not of the best quality, so most was imported. Sources of cobalt were hard to find so during the 15th century alternatives in the form of copper-red and iron-green were also used, although largely abandoned by the end of the century. Most of the imported cobalt came from the Middle-East and was called Mohammedan blue, and was often used in combination with the local cobalt, for example; mixed six parts Mohammedan blue to four parts local blue for outlining and nine parts Mohammedan blue to one part local blue for washes. Achieving a good underglazed red was very difficult, but there were some successes, such as the copper-red(38-455) ewer in the Burrell.



Rhyton in the Shape of a Water Buffalo's Head - 16-17c, Porcelain with Ming san cai (three colour) enamels (38-512)



Brick with Bodhisattva Seated in Niche - 17c, Earthenware with enamels on biscuit (38-680)



Seated Luohan - Stoneware with San sai enamels on biscuit

Polychrome wares began to become fashionable at Court towards the end of the 15th century. The most magnificent of these are the Ming san sai (**38-512 & 38-680 - The Burrell Luohan is another example**), or three-colour glazes, which imitated the colours used during the Tang Dynasty. The colours used may be yellow and green or turquoise and aubergine or some combination of these colours, sometimes with white. Another technique is fahua (**38-517 & 38-518, 38-536, 38-549, 38-530, 38-515**), in which the colours are separated by a thin ridge of clay, often in cloisonné style or by incised lines, to keep the different coloured glazes from running together. Also, by the end of the 15th century, the technique of painting in bold splashes of colour had been replaced by a technique using carefully drawn outlines filled in with a uniform wash.



*Pair of Temple Altar Vases with Animal-Head Handles - late 15c
Stoneware with fahua (enclosed design) decorated in enamel on the biscuit (38-517 & 38-518)*



Bulb Bowl - 16c, Stoneware with fahua decoration in enamels on biscuit (38-536)



Wine Jar - Porcelain with fahua decoration in enamels on biscuit (38-549)



Vase with Elephant-Head Handles - 16c, Porcelain with fahua decoration in enamels on biscuit (38-530)



Vase with Animal-Head Handles - 15c, Porcelain with fahua decoration in enamels on biscuit (38-515)

Most polychrome wares consist of a combination of enamels and underglazed blue on white. During the Chenghua period, a group of wares known as tou ts'ai (meaning five colour, appropriateness of decoration or contrasting colours). Of these wares, the most famous are the stem cups decorated with vine leaves and bunches of grapes, and the 'Chicken Cups' (38-435), decorated with chickens amongst flowering plants.



Stem cup - 16c Porcelain with Underglazed Cobalt Blue Decoration (38-442)



*Chicken Bowl - Four character cyclical mark on vase dates it to the year 1492AD
Porcelain Underglazed with Cobalt Decoration (38-435)*

The bulk of celadon production moved from Long-Quan to Chu-chou. The yellow monochrome wares of the Chenghua period are of particularly high quality and become the predominant feature of the next reign.



*Potichie and cover - Zhejiang province, 15c,
Porcelain with Lungquan type celadon glaze over relief decoration (38-316)*



Dish - Stoneware, Zhejiang province with incised decoration under celadon glaze (38-415)

Shallow dishes and bowls decorated with green dragons pursuing pearls enamelled on a white ground(38-473) where first made at this time.



*Dish, Hongzhi Mark and Period
Porcelain with Green Enamel Five Clawed Dragon Pursuing Pearls on a White Ground
Decoration
on biscuit reserve (38-473)*



Square Sweet Meat dish and Cover with foliated corners and Five Clawed Dragons Chasing Flaming Pearls,

Wanli Mark and Period, 1573-1619
Porcelain with Underglazed Cobalt Blue Decoration (38-449)

When Chenghua died in 1487, his son, Hongzhi ascended the throne. A brilliant academic and follower of Confucian ideology, Hongzhi Emperor stopped the corruption and brought in a period of great prosperity. Along with Hongwu and Yongle, Hongzhi is regarded as being one of the Ming Dynasty's most brilliant emperors.

Yellow bowls were the most common wares during the Hongzhi period, probably made for the Court at private kilns. Hongzhi blue-and-white wares are very rare and it is possible that the Imperial kilns were closed down for a while towards the end of the Chenghua Emperor's reign. A new design, with five-clawed dragons engraved on the paste and filled in with green on a yellow background appears. Underglazed red also becomes an important decoration.

After the death of Hongzhi in 1505 there was a succession of poor emperors mainly concerned with their own interests and indulgencies. Zhengde, grandson of Chenghua, was first; a keen scholar, who could read both Arabic and Tartar, but who was not interested in government. Although not necessarily a Muslim himself, the Court Eunuchs, who were Muslim, gained increasing power and he had several Muslim women in his harem. The porcelain of the period shows an increase in Islamic influence such as the use of Arabic and Persian calligraphy (**38-452**).



16th Century Ming Meiping Vase with Arabic inscriptions by brush in Cartouches
Porcelain with underglazed Blue Decoration and Small Touches of Overglaze Enamel (38-452)

Zhengde was followed by Jiajing, during whose reign the Portuguese were permitted a trading post at Macao in 1557. This trading post was customs free, encouraging a lively entrepot trade where ships would deliver goods to the trading post for shipping on to a further destination, perhaps after some form of processing. This was highly successful, and was followed by a Dutch trading post in 1601, during the reign of Wan-li. China was therefore very much involved with the boom in maritime trade at this period, but did not herself develop a world maritime system of her own. Theft and pilfering was rife in the Imperial Kilns so a new sub-prefect was appointed director to replace the eunuchs as superintendents of the Kilns. The new director met with limited success so a new custom was introduced of 'trading out the baking and contracting the decoration of the

Imperial wares to private kilns'. By the Wan-li period, all Imperial wares were produced at private kilns.

By using cobalt of the highest quality, the underglazed blue wares made for the palace during the Jiajing period have a particularly deep purplish-blue, almost violet tone, and are regarded by the Chinese to be of even higher quality to the blue wares of the Chenghua period. Decorations show strong Taoist influences, with symbols of immortality and longevity being used as well as the eight Taoist genii, dragon and phoenix bowls. As well as the blue wares, a wide range of rich colours were employed including tomato-red, turquoise, sapphire-blue, yellow, aubergine, emerald-green leaf-brown and coffee. Wu tsai (five colour) wares appear using enamels in combination with underglazed blue.



Dish - Porcelain, Wucai (five colours) Underglaze Blue and Overglaze Enamels (38-467)

However, the general fortunes of China continued to decline. The Longqing Emperor (1566 to 1572) attempted to correct the situation; his short reign of six years was not enough to stem the downward trend – a trend that continued during the 48 year reign of Wan-li Emperor, the longest reigning emperor (1572 to 1620) of the Ming Dynasty.

Wan-li's reign saw an increasingly rapid reduction in quality of blue-and-white wares. This may be due to difficulty in getting supplies of high-quality clay, the tight control by the court on design or the enormous quantities of porcelain that the kilns were expected to produce. Over one hundred thousand pieces a year were ordered, and mass production techniques were employed to meet this demand inevitably resulting in lower artistic quality.

The final succession of emperors saw the Ming dynasty eventually come to an end when Chongzhen Emperor hanged himself as the Manchus took control of the country in 1644.

The period from the death of Wanli Emperor to the appointment of Ts'ang Yung-hsuan as director of the Imperial Kilns under the reign of Kang-xi at the start of the Qing Dynasty, is often called the 'Transitional Period'. During this time the bulk of production at the kilns was for orders placed by the Dutch East India Company for export. This sustained the kilns during a period of decreasing court patronage and saw a significant change in style which would be an important influence on the Qing potters of the following dynasty, when Imperial production was re-established on a large scale. The quality of many of these transitional wares is very high with deep violet blue over a clear white body, beautiful landscapes with figures.

by John Rattenbury from various sources