A New Perspective on Transitional Period Chinese Porcelain (1620-1683): Two Case Studies in the Porzellansammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

Tim Revell

By the end of Wanli reign (1572-1620), the Ming court diverted funds for military campaigns against the Manchus in the northeast; as a result, the financial support enjoyed by the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen came to an abrupt end. From 1620 to 1650, virtually no imperial requests were made and only a small number of court commissions were completed before 1683—the year when official kilns reopened under Qing court patronage.[1] This period is now known as 'The Transitional Period,' a term coined by Soame Jenyns in his *Later Chinese Porcelain*, which is defined as the era between ca. 1620 and the later Kangxi re-establishment of official kiln production in 1683. Jenyns indicated ceramics of this period possess the typical characteristics of art that "invariably exists between the fall of one Chinese dynasty and the rise of the next."[2]

However, this paper will suggest that we contemplate widening Jenyns' observation in regards to late-Wanli porcelain and consider that the expansion of and diversity in motifs was a strategy deployed by merchants to raise financial capital and leverage the market. Radical monetary changes during this period had two major effects on porcelain production. First, the need for sustained revenue increased the number of European orders. Second, domestic demand for silver imports caused steady inflation and significant financial insecurity for porcelain manufacturers.[3] Therefore, foreign trade became paramount for kilns as traditional domestic patronage for porcelain decreased. Meanwhile, artisans at Jingdezhen, in lieu of monetary compensation from a central authority (court patronage), were forced to look elsewhere for economic stability, including, as this paper maintains, the antique markets.

This paper will address some effects of the economic tumult in the porcelain trade during the Transitional Period and how artisans deceptively used earlier Ming dynasty reign marks and associated themes in hopes of stabilizing their income. We will also consider how these factors that served to promote Ming literature, painting and ultimately porcelain were part of a new spirit of experimentation in the context of a rising landed gentry and wealthy merchants in the early Qing that gained clout in wake of waning imperial control. Focusing on two porcelain vessels in the Porzellansammlung (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden), this paper will argue that the return to Ming themes and the anachronistic application of Ming imperial reign marks on Qing pieces, were chiefly determined by a market-oriented strategy.

A pitcher, which exhibits high quality, violet-blue cobalt oxide pigment, and most likely made at Jingdezhen during the Chongzhen reign (1628-1644) is the first example **(fig. 14.1)**. It has an oval, vase-shaped

[1] George Kuwayama, *Chinese Ceramics in Colonial Mexico* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 15.
[2] Soame Jenyns, *Later Chinese Porcelain: The Ch'ing Dynasty 1644-1912* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 17.
[3] Chun-shu Chang and Shelly Hsueh-lun Chang, *Crisis and Transformation in Seventeenth-Century China: Society, Culture, and Modernity in Li Yü's World* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 151.

Tim Revell, A New Perspective on Transitional Period Chinese Porcelain (1620-1683): Two Case Studies in the Porzellansammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, in: Fraser, Wakita, Wang, Women Cross Media. East Asian Photography, Prints, and Porcelain from the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net 2022, p. 326-335, https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.995.c13794

body and was likely ordered along with other *Chine de commande* porcelain produced between 1634 and 1644 for the European market; its C-form, long handle and pointed spout are indications of this clientele.[4] The recessed glazed foot exhibits some evidence of kiln-grit and a slight, red iron oxide line still faintly visible. Particularly compelling is the harmonious integration of both the tastes of (Chinese) gentry and Europeans. The neck and shoulder of the pitcher clearly show appropriation of Dutch motifs such as tulip and flower designs.

The depiction of a separated, vertical cliff divided by clouds under a vessel's handle is a key factor in identifying Chongzhen (sometimes also early Shunzhi) porcelain and a clear indicator of a late Ming porcelain landscape **(fig. 14.2)**.[5] The export market became a consistent source of income for kilns challenged by a labor levy in the 1560's, which in turn instigated a rapid increase in private kilns. As orders for official wares at Jingdezhen kilns were largely dormant—the extensive financial support provided by the Longqing (r. 1567-1572) and Wanli (r. 1597-1620) emperors ended in 1620—private kiln manufacture began to fill the gap and took over a considerable portion of the production.[6] Foreign trade became a major factor, yet "foreign" business was not strictly European; one estimate puts European trade at only sixteen percent of total export. The vast majority went to Japan and South East Asia with profits in the Japan market at approximately 100 to 200 percent.[7] Wars and civil unrest created difficulties in foreign trade and much of the Chinese ceramic trade to Europe flowed via Japan during the seventeenth century. The Dutch East India Company (VOC), for example, did not trade with China during this period and would not continue steady commercial relations again until 1683; they predominantly traded with Japan during the transitional years. After 1683, the VOC stopped business with Japan, which is an indication that Japanese goods may not have been their priority. According to Timothy Brook, cotton thread and ceramics earned around two to three times their Chinese price, accounting for significant profit.

Manufactures created generic European porcelain, so much so, that the Batavia government in 1635, 1637 and 1639 issued statements against 'Dutch flowers and leaves' for the theme was not sufficiently exotic.[8] The pitcher in Dresden is an exceptional object that is most likely a part of this tradition, produced *en masse*; it could easily be sold on the foreign market. The flowers and tulips provide some indication of the style of objects circulating in Ming markets; in terms of subject matter, the famous tale of "Visiting Friends with a Zither" featuring an animated scholar and a servant with a zither is depicted on the pitcher's body. This motif appears in various Ming media, especially in literati paintings such as by those by Shen Zhou (1427-1509) and Wen Zhengming (1470-1559).

Artistic themes in the Ming, such as "Visiting Friends with a Zither" and literati figures situated in landscapes, were immensely popular among a growing merchant class, who sought to associate themselves with an established intellectual culture. Moreover, Ming painting had reached a cultural zenith unprecedented in previous periods with high quality professional workshops who incorporated literati themes and popularized them. The zither—as representative of music—was part of the "Four Gentlemanly Pursuits" along with chess, calligraphy and, of course, painting, practiced by the cultural elite. Thus, the depiction of a zither on

[4] See the study on Chinese-Dutch trade by Christian Jörg for rare images of designs made by the Dutch for Chinese porcelain production. Christian Jörg, *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982); Christian Jörg, *Chinese Ceramics in the Collection of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam: The Ming and the Qing Dynasties* (London: Wilson, 1997), 30.

[5] Stephen Little, *Chinese Ceramics of the Transitional Period: 1620-1683* (New York: China House Gallery, 1983), 11. According to Curtis, this was a way to frame scenes appropriated from woodblock-printed books—transported from flat to round surfaces. Julia B. Curtis, *Chinese Porcelains of the Seventeenth Century: Landscapes, Scholar's Motifs, and Narratives* (New York: China Institute in America), 48.

[6] Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 178.

[7] Brook, *Confusions of Pleasure*, 178-79.

[8] Jörg, *Chinese Ceramics in the Collection of the Rijksmuseum*, 76.

later porcelain presents layers of prestige: it represents a celebrated Ming compositional motif, whilst the zither proclaims intellectual sophistication. The idea of "visiting friends" was popularly cemented in the first book by a European ever published in China entitled, *On Friendship* by the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci S.J. (1552-1610); this volume harks back to Mencius the most celebrated philosopher after Confucius, and specifically identifies visiting like-minded scholars as a predominant theme.

However, porcelain manufacturers during the Transitional Period were not interested in Ming themes based purely on nostalgic yearning, but rather, as I argue, on a new infatuation with antique porcelain, often porcelain manufactured during the Chenghua reign (1464-1487) and also produced in other Ming periods. Shen Defu (1578-1642), a bureaucrat and writer, who is mainly known for essays on Ming history, describes the market scene at Shanghai's City God Temple (*Chenghuang miao*).

> Calligraphy, antiques and paintings, both genuine and false, are displayed.... In ceramics the dearest are those of the Chenghua reign [1464-1487], then those from the Xuande reign [1425-1435]. A cup used to count only several ounces, ... and when I was a child I did not think of as valuable treasures. A pair of Chenghua wine cups now fetches 100 ounces, and a Xuande incense burner almost as much.[9]

Clearly antique objects, specifically earlier Ming porcelain, played a large role in demonstrating the sophistication and taste of collectors as material culture grew in importance in this period. Transitional period artisans and artists would have been acutely aware of the burgeoning market for Ming antique porcelain and presumably priced their products accordingly. Moreover, the lack of imperial patronage during this era meant that kiln manufacturers were almost entirely reliant on the merchant class for orders. We may surmise that they most likely reverted back to early Ming designs and themes to fetch higher prices on the market. A group of four vases now in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam depict the "Four Gentlemanly Pursuits," which Christiaan Jörg attributes to "a longing for classical scholarly pursuits." Yet, the base of the vases carries the six-character Jiajing (r. 1521-1567) mark, leading one to conclude that the "deception" was more likely connected to the need to bolster sales, rather than a romanticization of Ming "classical scholarly" culture.[10] That is, the sixteenth century reign mark would ensure a higher price; the theme perhaps was secondary in terms of the cost of the set.

Other descriptions seem to confirm this assumption, including one from the *Comprehensive Record of the Heavenly Capital (Tianfu guangji)* with a preface dated to 1671.

> Even palace manufactures like Xuande bronzes, Chenghua porcelain, Yongle lacquers from the Orchard Factory and Jingtai enamels of the imperial workshops, their curiousness and craft surpassing that of antiquity, were bought for high prices at the Inner Market by the *aficionados (hao shi zhe)* of the whole empire.[11]

The esteem of early Ming porcelain as "surpassing that of antiquity" could account for Ming signatures and markings applied later on non-Ming porcelain. Although the demise of the Ming and a disillusioned literati could be a factor, socio-economic issues seem to explain the "unusual," to use Jörg's description, "archaic marks."

---

[9] Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 136-37.
[10] Jörg, *Chinese Ceramics in the Rijksmuseum*, 96-97.
[11] The Inner Market took place in Beijing behind the rear gate of the palace on the fourth day of every month. Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 137.

As previously mentioned, imperial patronage had disappeared from the Jingdezhen kilns by the end of the first quarter of the seventeenth century, leaving the industry at a virtual standstill. To keep production moving and earning a profit, porcelain manufactures adapted methods of pure commercialization. As mentioned, Chenghua porcelain, was particularly valued on the market. There are numerous examples of Transitional Period porcelain in the Porzellansammlung, with not only Chenghua reign marks but also with signature Ming themes, which were most likely replicated in hopes of creating quintessential "Ming" porcelain. The Transitional Period maybe slightly expanded to include the late Wanli reign (1572-1620); evidently, manufactures in the mature Wanli period were already concerned with market deception, which is evident in examples of late-Wanli porcelain with Chenghua marks in the Rijksmuseum collection.[12]

Undoubtedly, in the declining Wanli period just before the total decline of imperial patronage, manufacturing kilns were already turning to profitable "name brands" or economically potent reign dates. Late-Wanli porcelain with Chenghua marks also exist in the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul and other Dutch collections in addition to examples collected in Indonesia.[13] Jörg, however, does not surmise why these marks appear but, nevertheless, calls them "unusual." Ultimately, as we have seen, it was financial preservation that generated the use of Ming themes and reign marks on later Transitional Period porcelain. The desire to emulate earlier Ming porcelain was implemented in hopes of obtaining higher market prices. An outstanding example of this is the bowl from the Kangxi period (1662-1722), also in the Porzellansammlung **(fig. 14.3)**.

Notwithstanding its Kangxi-period origin, the bowl has a Chenghua mark in a double circle. The panel on the outer body of the bowl depicts the renowned scholar and poet, Su Shi (1037-1101), sitting in a boat in conversation with a monk and another scholar, while two boatmen are perched at the front; a crane gracefully soars into view. This iconography was well known as Su Shi's *Second Ode on the Red Cliff* (below, *Red Cliff*), and its elements were familiar to Ming artists; a fan containing the same features is in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York **(fig. 14.4)**.

There are two important factors to note. First, Su Shi's *Red Cliff* was thematically ubiquitous during the Ming dynasty; second, copies, such as the Metropolitan version, survived into the Qing in good condition. Therefore, porcelain manufacturers had access to excellent Ming sources and most likely used them to emulate Ming porcelain; woodblock-printed illustrations with similar themes were also abundant. That is, the use of Ming themes and the Chenghua mark, which was the most highly valued porcelain at the Beijing antique market, demonstrate the ways the manufacturer, in a time of instability, leveraged (Song and) Ming arts for reuse and profit. The market expanded not only for domestic consumption; commodities also began to fetch higher prices as older (earlier Ming) objects became less available.[14]

Other examples of the so-called "Red Cliff Bowls" exist including another version in Dresden and another in the Rijksmuseum with an anachronistic Yongle (1402-1424) mark.[15] Scholars have often noted porcelain themes from this period to be largely a result of political tension and "longing for the traditional values of the Ming." We should not discount this entirely; however, as we have seen, the economic circumstances were much more complicated than modern scholarship seems to permit.[16] Moreover, porcelain decoration from the late seventeenth century with scenes from histories and dramas often taken from literature further reinforces their authenticity as "Ming" objects. In other words, they were, as I argue,

[12] Bowl reproduced in Jörg, *Chinese Ceramics in the Rijksmuseum*, 39-40 (Inv. No. AK-TN 1943).
[13] Jörg, *Chinese Ceramics in the Rijksmuseum*, 47.
[14] Brook, *Confusions of Pleasure*, 201.
[15] Jörg, *Chinese Ceramics in the Rijksmuseum*, 51.
[16] Curtis, *Chinese Porcelains of the Seventeenth Century*, 27-28. To quote Curtis, Ming themes were largely "… concerns of the late Ming and early Qing literati-gentry, such as Ming dynasty corruption, loyalty to the Ming, and the issue of serving two dynasties." This observation is reiterated by Jörg, *Chinese Ceramics in the Rijksmuseum*, 74.

simply more important as "Ming," rather than scenes of inspiring literati themes that scholars, such as Julia Curtis, attempt to subscribe to them.

Faking or falsifying, replicating and altering in Chinese culture began much earlier than the Ming dynasty. When any product grows as a commodity, a parallel market in forgeries will flourish; replication is an inevitability. When a market expands sufficiently, its products are privileged as "art" or as Craig Clunas puts it, objects acquire "significance as concentrated cultural and economic capital." In China, as calligraphy matured as an art form, the forging of calligraphic works began in the fifth century AD.[17] Vessels of the Bronze Age, although produced in considerable numbers, did not develop a market (nor did they become "collectables" at the time) until the eleventh century. The "commercialized world," to use Clunas' words, of the Ming dynasty experienced the largest expansion of antiquities market and therefore also a "black market." The increase in replicated artworks was indicative of the lack of genuine items.[18] Clunas rightly cautions against the emphasis on 'archaism' as the key explanation for manufacture and declares the utilitarian function of turning "cultural prestige of antiquity into economic value" as a natural motivation.[19]

According to contemporary sources nine-tenths of the paintings in wealthy collections were forgeries.[20] If such high estimates were proposed, it would not be surprising to assume that porcelain manufactures also attempted to enter this lucrative market (of copies).[21] Thus, we can conjecture that the revival, or prolongation, of Ming styles and the use of various Ming reign marks during the Qing circles back to the idea of "replicating" a highly valued aesthetic that could produce profits in an unstable environment; and we must regard ideas of the "longing" for Ming culture with the upmost circumspection.

In conclusion, the foreign market became a significant source of income for kilns, while private kilns began to exploit the market. Transitional Period porcelain manufacturers used Ming themes and Chenghua marks, among others, to emulate "antique" porcelain and secure higher prices. Transitional porcelain production relied heavily on the merchant class and was largely dependent on socio-economic conditions. Even in the last years of the Wanli period, artisans were specifically replicating Chenghua marks, among others, on porcelain, as I have argued, to be "antique." One of the finest examples of the combination of Ming themes with the Chenghua mark from the Transitional Period is evident on the Kangxi-Period porcelain bowl in the Porzellansammlung **(fig. 14.3)**. Its Chenghua mark and easily understandable Ming theme declares its intention for the antique market and a high price point. These factors ultimately suggest a multiplicity of sources that strongly impacted Chinese porcelain of the Transitional Period, which we must recognize as largely being based on economic factors during a time of unpredictability.

[17] Craig Clunas, Faking in the East, chap. in *Fake? The Art of Deception*, ed. Mark Jones (London: British Museum Publications, 1990), 99.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Clunas, Faking in the East, 99.
[20] Ibid., 100.
[21] Ibid.

Bibliography

Bailey, Gauvin Alexander. *Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America 1542-1773*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.

Bailey, Gauvin Alexander and John O'Malley. *The Jesuits*. Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2005.

Brook, Timothy. *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Chang, Chun-shu and Shelly Hsueh-lun Chang. *Crisis and Transformation in Seventeenth-Century China: Society, Culture, and Modernity in Li Yü's World*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998.

Clunas, Craig. Faking in the East. Chap. in *Fake? The Art of Deception*, edited by Mark Jones, 99-101. London: British Museum Publications, 1990.

Clunas, Craig. *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

Curtis, Julia B. *Chinese Porcelains of the Seventeenth Century: Landscapes, Scholar's Motifs, and Narratives*. New York: China Institute in America, 1995.

Jenyns, Soame. *Later Chinese Porcelain: The Ch'ing Dynasty 1644-1912*. London: Faber and Faber, 1951.

Jörg, Christian. *Chinese Ceramics in the Collection of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam: The Ming and Qing Dynasties*. London: Wilson, 1997.

———. *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade*. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982.

Kuwayama, George. *Chinese Ceramics in Colonial Mexico*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997.

Little, Stephen. *Chinese Ceramics of the Transitional Period: 1620-1683*. New York: China House Gallery, China Institute in America, 1983.

Fig. 14.1 Milk Pot. Porcelain decorated with underglaze blue. Jingdezhen, China. Chongzhen period (1634-1644), Ming dynasty (1368-1644). H. 22.5 cm, W. 14.5 cm, D. 13.5 cm, D. footring 7.2 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung, Inv. No. PO 283. © Porzellansammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Foto: Adrian Sauer.

Fig. 14.2 Detail – Typical vertical cliff with clouds from Chongzhen Reign. Porcelain, decorated with underglaze blue. Jingdezhen, China. Chongzhen period (1634-1644), Ming dynasty (1368-1644). H. 22.5 cm, W. 14.5 cm, D. 13.5 cm, D. footring 7.2 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung, Inv. No. PO 283. © Porzellansammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Foto: Adrian Sauer.

Fig. 14.3 a-b Bowl. Porcelain decorated with underglaze blue, shown with the six-character Chenghua mark. Jingdezhen, China. Qing dynasty (1644-1912), Kangxi period (1662-1722). H. 8.9 cm, D. 18.1 cm, D. footring 8.3 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung, Inv. No. PO 1849.

Fig. 14.4 Illustration of Su Shi's "Second Ode on the Red Cliff," (detail). Unknown artist, in the style of Sheng Mou (act. ca.1310-1360). Ming dynasty (1368-1644), late 14th to early 15th century. Fan mounted as an album leaf; ink and color on silk. 31.4 x 31.4 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession No. 13.100.97. Image in the public domain.