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The History of Chinese Ceramics



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Preface

From the perspective of the anthropology of art, and embedded in a global academic context, this work allows one to recognize that “history is, in large measure, the record of human activity which spreads from the local to the regional, from the regional to the global, and from the global to the universal.” From reading *The History of Chinese Ceramics*, you will find it evident that China was not only the first country to create porcelain but also the first to export it to the world—both the product and its technology. *The History of Chinese Ceramics* thus relives the history of China’s foreign trade while at the same time depicting the expansion of Chinese ceramic technology and culture. This expansion was a learning process in which different nations were able to grow by absorbing and disseminating each other’s civilization and culture. It demonstrates that China was not a closed and isolated country but rather interacted with many other nations. Moreover, China’s multiple ethnicities contributed to the various cultures that made Chinese ceramics what they are today. In China, ceramics were not simply tableware but played an active role in ritual, religion, the scholar’s studio, and many other cultural institutions. Hence, they are utensils as well as symbols of culture. Understanding the use, production, and international export of Chinese ceramics is invaluable for the comprehension of the history of China’s society, art, aesthetic ideology, technical expertise, lifestyle, foreign trade, and civilization itself. As a result, a knowledge of the history of Chinese ceramics is of great importance to grasping the essence of Chinese culture and aesthetics.

Beijing, China

Translated by
Andrew Maske

Introduction—Viewing Ceramics History Through the Lens of the Anthropology of Art: A New Approach

Overview

To view arts and crafts history and theories from the perspective of the anthropology of art has long been my aspiration. This aspiration was the reason why, after gaining my Ph.D. in history at the Central Academy of Craft Art (now the Academy of Arts and Design at Tsinghua University) in 1996, I applied for a postdoctoral position at the Institute of Sociology and Anthropology at Peking University, where I received basic training in anthropology. The postdoctoral program ended in 1998, and since, then I have been engaged in research on the anthropology of art. I undertook an extended period of field research in Jingdezhen, where, with the ceramics-making history and production practice of craftsmen as case studies, I examined the transformation and restructuring of traditional crafts in modern society. Later, I took on a national key research project on folk culture resources in Western China. I studied the folk arts of Shaanxi Province on-site, including the folk ceramics of Chenluzhen, and visited Guizhou Province to study how the hmongb rongt people's cultural life and arts heritage were appropriated as resources.¹ Long periods of field research gave me new understandings of and new theoretical approaches to the relation between arts and socio-cultural development, the interaction between arts and people's modes of production and lifestyles, the relationship between arts and the social and aesthetic values of different eras, and the mutual promotion between the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition in art.

That was when the idea of rewriting arts and crafts history using the perspective of the anthropology of art occurred to me. Naturally, I would not be so ambitious as to take on the task of rewriting the entire history of arts and crafts. My intention was to focus on the history of one particular art and craft form, and the one I was most familiar with was the history of ceramics. I studied at the Arts Department of

¹ Fang Lili (ed.), *From Heritage to Resources—A Research Report on West Cultural Resources*, Academy Press, 2010; Fang Lili, *Travel Log to the West—Field Notes on Shaanxi Folk Arts*, Academy Press, 2010; Fang Lili et al., *Changes of Longjia Villagers' Lives—Study of Suojia Ecological Museum*, Academy Press, 2010.

the Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute, gained my Ph.D. in the history of arts and crafts in the History Department of the Central Academy of Craft Art, and then did post-doctoral studies at the Institute of Sociology and Anthropology at Peking University, where I chose Jingdezhen folk kilns as the subject of my research and produced the report *Traditions and Changes—Field Research on the Old and New Folk Kilns of Jingdezhen* as my graduation thesis. Later, I wrote *Jingdezhen Folk Kilns and Old Town Gone—Past Stories of the Ceramics Capital*. These three works totaled nearly one million words. Since the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, the development of China's ceramics industry has been centered on Jingdezhen; especially since the Ming and Qing dynasties, since after that Jingdezhen has basically been the sole leading kiln center while all other kilns remained secondary. The research I conducted on the history and status of Jingdezhen ceramics laid the foundation for my compilation of *The History of Chinese Ceramics*. Professor Tian Zibing, my Ph.D. supervisor, decided to compile *The Complete History of Chinese Craft Arts* in 1997 and assigned me to document ceramics history as part of that work. It took me three years to finish the first draft. But for a number of reasons, *The Complete History of Chinese Craft Arts* was never published. Then in 2007, Qilu Publishing House invited me to submit a manuscript on ceramics history. At that time, I had just completed the research project on folk culture in Western China, so I spent years revising and modifying the first draft which I wrote during my doctoral studies before submitting this final version.

I relate the above story to make two points: that this history of Chinese ceramics is written from the perspective of the anthropology of art, and that the work was initially intended to be part of *The Complete History of Chinese Craft Arts*. The latter is also why the book, viewing ceramics primarily as one major craft art in Chinese history, examines the artistic characteristics of ceramics in different historical periods and the contributing factors to those characteristics, notably, how emperors, literati, and craftsmen in different dynasties expressed their spiritual pursuits and aesthetic preferences through colorful ceramic ware.

In writing this work, much of my attention and effort was concentrated on how to observe and understand ceramics as a craft art using the approach of the anthropology of art. In art anthropological studies, "one needs to know where the art was made, who made it, what its use was, what its functions were, and what it meant to the people who made use of it. This is the study of art in its cultural context."² Many anthropologists conducted research into specific art works and artistic behaviors in their cultural context. As pointed out by Evelyn Payne Hatcher, "However, the majority of the art forms that we see in museums and art books that have come from Native America, or Africa, or Oceania, are objects that were once part of a larger artistic whole from which they have been extracted. The most obvious example of this is a mask that was part of the artistic whole that included the costume, the movements of the wearer, the music, and indeed, the whole performance. Such a performance may last for days and involve a great deal of artwork; it may even, as

² Evelyn Payne Hatcher, *Art as Culture: An Introduction to the Anthropology of Art* (second edition), London: Bergin & Garvey, 1999, p. 1.

among the Pueblos, be part of a year-long ceremonial cycle. In a sense, just to look at a mask as a work of art by itself inevitably imposes our own cultural standards. So, it is necessary to recognize that we need to try to piece together and imagine the artistic context as well as the cultural one if we are to attain a deeper sense of the import than the piece available to us provides.”³ Here, Hatcher is talking about a holistic approach, an approach that opposes the practice of isolating art works from culture and society. Alfred Gell, viewing art as a type of social agency with its own autonomy, also believes that art anthropological research should focus on the social context surrounding the production, circulation, and reception of art and defines the anthropology of art as the theoretical research of social relations related to art.⁴ It can be seen from the above theoretical narrative that the study of ceramic history should not be limited to the examination of the wares themselves or the ceramic craft art alone. Rather, we should extend our horizon to wider realms including the related cultural context and the social structure and its development.

Hence, in this book, while I, like any other author writing about the history of Chinese ceramics, will describe the varieties, shapes, decorations, materials, production techniques, etc., of the ceramics in each historical period, will focus my attention not on the descriptions themselves but on the motives behind them. The reader’s attention is enthusiastically drawn to the introduction and conclusion of each chapter, where I will look into the fundamental reasons for the different characteristics of Chinese ceramics in different periods by examining how natural environment, political background, cultural factors, market demands, foreign trade, and the Chinese people’s philosophical thinking and aesthetic experiences in different periods were reflected in the art form and its transformation over time. Also examined is the interaction between the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition, between official (*guan*) kilns and folk kilns, between the Han people and minority ethnic groups, between refined culture and popular culture, etc. Such an approach is to examine the myriads of phenomena that make up ceramics’ history in a holistic manner so as to understand how various social factors, comprised of the artistic and cultural contexts of the time, influenced ceramics, and contributed to the artistic style and characteristics of the ceramic ware of the period.

There is a grammatical architecture behind culture, and the job of anthropologists is to look for that grammar, which to most humans is unknown: just as how everyone can speak, even though they do not necessarily understand the grammar behind the language they are using. Therefore, research into the history of Chinese ceramics should not only describe the ceramic art and cultural landscape of different periods but also delve into the patterns and motives of the development of that ceramic art and, based on this, seek to offer further understandings of the features and connotations of Chinese culture and society. To this end, I share with you my thinking from an anthropological perspective in the following respects.

³ Evelyn Payne Hatcher, *Art as Culture: An Introduction to the Anthropology of Art* (second edition), London: Bergin & Garvey, 1999, p. 13.

⁴ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 7.

Cultural Diffusion and Global Interaction

I intend to site the history of Chinese ceramics in a broad and global cultural context from the beginning, because this approach will allow us to venture beyond understanding the plethora of issues regarding the history of Chinese ceramics itself and investigate broader anthropological theoretical problems based on this context.

Classical anthropology comprises two major schools, the evolutionist school and the diffusionist school. Classical evolutionist thought all belongs to linear evolutionism, believing humanity's cultural development progresses along a single line and emphasizing the uniformity in all human potential and the decisive role such uniform potential plays in the cultural evolution of all communities. Since the mental and intellectual powers of all humans are identical, as classical evolutionism believes, the course of cultural development of all nationalities is bound to be the same,⁵ i.e., from simplicity to complexity, from barbarism to civilization, and from backwardness to advancement. It is hence believed that most technologies are a natural outcome of the progress of history and are capable of being independently created or invented by individual nationalities in different historical periods.

While the evolutionist school sees culture as evolving along a temporal dimension, the diffusionist school suggests that culture is predominantly being transported via the spatial dimension, e.g., from one place to another, from one nationality to another, or from one culture to another. While concentrating comprehensively on how human culture evolves over time, the evolutionist school overlooks the geographical distribution of culture, when in reality the evolution of culture is primarily represented by its constant changes across geographical locations. "It sounds very simple: since all historical events occur in space, we must be able to measure the time they needed to spread by the distances that were covered: a reading of time on the clock of the globe."⁶ That is to say, cultures of different types often develop concurrently in interaction with one another, which is made possible by large-scale population migrations or national conquests, and the similarity between different cultures is to a large degree the result of cultural contacts.⁷

The diffusionist school believes humanity's independent creative or inventive capacity is limited, and that the regularities that apply to all cultures are the result of culture dissemination rather than the "uniformity of all human beings' mental and intellectual powers" as termed by the evolutionists. Places where inventions first occurred usually became cultural centers and from these centers various cultural traits were disseminated and spread to surrounding areas. It is in this process that cultural contact and cultural change take place.

A closer look at the history of Chinese ceramics reveals that the development and spatial trajectory of Chinese ceramics is a perfect demonstration of the abovementioned theoretical anthropological proposition. Porcelain was independently invented

⁵ Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society*, translated (into Chinese) by Yang Dongchun et al., The Commercial Press, 1981, p. 8.

⁶ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983, p. 19.

⁷ Fang Lili & Li Xiujuan, *Art Anthropology*, SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2013.

by the Chinese. No other country has ever invented porcelain on its own. The fact that porcelain is now made around the globe resulted from the constant diffusion of China's porcelain-making techniques.

Primitive pottery appeared in China back in the Shang and Zhou dynasties and matured during the Eastern Han Dynasty. China's porcelain technology started influencing surrounding regions in the Tang and Song dynasties and spread to what is now the Middle East during the Yuan and Ming dynasties. By the end of the Ming Dynasty, the Japanese mastered China's porcelain-making methods and started selling porcelain to Europe which they made by imitating the Chinese products. In the eighteenth century, the Europeans mastered porcelain-making technology through their missionaries in China, marking the beginning of the worldwide dispersal of China's porcelain technology. Therefore, the history of Chinese ceramics is also the history of Chinese ceramic technologies being spread to other parts of the world. This is also an indication of the limitations of the evolutionist views—cultures do not develop linearly in isolation; rather, they interact with and influence each other.

Perhaps influenced by traditional evolutionist views, when observing Chinese history, we tend to look at it as an isolated entity developing on its own, and when writing on the subject, we tend to devote all our attention to the development of Chinese society only and neglect its interaction with other countries. If we adopt the diffusionist view in looking at Chinese history, we will give due weight to both the temporal and spatial dimensions. This is like looking at China and the earth from space. Unlike being solely situated within China, from this angle, you will find China to be part of the globe and closely connected to other countries and regions. You will also find that the whole world is a dynamic place with all its parts communicating with each other and evolving together.

Globalization is not something new. It has existed for ever. It is just that intercultural communication and exchange were rather slow in times past and only accelerated to a global scale in the sixteenth century when great geographical discoveries were made possible by the advancement of European navigation technologies. This whole process of globalization and its acceleration can be found to be reflected in each stage of the development of Chinese ceramics. Hence, the history of Chinese ceramics has always been part of global ceramic history, global trade history, global economic history, global political history, global cultural history, and global arts history.

I try my best to consider and accommodate intercultural communication when describing each stage of China's ceramic history. Ceramics export is touched on in each chapter and makes up increasingly large and rich portions in chapters on the Ming and Qing dynasties as well as in later periods, because after that, time global communication became ever more convenient and rapid and ceramics trade between China and other countries, especially with European countries, became ever more frequent.

The story of Chinese ceramics, told as an integral part of the globalization process, shows that while transporting ceramic products and technologies to other countries, China has also been transmitting Chinese culture to every place that its ceramic trade has reached. Meanwhile, foreign customers providing design samples and placing

orders also brought foreign culture, art, and lifestyles to China. It is clear that cultural export and communication is never a one-way process. It is mutual and interactive. The anthropological point of view shows that history moves forward amid dynamic interaction and diffusion. When looking at history, we should pay attention to both the longitudinal dimension, namely development of the subject over time, and the latitudinal dimension, namely mobility across space, for it is through such mobility that the multiplex cultural patchwork is sewn, with cultural elements from different places constituting the small patches of cloth which are tightly intertwined.

Migration, Assimilation and Cultural Communication

Anthropologists generally have a sharper eye for difference than for sameness and give more attention to the marginal than the central.⁸ Cultural diversity and cultural coexistence has always been a universal phenomenon, one that embodies the unity of opposites.⁹ The formation of each culture is the result of biological, geographical, historical, and economic factors. The cultures of all nationalities are equal in value and shall not be ranked into higher or lower statuses. All cultures are equal, and there should be no Euro-centrism in world cultural development. Similarly, the study of Chinese culture should give due weight to the interactions between multiple cultures and avoid allowing the Han culture to overshadow the cultural contributions made by minority ethnicities.

To apply this view to the study of Chinese ceramic history, we should first acknowledge that with China, being an ethnically plural society, the brilliant landscape of Chinese ceramic history is the result of the development and fusion of the ceramic cultures of different ethnic groups over the centuries. As early as the primitive times, different types of pottery appeared in a number of cultures that emerged in middle and late Neolithic China. These primitive cultures include the Yangshao Culture in the middle and lower Yellow River, the Dawenkou Culture along the Huaihe River and the lower reaches of the Yellow River, the Daxi, Shanbei, Majiayao, and Hemudu cultures that emerged in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River, the Shixia Culture centered on the Pearl River basin, and the Hongshan Culture along the Liaohe River. This shows that China's ceramic culture was from its very beginning heterogeneous, multi-regional and multi-ethnic. In later historical periods—from the separatist era of rivaling dukes and princes in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, to the great unification in the Qin and Han dynasties, and from the coexistence of different ethnic regimes in the Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern dynasties, to the national unification of the Tang Dynasty—the ceramic arts of different ethnic groups sometimes merged with and at times separated from

⁸ *Trends in Anthropology* by Social Sciences in China Press, Social Sciences Academic Press (China), 2000, p. 19.

⁹ Naribilige et al., *New Patterns of Anthropological Theories*, Social Sciences Academic Press (China), 2001, p. 13.

each other with the historical tides of fragmentation or unification. Sometimes, they developed independently from each other, and sometimes, they blended with and influenced each other. By the Tang Dynasty, the integration of the different ethnic groups' ceramic cultures and technologies led to the overall pattern of celadon dominating the south and white porcelain dominating the north. Meanwhile, under the influence of diverse cultures, there emerged ceramic types that could serve ethnic minorities in northwest China, represented by the tricolor glazed earthenware of the Tang Dynasty, the blue and white porcelain of the Tang Dynasty and the Changsha kiln underglaze decorated porcelain.

The Song Dynasty, with famous kilns in almost every part of the country, marked a peak in China's ceramic development and is thus the subject of a major chapter in this *History of Chinese Ceramics*. Influenced by Han-centrism, people tend to focus on the ceramic history of the Han people when examining the ceramics of the Song Dynasty and fail to give due attention to ceramics in areas ruled by ethnic minority regimes. In this period, apart from the Northern and Southern Song, there were in fact also the Liao, Xixia, and Jin, with Liao and Jin each ruling over territories larger than those of the two Song dynasties. Previous literature only describes the ceramics of the Liao Dynasty cursorily, when in fact Liao ceramics are far more important in the history of Chinese ceramics. The Jin Dynasty was as important as the Liao in China's history because they both reaffirmed the position of ethnic minority regimes as an integral part of Chinese history. Yet the Jin is different from the Liao in that after it replaced the Liao, its territory covered all areas east of the Liaohe River along with part of the Southern Gobi desert, with its center in the central plains which were traditionally ruled by the Han. If the Jin Dynasty is not accommodated in the history of China, neither would the Liao Dynasty be regarded as part of "orthodox" Chinese history. In fact, if Jin is not taken into consideration, China as a country would not be complete, because at that time, the Southern Song Dynasty—the regime of the Han, the "orthodox" Chinese government—had in effect forsaken the central plains and merely occupied areas south of the Qinling Mountains and Huaihe River. Therefore, the Jin Dynasty is an important link in China's long history. Without this period, Chinese history would not be completed, and Chinese civilization would not be as great. In addition, the Jin Dynasty brought northeast China into the mainstream of Chinese history, an area which has since occupied a significant position on the grand stage of China's development. This has had a major impact on modern Chinese and global geopolitics. (See Figs. 8.1 and 8.2 of this work).

The territory of Jin extended to the central plains, covering what is now Hebei, Henan, Shandong, Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Gansu. These are where some of the most famous kilns of the Northern Song Dynasty were sited, such as the Ru, Ding, Yaozhou, Cizhou, and Jun kilns. The Ding and Cizhou kilns in the Jin Dynasty represented the forefront of Chinese ceramics. The black and white porcelain of the Cizhou kilns laid the foundation for many of the techniques of the blue and white porcelain of the Yuan Dynasty. The red and green porcelain that emerged in the Jin Dynasty was the first known polychrome (multicolored) porcelain in China, its decoration techniques becoming the basis for later porcelains such as the red and green porcelain of the Yuan Dynasty, the *wuca*i (five-color) porcelain of the Ming Dynasty

and the Kangxi *wucai* (five-color) porcelain of the Qing Dynasty. The appearance of the white porcelain body that was indispensable to the polychrome porcelain of later periods was closely related to the Ding kilns of the Jin Dynasty. All these show that ceramic production in the Jin Dynasty laid the foundation for the blue and white porcelain and polychrome porcelains of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties and should be seen as an important part of the history of Chinese ceramics. Despite this, the Jin Dynasty has never been given the status it deserves in previous studies of the history of ceramics, sometimes being omitted altogether in some scholars' narration of ceramic history. To make up for this, this book devotes a well-researched and elaborately written section to ceramics during the Jin Dynasty.

The Yuan Dynasty is also an important period in the history of Chinese ceramics. But although ceramic wares of the Yuan Dynasty have been regularly unearthed, for a long time, there existed in the studies of ceramic history a bias favoring the Song and Ming over the Yuan because the Yuan Dynasty lasted for a relatively short time and thus left few historical records, but more importantly because the Yuan was a regime established by ethnic minority aristocrats. Some exquisite porcelain from the Yuan Dynasty was mistakenly identified as being manufactured during the Song Dynasty, and some beautiful blue and white porcelain from the Yuan was wrongly deemed to be from the Ming. Some researchers even sweepingly described Yuan ceramics as heavy, thick, and clumsy.

The chapter "Ceramics of the Yuan Dynasty" in the *History of Chinese Ceramics* published in 1982 only mentions "major kilns in the Yuan Dynasty such as the Jun, Cizhou, Huo, Longquan, and Dehua kilns continued to produce traditional varieties on the foundation of the previous dynasty,"¹⁰ and does not mention other ceramics of the period when in fact, in recent years, occasionally during construction of industrial and agricultural infrastructure projects, a large number of fine Yuan ceramics have been unearthed, notably the blue and white porcelain and underglaze red porcelain samples discovered in Gaoan, Le'an, Yichun, Yongxin, Pingxiang, and other areas in Jiangxi, along with the finest porcelain made in major kilns across China including the Jingdezhen, Ding, Jun, Longquan, Yaozhou, and Cizhou kilns. The items were unearthed from storage pits in several spots in the ancient Yuan Dynasty town on the Jining Road in Inner Mongolia, of which the blue and white porcelain, underglaze red porcelain, and "shufu" inscription egg-white porcelain are the most eye-catching, drawing enthusiastic attention from experts at home and abroad with their sheer volume and exquisite craftsmanship.¹¹ These ceramics of the Yuan Dynasty, unearthed mostly from pit storages, and other materials found in recent years show that a number of kilns other than those mentioned in previous literature were also producing porcelain during the Yuan Dynasty, such as the Jizhou, Yaozhou, and Ding kilns. Recently, many scholars are using their studies to rectify

¹⁰ Chinese Ceramic Society (ed.), *History of Chinese Ceramics*, Cultural Relics Press, 1982, p. 332.

¹¹ Yu Jiadong & Jiang An, "An Examination of the Historical Background of the Prosperity of Jingdezhen Porcelain from Pit Storages in an Ancient Yuan Town on Jining Road, Inner Mongolia," Chinese Society for Ancient Ceramics (ed.), *Studies on Ancient Chinese Ceramics* (Vol. 11), The Forbidden City Publishing House, 2005, p. 135.

the lack of research on the ceramic development of the Yuan Dynasty, an inadequacy probably resulting from Han-centrism, a task which this book seeks to complete. By placing an emphasis on Yuan ceramics which is worthy of their significance, we are not only painting a more objective picture of the history of Chinese ceramics but also better understanding different ethnic groups' contributions to Chinese civilization and reestablishing the Chinese nation's historical landscape with all its diversity and multiplicity.

An important view of *World Civilizations* is "invasions into civilized society by barbarians often turned out to be critical historical junctures, for such invasions would expedite the breakdown of old orders and the formation of a new order."¹² Indeed, an examination of world history shows that relatively advanced civilizations, having developed to a certain historical stage, are often attacked by civilizations relatively barbarian, and the attack, while breaking old traditions of the advanced civilization, brings new vitality. The ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome, Babylon, and India were all replaced by foreign civilizations, removing their old traditions with them—the Chinese civilization being the only exception. So, what made the Chinese civilization the only one that survived?

A study of the history of Chinese ceramics might help explain this phenomenon. Attacks and power seizure by Northern nomadic peoples has occurred many times throughout China's history, from the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern dynasties to the Five dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period, and from the Song Dynasty to the Xia, Liao, Jin, Yuan, and Qing. The nomadic peoples were militarily strong but not as advanced as the Han people in terms of culture, institutions, and craftsmanship. They overthrew the political power of the Han people but did not destroy their culture. Instead, they humbly learnt from the Han culture, including their ceramic art. For instance, during the Jin, Yuan, and Qing dynasties, under the rule of ethnic minority aristocrats, China's ceramic art not only continued but also gained new vigor. The Ding and Cizhou kilns of the Jin Dynasty prepared the groundwork for the white, as well as the blue and white porcelain of the Yuan Dynasty; the blue and white porcelain, underglaze red porcelain and high-temperature color glaze of the Yuan Dynasty laid the foundation for the emergence of the polychrome porcelains and the rich high-temperature color glazes of the Ming and Qing dynasties; and the reigns of Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty constituted a peak in the development of Chinese ceramics. All these show that the Chinese culture is immensely inclusive. It can accommodate new and different cultures, digest the novel elements of these various cultures, and assimilate them as part of its tradition. The other side of the coin is the significant contribution ethnic minorities, and their political regimes made to China's historical progress and cultural formation, a contribution that should be given credit for the continuity of Chinese history over thousands of years. Indeed, if primitive pottery is included, this history should be said to have extended over 10,000 years.

¹² Dennis Sherman, A. Tom Grunfeld, Gerald Markowitz et al., *World Civilizations*, China Renmin University Press, 2007, p. 38.

Therefore, the progress of history is the very process of ethnic migration, assimilation, and mutual influence, of the betterment of the ethnic character, and of cultural change and development. A history that fails to accommodate ethnic elements is no complete history nor would this *History of Chinese Ceramics*.

Iconographic Representations in Utensils

Clifford Geertz says in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*: “Human thought is consummately social: social in its origins, social in its functions, social in its forms, social in its applications. At base, thinking is a public activity—its natural habitat is the house yard, the marketplace, and the town square.”¹³ Taking the house yard, the marketplace and the town square as habitat is not thinking per se, but it is the vehicle for thinking, for thinking is intangible and takes concrete objects as its media. Bronislaw Malinowski echoes this observation in saying: “The problems set by man’s nutritive, reproductive, and hygienic needs must be solved. They are solved by the construction of a new, secondary, or artificial environment. This environment, which is neither more nor less than culture itself, has to be permanently reproduced, maintained, and managed.”¹⁴ These anthropologists are saying that human thought and human culture reside in various objects. The material devices of humanity—utensils, houses, boats, tools, weapons, etc.—are the one aspect of culture that is the easiest to perceive and understand. Therefore, instead of going on about culture itself as an abstract concept, it would facilitate comprehension to talk about culture through the medium of utensils.

The ancient Chinese maintained that the “instrument is the carrier of the Way” and that “the metaphysical is called the Way, the physical is called the instrument.” Here, instrument refers to devices and the Way means culture, namely the thought embodied in those devices. Ceramics are such devices because for the people they are not only daily utensils but also a vessel and a symbol of Chinese culture. Research into the history of Chinese ceramics, if focusing only on the instrument, i.e., the devices themselves, and overlooking the Way, i.e., the culture and thought embodied in them, would be lacking in depth and comprehensiveness. It should go beyond plain descriptions which only show ceramic wares separated from each other with no connection whatsoever, to depicting what is behind the ceramics, i.e., an entire set of culture and values and the entire course of the transformation of Chinese society.

Malinowski defines culture as “the iconography and norms collectively owned by a group of people.”¹⁵ How the collective iconography and norms of the Chinese people

¹³ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1973, p. 360.

¹⁴ Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*, British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.

¹⁵ Wang Mingming, *Cultural Patterns and Expressions of Human Beings: A Review of Contemporary Western Anthropological Thought*, Tianjin Renmin Publishing House, 1997.

are represented in ceramics, the vessel of Chinese culture, is a question constantly on my mind when I attempt to narrate the history of Chinese ceramics.

Leslie Alvin White differentiated three components of culture: the technological, the sociological, and the ideological, with each level resting on the previous one in that order. It is the technological component which is the primary determining factor responsible for cultural evolution,¹⁶ while the ideological component gives expression to the technological component and reflects the sociological component.¹⁷ White's argument on the three culture components is well reflected in the development of ceramics over time.

Ceramic production requires technology for its realization. Though on the surface new varieties, new decorative patterns, new forms of expression, etc., in different dynasties were made possible by technological innovations and the adoption of new materials, my research seems to show that the technological reforms were driven by changing values and aesthetic preferences, meaning that the ideological component of culture often played a determining role. For instance, the first porcelain type Chinese people succeeded in creating was celadon rather than white or black. Technically, this could be attributed to the fact that the ancient Chinese first mastered the technique of firing celadon with reducing flame rather than firing white porcelain with oxidizing flame, when in fact it was more the result of craftsmen's pursuit of a ceramic texture that resembled greenish jade, a pursuit driven by the Chinese people's preference for jade and the greenish-blue color. Another example is the emergence of polychrome porcelain in the Ming and Qing dynasties. On the surface, it was because craftsmen mastered new decorative techniques and invented new materials, when in fact it was a natural result of new aesthetics, values, and spiritual pursuits brought on by the rise of urban life. Another contributor to the advance of ceramic production is the evolution of the sociological component, for it takes evolved social configuration and division of labor, apart from new technologies and thought, to realize real transformation. The sociological component involved the official kiln system, the government's management of folk kilns, state policies on trade ports, and the emphasis placed on the urban division of labor, which are all worthy of attention in our research.

Aside from the three components of culture, yet another influencing factor is the natural environment. Julian Haynes Steward defines culture as an integration of technologies, social organizations and values and beliefs, which constantly adjusts itself to adapt to its natural habitat and other rival cultures surrounding it.¹⁸ The development of the ceramics industry has been closely related to the natural environment. For instance, the decline of the Yue kilns in the mid-Northern Song Dynasty should be partially attributed to the shrinking of forestry and the decrease in fuels in the area. An overview of the entire history of Chinese ceramics reveals that the

¹⁶ Xia Jianzhong, *Theoretical Schools of Cultural Anthropology—The History of Cultural Studies*, China Renmin University Press, 1997, p. 223.

¹⁷ See Footnote 16.

¹⁸ Xia Jianzhong, *Theoretical Schools of Cultural Anthropology—The History of Cultural Studies*, China Renmin University Press, 1997, p. 238.

development of the industry generally underwent a north-to-south spread, and in Southern China in particular, experienced dissemination from the east to the west. Palaeoclimatological studies have found that the warm temperature zone in China moved from the north to the south over time. From the Yangshao Culture period to the Shang Dynasty, the Yellow River basin enjoyed a warm and humid climate and wide forest coverage, which was beneficial to the development of the ceramics industry. In addition, apart from a short cold period during the Western Zhou Dynasty, Northern China enjoyed a long-lasting warm climate until the Western Han Dynasty, providing favorable climatic and ecological conditions for the flourishing of the Yellow River basin civilization. A natural result of this was that over this period, the center of the ceramics industry lay along the middle reaches of the Yellow River, extending from the Weihe River to Zhengzhou. Then during the Eastern Han, and the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern dynasties, the freezing line moved southward, and the later years of the Eastern Han suffered lengthy natural disasters and famine also resulting from a deterioration in the natural conditions. These led to political turbulence and economic downturn in the north, which contrasted sharply with the relatively stable and warm environment of the south. Large population migrations from the north to the south occurred. It was at this very juncture that the Kuaiji kilns succeeded in firing celadon. Then during the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern dynasties, the Kuaiji kilns grew into the largest celadon production site in China, selling products almost everywhere south of the Yangtze River and even reaching beyond the Yangtze River to the Yellow River areas. During the Sui, Tang, and Five dynasties, Northern China warmed up again, a vital contributor to the Yellow River reaches becoming the political and economic center of China. When it came to the Southern Song and Yuan dynasties, the north entered another cold period. Forest coverage shrank, leading to a lack of fuel so kilns used charcoal instead. During the final years of the Northern Song Dynasty, the Han regime could no longer resist the Northern ethnic minority's southward advance and large populations migrated to the south.¹⁹ By the Southern Song Dynasty, official kilns were set up in Lin'an (present-day Hangzhou), and after that, the center of Chinese ceramics remained in the south and never crossed the Yangtze River again.

In addition to vegetation and climate, the change in rivers might also affect the decline or boom of the nearby ceramics industry. Previous researchers attributed the decline of the Yaozhou kilns after the Yuan Dynasty to wars, but my investigation and analysis reveal another possible contributing factor, namely the change in the natural environment. It is recorded that the Yaozhou kilns, with the Huangbao town of Tongchuan at their center, were densely strewn along the two banks of the Qihe River, giving rise to the historical phrase the "ten-mile potteries." But when I visited the site of the Yaozhou kilns in 2004, the Qihe River had dwindled to a small ditch. Almost all ceramic production sites in history were adjacent to mountains and rivers. Mountains provide raw materials and fuel, while water is used to wash porcelain clay, to smash porcelain stone, and to serve as an important means of transport. Rivers are

¹⁹ Xiong Haitang, *Research on the Technical Development and Exchange History of the Ceramics Industry in East Asia*, Nanjing University Press, 1995, p. 115.

essential for a flourishing ceramic production regime. Thus, in ancient times, it was often that kilns were set up along rivers and then cities took shape around them. It is therefore plausible that the decline of the Yaozhou kilns was related to the drying up of the Qihe River.

Thomas Harding et al. believe: “Adaptation to nature will shape a culture’s technology and derivatively its social and ideological components. Yet adaptation to other culture may shape society and ideology which in turn act upon technology and determine its further course. The total result of the adaptive process is the production of an organized cultural whole, an integrated technology, society, and ideology, which copes with the dual selective influences of nature on the one hand and the impact of outside cultures on the other.”²⁰ Thus, when examining the history of ceramics, in addition to the interaction and interrelation between the technological, sociological, and ideological components of culture in different periods, the role the natural environment played should also be taken into consideration as yet another variable. Previous ceramic history studies attached little importance to these factors and therefore produced few academic reports on them. I believe that in future archaeological excavations and historical studies, more emphasis will be placed on these aspects.

Intrinsic Elements from Sacred to Secular

The fact that the ancient Chinese started making pottery over 10,000 years ago makes the origin of art a natural part of the discussion of China’s ceramics history. Among the many theories on the origin of art, the two predominant theories respectively relate it to religion and labor, the former holding that art originated from humanity’s spiritual needs and the latter deeming that art came into being amid humanity’s productive labor carried out to fulfill material needs. A close look at the history of Chinese ceramics reveals that the material and spiritual needs of the human race coexisted from the very beginning. Ceramics, both as utensils for daily use as well as a type of craft art, originated from both the material and spiritual needs of humanity. Humans are spiritual animals. All human creations, apart from their practical purposes, are bound to embody some sort of spiritual pursuit. This is especially true of the earliest years of the human race, when all creative activities were about religion and about humanity’s perception of the external world. Émile Durkheim says that “almost all great social constructs (science, technology, morality, law, etc.) have their origins in religion.” He believes that production technologies came from witchcraft and then gave rise to all economic activities; and that religion is not only a form of society’s self-consciousness, but also a source of social solidarity and an inspiration for the collective creativity of humankind.²¹ Following this line of thought, some scholars

²⁰ Thomas G. Harding, David Kaplan, Marshall D. Sahlins & Elman R. Service, *Evolution and Culture*, The University of Michigan Press, 1988, p. 48.

²¹ Wang Hailong & He Yong, *Introduction to the History of Cultural Anthropology*, Xue Lin Publishing House, 1992, p. 142.

believe witchcraft and primitive religion preceded labor or at least coexisted with labor and that it is in the earliest witchcraft that the seeds of art were sown. Evidence shows that all forms of primitive art, such as murals, tattoos, totem symbols, and decorations, were related to witchcraft. Nevertheless, such arts, created for pragmatic purposes and inseparable from other practical human activities, were in a sense only “pre-art.”²²

This is a view that I share. For instance, the colored pottery made by the Chinese ancestors 6000 years ago were not merely for everyday use, and their decorative patterns were not randomly painted by potters for mere aesthetic purposes. They related to the religion and totem worship of the day. The Banpo type human face and fish patterns and the Miaodigou type bird pattern of the early Yangshao Culture, the Machang type frog pattern and the human figure pattern of Majiayao Culture, the Zhangjiazui type canine pattern of Xindian Culture, the Huoshaogou type lizard pattern of Siba Culture, etc., were all possibly totems and symbols of primitive tribes. Thus, the decorative arts of the pottery were not only for practical use; they probably also carried religious symbolic meaning.

Franz Boas states that it is worth noting that the artwork of many nationalities in the world, though on the surface only decoration, is in reality associated with certain meanings.²³ That is to say, the patterns are more than decoration. They are also cultural symbols with rich meaning. The mission of art in primitive society was in no way the same as that in today’s civilized society. It was the fruit of primitive people’s labor, a vessel for their belief, and even a sort of divine object, eventually becoming an essential part of primitive humanity’s life system. In primitive cultures, art not only represented pleasure and luxury but also symbolized spiritual forces such as mystery and awe. What primitive people felt for art were not only aesthetic feelings but also a kind of worship bordering on religion. At that time, the function of art resided more in witchcraft than in aesthetics.²⁴

Pottery decorations were one origin of pragmatic arts. The painted patterns were diverse. Realistic, freehand, or abstract, they were primarily closely related to the life and labor of their creators and revealed profound cultural information. For anthropological studies, these primitive pottery decorations not only carried artistic meaning, but they also contained culturally symbolic features such as inscriptions, property marks, tribal totems, family signs, and religious symbols.

This is true not only of pottery but also of porcelain. Most of the earliest primitive porcelain in China was not for daily use. The ampules and *díng* (food vessel) were ritual objects imitating bronze or lacquer wares and most of them were burial objects for funerary use.

It was not until the Eastern Han Dynasty that China’s porcelain, with the maturity of its manufacturing technology, began to gradually take on more functions

²² Wang Hailong & He Yong, *Introduction to History of Cultural Anthropology*, Xue Lin Publishing House, 1992, p. 207.

²³ Franz Boas, *Primitive Art*, translated (into Chinese) by Jin Hui, Guizhou Renmin Publishing House, 2004, p. 59.

²⁴ See Footnote 22.

besides the religious ones which had virtually been its sole mission for the preceding millennia. Many porcelains lost their function as ritual ware, the number of practical wares represented by pots, jars and *lei* (liquor barrels) increased dramatically, and there came into being new wares for daily use such as five-linked jars, incense burners, tiger-shaped chamber pots, water pots, and mortars. On ceramic burial objects after the Eastern Han Dynasty, paintings depicting celestial scenes decreased, replaced by those describing secular life.

In the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern dynasties, celadon matured and began to be used in everyday life. But most celadon wares still carried elements of primitive religion. For instance, the feet and ornamentations of the flowery washer, blue-glazed six-legged washer, blue-glazed tripod inkstone, etc., of the Western Jin Dynasty were mostly religious animal patterns or god figures. The ornamentations on the shoulders and spouts of jars and pots and on the lid knobs of tanks were all animal shaped with religious connotations. Sometimes, the entire ware was shaped like an animal, such as the blue-glazed toad water pot, the blue-glazed tortoise inkstone, the frog inkstone dropper, and the blue-glazed sparrow cup. There were numerous other animal-shaped wares, including goat-shaped wares, tiger-shaped wares, lion-shaped wares, goat-head pots, and rooster-head pots. During this period, the themes of ceramic wares were dominated by animals and gods, while plant patterns were rare. New themes such as the Buddha, flying goddesses, honeysuckle patterns, and lotus petals appeared in the Northern Qi and Southern dynasties, still resulting from religious influence.

Giambattista Vico, a philosopher and historian holding classical evolutionist views, believes each nation develops independently, resulting in a unique culture and history. Nevertheless, though the histories of different nations are isolated from each other, they all pass through the same distinct stages: the ages of gods, heroes, and men. All nations develop in parallel in conformity to this periodization of the three stages, because the motivating force of progress is human nature and human need, which is basically identical in every nation.²⁵ Vico's view that "each nation develops independently" is erroneous, but the division of human social development into three stages, namely the ages of gods, heroes, and men, is noteworthy, for it well echoes the history of Chinese ceramics. Before, the Shang and Zhou dynasties gods ruled over everything and almost all pottery was religious. After the Shang and Zhou, imperial power was strengthened and naturally many ceramic wares were made as ritual or burial objects. Then, by the time of the Sui and Tang dynasties, mankind's life started gaining attention. People's focus moved from the strictly hierarchal imperial court to the simple yet vivid countryside, seeking to spot the beauty and pleasure of life among the mountains, rivers, and plants. Accordingly, religious and aristocratic art styles faded away, giving way to the secular and everyday style. The subject matter of paintings moved from gods, Buddhism and human figures to landscape, flowers and birds, and the format was transferred from mural and stone carving to paper and silk, making it possible for paintings to be hung in the living rooms and studies of

²⁵ Xia Jianzhong, *Theoretical Schools of Cultural Anthropology—The History of Cultural Studies*, China Renmin University Press, 1997, p. 3.

the common people. Porcelain also entered the homes of ordinary people as daily utensils. Religious decorations that previously dominated ceramic wares decreased and animal patterns were gradually replaced by plant patterns. By the Tang and Five dynasties, porcelain wares were mostly shaped following plants, giving birth to a series of new models such as the melon ridge flagon, the water caltrop flower plate, the lotus flower saucer, the lotus petal *zun* (wine container), the lotus petal candleholder, and the crabapple flower bowl. Different from the unearthed animal-shaped wares of the Three Kingdoms and the two Jin dynasties which were mostly burial objects meant to repel evil forces and demons and thus appeared ferocious, the animal-shaped wares of the Tang and Five dynasties, apart from tomb-guarding animals used as burial objects, were all artistically and aesthetically appealing. The Sui, Tang, and Five dynasties were an important phase where ceramic art migrated from the sacred realm to secular life.

The appearance of new urban lifestyles in the Song and Yuan dynasties further pushed ceramics in the direction of practicality and secularity. Townsmen—craftsmen and small shop owners, and laboring masses including waiters, home servants and shop assistants that resided in cities—formed a new social class whose interests and pursuits differed sharply from those of the upper class. In contrast to rural areas where entertainment and recreational activities were carried out only when there were temple fairs, country fairs or bazars, urban life tended to eliminate the periodicity of entertainment and so the connection between entertainment and festivals, celebrations, and religious activities gradually vanished. A number of recreation centers that provided entertainment on a regular basis, called *wazi* or *wasi*, came into being. These public places of entertainment, different from the Musical Houses (courts for imperial musicians) of the Tang Dynasty, which were set up by and affiliated with the imperial court, were venues where professional performers gathered to entertain the common folk. There were storytellers telling stories on a variety of themes (history, romance, swordsmanship, religion, etc.), mime performers with musical accompaniment, instrument players and singers, puppet show performers, circus performers, vocal imitation performers, etc. Cities became the birthplace of new art forms. Since the Song Dynasty new art forms have been developing in parallel with fine culture. The urban literature and arts all retained the folk flavor and taste of their origin places. The language was simple, popular, and rich in local style and flavor, and not devoid of dialect terms. By the Yuan Dynasty *wazi* or *wasi* developed new forms and was called *washe*, where independent performing zones were set up with railings in between separating them from each other to stage the performances of different artists. Hence, the performances were called “railing arts.” It was in between these *washe* railings that the Yuan drama came into being. These operas with colorful subject matter including society at large (folklore), romance, history, etc., were not only performed on stage but also depicted on the black and white porcelain of the Cizhou kilns and the blue and white porcelain of the Jingdezhen kilns at the time. From then on, in addition to religious and imperial elements, ceramic decorations also featured pleasant birds and flowers and fascinating dramatic characters and stories.

To summarize, along with urbanization, arts gradually became detached from the religious and divine and moved toward secularization and independent development. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, as urbanization and commercialization deepened, the secularity of ceramics as a commodity and folk art became ever more prominent. Examining the history of the ceramic art has also deepened our understanding of the overall history of Chinese culture and arts and expanded our knowledge of the evolution of China's social structure over time, which is also an important subject which this book seeks to explore.

Interactions Between Official Kilns and Folk Kilns

It seems that of all the places in the world, it has been in China that official kilns have had the longest and largest presence. And why is that? As discussed above, from their very birth, Chinese ceramics were associated with primitive religion. Later, as rites and music became the de facto religion in China, ceramics were used as altar wares and ritual objects for sacrificial rites. Traditional Chinese ritualistic activities featured a great variety. Court sacrificial rites came in three types in terms of scale, namely grand sacrifices, moderate sacrifices, and inferior sacrifices. The grand sacrifices included ceremonies that sacrificed to Heaven and Earth, to the supreme god, to the imperial ancestral temple, and to the gods of land and grain (together called *She Ji* and often used to refer to the country itself). Moderate sacrifices included ceremonies that offered sacrifices to the sun, the moon, the agricultural ancestor (*Xian Nong*), the silkworm goddess (*Xian Can*), previous emperors, and the Grand Duke Jupiter (*Tai Sui*). Meanwhile, inferior sacrifices were ceremonies that sacrificed to all temples and ancestral shrines. Court rites also included weddings and funerals in the imperial palace. At such sacrificial rites and ceremonies commemorating major life events, many ritual objects were used. Before the Song Dynasty, metal wares, mainly gold, silver, and bronze dominated these ritual objects, and during the Yuanfeng era of the Song Dynasty, ceramic wares started to be used for royal sacrifices to Heaven and Earth. So, institutionalized kilns, in other words official kilns in the real sense, appeared in the Song Dynasty.

Unlike what some may believe, the establishment of official kilns was not only to satisfy the emperor's needs for an extravagant and luxurious life; rather, official kilns were more for the sacrificial ceremonies of the nation, which were a means of reinforcing "the traditional social ties between individuals; they stressed the way in which the social structure of a group is strengthened and perpetuated through ritualistic or mythic symbolization of the underlying social values upon which it rests."²⁶ For an imperial regime, this is a serious matter going to the very survival of its rule. Religious beliefs symbolize social relations and embody human anxieties and hopes. For the ancient Chinese, it was of paramount importance to worship

²⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1973, p. 142.

Heaven and Earth, to sacrifice to deities, and to pay tribute to ancestors, for without their blessing the state's rule would not be secure and the people's lives would not be stable. Thus, in a sense, the official kilns made ceramics not for the emperor or the people, but for Heaven and Earth, for deities, and for ancestors. Such ceramics were therefore not commodities, but sacred objects, sacred objects that needed to be made to the highest quality regardless of cost, material, or energy. The best craftsmen and the most generous funding in the country were granted to the official kilns in order to enable them to fashion and produce porcelain. And the highest input naturally led to the best products. Led by the official kilns, the quality of porcelain produced across the country all improved. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the Ming and Qing dynasties, Chinese porcelain became the most luxurious and expensive commodity in Europe.

Official kilns represented the mainstream thought, ideology, and aesthetic preferences of an era, while folk kilns, being closest to common people's lives, often promoted the market. The progress of China's ceramic history was not entirely driven by official kilns. The important role of folk kilns and their interaction with official kilns should also be given due attention. A general rule is that official kilns dominated during certain periods but in the longer historical timeframe official and folk kilns always interacted with and influenced each other. In fact, leading official kilns often grew out of folk kilns; that is to say, creations by folk kilns in one period were often the predecessors of dominant official kiln features in the next period.

One example is the official kilns' pursuit of celadon ware resembling the color of jade in the Song Dynasty. The preference for celadon resulted from the Chinese tradition of jade appreciation. Ancient Chinese believed jade was the essence of nature and could communicate with deities. As early as the Liangzhu Culture, Chinese people used jade to make ritual objects. So, official kilns, when firing porcelain, tried to reproduce the texture of jade. In the emperor's sacrificial ceremonies, the worship of Heaven was the most important and "celadon is the celestial color," another reason why Song porcelain pursued a jade-like color. At that time, to make bluish green porcelain that looked like jade was not only the pursuit of official kilns but also the trend of the whole society. Of the five famous kilns in the Song Dynasty—Guan (official), Ru, Ge, Jun, and Ding—four made celadon wares almost exclusively, with the exception of the Ding kilns. Other renowned kilns not listed in the famous five, including the Longquan, Jingdezhen, and Yaozhou kilns, also made celadon.

The five famous kilns of the Song Dynasty all made porcelain as a tribute to the imperial court. The only exception was the Ding kilns which stopped paying tribute later. Ye Zhi explains why in his *Notes in Tan Study*: "The imperial court deemed Dingzhou white porcelain improper for use because of its unglazed rim, and so ordered Ruzhou to make celadon wares." There is a similar record in Lu You's *Notes in Old Scholar Hut*: "In the time of the former capital (Northern Song), Ding ware was not allowed into the imperial palace due to its unglazed rim, and only Ru ware was used." Nevertheless, in fact, though porcelain made by the Ding kilns featured unglazed rims which exposed the body, usually the rim was delicately edged with gold, silver, or copper. So, some researchers believe that the unglazed rim was not the only reason the royal palace stopped accepting Ding porcelain. Another possible

factor related to the aesthetics at the time. The Han Chinese regarded white as a sort of taboo color due to its exclusive use in funerals. Thus, the pure white porcelain produced by the Ding kilns might have lost its favor due to its color.

Still, when it came to the Yuan Dynasty, a regime established by Mongols who favored the color white, white porcelain naturally became the favorite of the emperor. In the Yuan Dynasty, the Jingdezhen kilns adopted a dual formula which raised the firing temperature and added aluminum oxide to enhance whiteness. Kilns that previously made celadon such as Ruzhou and Yaozhou declined and virtually disappeared in the Yuan Dynasty. Jingdezhen, once renowned for firing *qingbai* (bluish white) porcelain in the Song Dynasty, transferred to firing egg-white porcelain and blue and white porcelain in the Yuan Dynasty.

Official kilns in the Ming Dynasty were set up in Jingdezhen, and, like the Song and Yuan dynasties, produced sacrificial wares for the imperial court. Porcelain wares for sacrificial ceremonies from the Song to the Yuan were all plain. Celadon was used in the Song Dynasty while egg-white porcelain was used in the Yuan. But what about the Ming Dynasty? Records show that in the Ming Dynasty, in addition to monochrome porcelain, wares in four colors, namely celadon, yellow, red, and white, along with blue and white porcelain were also used in various sacrificial activities. This was a major development in the history of ceramics. Though polychrome porcelains existed before the Song and Yuan, they were mostly fired by folk kilns to meet occasional market needs. Not advocated by the imperial court, they never became the mainstream until the Ming Dynasty, when they not only started to be made by official kilns but were also used by the royal family in sacrificial rituals, and thus became a mainstream porcelain style. This led to the continuous development of polychrome porcelains after the Ming and Qing dynasties and replaced once-glazed plain porcelain to become the mainstream in China's ceramic aesthetics.

It can be seen that the Yuan and Ming blue and white porcelain and the Ming polychrome porcelain all originated in folk kilns. The black and white porcelain of the Cizhou folk kilns of the Song and Yuan laid the foundation for the decorative technique of the blue and white porcelain of the Yuan Dynasty, and the red and green porcelain produced by folk kilns in the Song and Jin periods blazed the trail for the blue and white *doucai* porcelain in the mid-Ming, and for the Ming *wucaï* (five-color) porcelain in the late Ming. The roots and origin of the official kilns were often hidden in the fertile soil of the folk kilns. If not for the constant innovation of folk kilns which supplied nutrients to the official kilns, they would not have grown into the deeply rooted tree that ultimately represented the mainstream ceramic aesthetics of the era. Therefore, the historical value of folk kilns, like that of official kilns, should be given due emphasis in the study of Chinese ceramic history. What also requires attention is the sacred value of official kiln wares in expressing rituals and imperial power, their value as symbols of social ties, and their role in the constant restructuring of the social system and social order through the sacred structure of the universe. This aspect has not been given enough attention in previous studies of ceramic history and could well be a new research direction.

Scholar Culture and Aesthetic Values of Ceramics

According to Leslie Alvin White, there are three components of culture, the technological, the sociological, and the ideological, with the technological being the primary determining factor responsible for cultural evolution. Through an examination of the history of Chinese ceramics, I find that technological innovation is indeed important for cultural development, yet it is often driven by the ideological component. All technological development or advancement can be attributed, at least in part, to some sort of ideological change. The ideological factor determines the developmental direction of the technological component.

The innovations and changes of Chinese ceramics in terms of variety, shape, and decoration are more determined by the aesthetic preferences of the time than by technological innovations. Before the Song Dynasty, the leading force dominating China's ceramic aesthetics was the imperial power represented by the official kilns and literati ideology. Values embodied in such imperial power and literati ideology were the core values of Chinese society at the time. These values originated from the two preeminent Chinese philosophical schools, Confucianism and Taoism. The two philosophical schools found distinctly different reflections in aesthetics. Confucius, originator of the Confucian school, believed the nature of human beings lay in sociality. Thus, he advocated the conformity of appearance with nature and the combination of external decoration or artificial beauty and internal beauty or the beauty of nature. The result was a kind of beauty that was rich, intense and masculine. The representative of Taoism, Zhuangzi, believed human nature lay in nature; that any appearance added to nature was superfluous and harmful, and that all sociological embellishment confined human nature. It was believed that what is natural is intrinsically beautiful and does not need modification to fit into a certain form. Taoism stresses nature. The Taoist concept of beauty stresses "authenticity" and "plainness," meaning that the nature and original flavor of things should be preserved, and no artificial polishing is required. This is the pursuit of authenticity, of simple and natural beauty, of plain and unassuming beauty. The appearance advocated by Confucius and the nature championed by Zhuangzi, one masculine and hard, the other feminine and soft, led to two realms of beauty. The two schools of philosophical thought have long influenced the evolution of Chinese aesthetics and ceramic styles over time, with Confucianism assuming the dominant position in some dynasties and Taoism gaining the upper hand in others.

From the Qin and Han dynasties to the beginning of the Tang Dynasty, the decorative techniques of Chinese ceramics were mostly confined to carving, drawing, printing, sticking, mold printing and openwork on the surface of the item. These techniques resulted in the masculine, bold and intense beauty of the Confucian school. The most breathtaking ceramic work during the Qin and Han dynasties was the terracotta warriors unearthed in Qin Shi Huang's Mausoleum. The magnificently imposing manner, spectacularly grand scale and meticulously realistic style of these objects was not to be seen again in the Chinese ceramics which followed.

Chinese ceramic works were created by craftsmen, but what dominated the ceramic aesthetic preferences were official kilns, the market economy, and literati ideology. The preferences of the men of letters had an impact not only on the market but also on the imperial court. Deeply influenced by Confucianism and Taoism, ancient Chinese scholar-bureaucrats regulated themselves with the two philosophical systems. Often, they preferred Confucianism when young and ambitious, and leaned toward Taoism when they had experienced difficulties or gained a deeper understanding of society. Some of them “cultivated behaviors in line with Confucianism while obtaining inner tranquility through Buddhism.” In some sense, ancient Chinese scholar-bureaucrats represented the unity of an ethical personality with a natural personality. In ethics, they fulfilled their filial obligations to parents, were loyal to the emperor, and discharged their duties to the patriarchal society by contributing to their families and to the country. In terms of natural personality, they enjoyed the beauty of nature and expressed their feelings through forests, mountains, and rivers to obtain spiritual rest or relief. One corresponded to their employment and the other to their free lives. The unity of these two opposing personalities was key to the balance between their lives and their minds. Such unity was particularly prominent among literati in the late Tang to the Song. During this period, men of letters on the one hand advocated Confucianism and on the other hand followed Taoism and Zen Buddhism in aesthetics and in their personal pursuits.

Such literati tastes began to be reflected in ceramic works after the Tang Dynasty. Decorations focused more on the possibilities of glaze color itself rather than on additional ornament. After the mid-Tang, Yue porcelain turned toward a simple but elegant style. Beautiful shapes combined with a bright green coloration elevated the work to a high aesthetic standard. The white porcelain of the Xing kilns in Neiqiu gained sudden fame, winning people’s admiration with the charm of its snow or silver-like glaze color alone. Its thick and fine body texture and clear white glaze gave it a plain but dignified character. Besides celadon and white porcelain, kilns in the Tang Dynasty also produced colorful glaze porcelain, brown glaze porcelain, multi-clay glaze porcelain, black glaze porcelain, yellow glaze porcelain, etc., all celebrated for their naturally formed glaze color without any artificial modification. The glaze color was prone to natural and thus somewhat random change and progressed in varying degrees from single color to complex polychromatic glaze, laying a foundation for the flambé glaze of the Jun kilns, the oil-spot and hare-fur porcelain of the Jian kilns, and the tortoiseshell glaze of the Jizhou kilns that were to appear in the Song Dynasty.

While the intense, bold, and masculine aesthetic style advocated by Confucianism that emphasized a combination of nature and appearance coexisted with the simple, authentic, and elegant aesthetic style advocated by Taoism that emphasized nature over appearance, they complemented and added radiance to each other from Wei and Jin to the mid-Tang. However, when it came to the Song Dynasty, the artistic inclinations of the literati almost entirely leaned toward Taoism and Buddhism.²⁷ In painting, such change was reflected in the decline of religious paintings and the relegation of human figure paintings to a secondary status, giving way to the rise of

²⁷ Li Zehou, *The History of Beauty*, Cultural Relics Press, 1981.

themes which stressed spiritual comfort and enjoyment. People's feelings and sentiments became the subject of the arts and of aesthetics. Such attention to feelings and sentiments was in line with the aesthetic aspiration of Taoism and Buddhism, the most prominent feature of which was to understand and experience the beauty of nature. This was an experience that was elevated above tangible activities and that focused on an invisible realm of life. Taoist philosophy holds that purely spiritual experience in nature is the highest and most perfect status in life. Influenced by such Taoist views, arts in the Song Dynasty transcended sensual pleasure and artificial decoration to pursue simplicity, archaism, and plainness, which in turn were believed to embody the most intense beauty and the strongest flavor. Thus, the aesthetic pursuit during the period could be summarized into returning to the world of natural expression and experiencing the mysterious unfolding of the inner rhythms of nature amid silence and aloneness. This led to the artistic standard eschewing artificial ornament and favoring natural interest, which found particularly prominent expression in the porcelain of the Song Dynasty.

The most famous kilns in the Song Dynasty were the Ge, Ru, Guan (official), Jun, and Ding kilns, whose products clearly displayed the aesthetic preference of the palace nobility and scholar-bureaucrats of the time. Apart from the white porcelain of the Ding kilns, which featured carved and printed patterns, the porcelain made by all the other famous kilns were solid color wares with no decoration. Here, the absence of decoration does not mean crude craftsmanship. Rather, it represented a more conscientious aesthetic idea pursuing natural beauty. The Ge, Guan, and Ru kilns all produced celadon decorated with natural crackle glaze. The crackle pattern came from the cracking of the glaze surface during firing due to different contraction coefficients of different parts of the glaze. The cracks were probably flaws that occurred during firing, but craftsmen ingeniously made use of the defect and turned it into a type of natural, haphazard, and fascinating decoration.

The crackle pattern of the porcelain made by the Ge kilns was the densest and deepest. The cracks were of different depths, the deeper ones appearing black and the shallower ones pale yellow. Where the cracks in the two colors intertwined, they were called "golden threads and iron lines." The cracks of Guan kiln porcelain were sparser and shallower, and thus were mostly gold in color and hence called golden lines. The cracks of Ru kiln porcelain were even shallower and thinner. Barely visible, they looked like transparent cracks in ice.

One famous variety of Guan ware in the Northern Song Dynasty featured "purple rim and iron feet." The wares, produced through high-temperature reduction firing of a body made of iron-rich clay, resulted in a blackish purple body color. The glaze applied to the wares did not completely cover the rim area and exposed some of the body, producing the "purple rim" feature. Unglazed surfaces at the bottom of wares' feet turned blackish red resembling iron after firing due to the reduced atmosphere and were therefore called "iron feet."

Porcelain produced by the Guan, Ru, and Ge kilns was all celadon, but of different hues. That from the Ru kilns was mostly azure or of incense ash color. That from the Guan and Ge kilns was of similar glaze colors, including light greenish blue, pale blue, putty and bluish yellow. The different celadon hues resulted from a mix of

different body materials. Body materials of different colors, such as blackish gray, dark gray, light gray and earthy yellow, resulted in different shades of celadon. This aesthetic of achieving different colors by different characteristics of the material itself was exactly what the literati at that time pursued.

The ceramic arts of the Jun kilns also followed this aesthetic. The Jun kilns belonged to Northern celadon producers, but they introduced iron oxide and a small amount of copper oxide to the glaze as chromogenic reagents, resulting in an extremely varied glaze color during firing. Some became rose red, some the red of the crabapple flower, some pale blue, some sky blue, and some sky blue strewn with purplish red, like the glow of a sunset. There is a saying in China's ceramic world: "there are no identical Jun kiln wares." No two porcelain wares from the Jun kilns, even if fired in the same kiln, were completely the same, because their glaze color was naturally formed and could not be artificially controlled. This conformed to the highest aesthetic ideal pursued at the time.

All Taoist ideas can be traced back to the worship of nature. Taoist philosophy stresses following the natural course of things, praises the natural and authentic form of things, and advocates the display of things in their original state. It opposes forceful intervention, artificial disturbance, affectation, and hypocrisy. Laozi described the *Tao* with the descriptor "*Pu*," which refers to a natural state without decoration, and took keeping to nature and adhering to *Pu* as his ideal. The natural state then became the highest standard of beauty as deemed by literati of later generations and gave rise to the saying "the most glorious returns to simplicity." Zhu Xi states: "Heaven is devoid of sound, color, smell, or taste, yet it is the pivot of creation and root of wisdom." (*Commentaries on Zhou Dunyi's Taiji Tushuo*). This is similar to what Laozi says, namely "great music has the faintest notes." "Great music" is music without sound, and this is the essence of the porcelain art of the Song Dynasty. The Song porcelain described above embodies simplicity, plainness, natural form, expression without word, and music without sound. Even the naturally formed defects and flaws became beauty; such is the great beauty, the ultimate beauty. This aesthetic pursuit seeks to free people's thinking from all shackles so that they may move freely in the broad and boundless natural realm, to experience the innumerable languages in the wordless realm. This is an infinite realm, and such infinity dissolves rules, structures, and all other forms of existence that the human mind might possibly perceive, so as to get a sense of a more profound way of being.

Zhuangzi states: "One that appreciates ultimate beauty and enjoys ultimate happiness is the ultimate man." Here ultimate beauty refers to the profound implications of numerous natural forms in the universe, ultimate happiness is to immerse oneself in such beauty, and the ultimate man is one who is able to appreciate such happiness. I believe that of all art forms in the Song Dynasty, porcelain gave the best expression to such spirituality. It could be said that it was porcelain art that pushed the Chinese literati's aesthetic pursuit to the highest level, a level which was reached not only through technological advancement, but with ideological forces that drove the exploration and maturity of this technology.

The distinction between refined culture and popular culture is a constant feature of China's history. Refined culture came into being through the confluence of Confucian,

Buddhist, and Taoist philosophies. In ideology, Confucianism dominated, while in terms of aesthetics, Taoist and Buddhist pursuits led the way. But after the Yuan Dynasty, especially when it came to the Ming and Qing dynasties, the ideological dominance of refined culture gave way to the market economy and civilian culture.

Ceramics of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties are Popularized

In the Yuan Dynasty the dominance of the refined culture came to an end and popular culture gradually rose to become mainstream, a change that signaled Chinese culture's transition into the modern era.²⁸ In ceramic art, this change was reflected in the transformation of dominant themes from the philosophical ideology embodied in the haphazard glaze colors of the Song Dynasty to the secular subjects directly depicted on the blue and white porcelain of the Yuan Dynasty and the *wucai* (five-color) porcelain and famille-rose porcelain of the Ming and Qing dynasties. This was a major turning point in the history of Chinese ceramics.

Porcelain made by Northern and Southern kilns in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, when compared with that of the Song Dynasty, bore a common characteristic where all wares placed more emphasis on surface decoration patterns and effects rather than on the expressiveness of the glaze itself. In addition, decorative means and techniques were much richer than any previous dynasty. Decorative techniques from previous dynasties including engraving, drawing, printing, sticking, stacking, openwork, and painting were inherited, and innovations and new developments were made on their basis.

In the Yuan Dynasty, almost all Northern kilns declined, except the Cizhou kilns. This can be attributed to the style of their products. Of the Cizhou kiln products in the Yuan Dynasty, black and white porcelain was the most voluminous and influential. Black and white porcelain was already quite well known in the Northern Song and many kilns in the Yellow River reaches made it, following the Cizhou kiln model. After the Song regime moved south of the Yangtze River, the Jizhou kilns started making black and white porcelain, and even Jingdezhen's blue and white porcelain was deeply influenced. After the Yuan Dynasty, black and white wares further developed in great leaps.

Decorative themes in the Yuan Dynasty included dramatic plots and characters, literary works, calligraphy and painting. The flourishing of operatic literature in the Yuan was bound to influence porcelain decoration. The use of dramatic literature as decorative themes was a feature of Cizhou ware, as well as being observed in Jingdezhen's blue and white porcelain.

The concept of painting scenes from dramas on porcelain ware as decoration was enabled by the development of a commodity economy and of popular culture at the

²⁸ Wang Xiaoshu, *History of Chinese Aesthetic Culture*, Shandong Pictorial Publishing House, 2000, p. 6.

time. Most of the characters and stories drawn on Yuan blue and white porcelain were from historical dramas, such as the *Legend of Meng Tian*, or that of Xiao He and Han Xin, the *Oath in the Peach Garden*, *Three Visits to the Hut*, the *Story of Zhou Yafu*, or the story of Emperor Taizong of Tang and Yuchi Gong. Most of the blue and white wares painted with such stories were ones for display and appreciation purposes such as jars, *meiping* (plum vases), and *yuhuchun* (pear-shaped vases). Meanwhile, the Cizhou black and white wares painted with Yuan dramatic characters and stories were mostly porcelain pillows, which were both practical and ornamental.

The appearance of large numbers of historical figures and dramatic characters on the black and white porcelain of the Cizhou kilns and the blue and white porcelain of the Jingdezhen kilns in the Yuan Dynasty was a major turning point in China's ceramic decorative art. Before the Tang Dynasty, porcelain decorated with human figures was rare. After the Tang and Song dynasties, human figures started to appear on porcelain wares, especially on those produced by the Cizhou kilns after the Song Dynasty, but they were mostly children at play or occasionally beautiful women, while there were almost no valiant men like those in the Yuan Dynasty. Therefore, the appearance of characters and story scenes in the Yuan Dynasty is highly significant in the history of Chinese ceramic decorative art. This was the first time that story scenes from legends and dramas were inscribed on porcelain wares in such entirety and detail, and this laid the groundwork for the appearance of even more colorful characters on porcelain wares in the Ming and Qing dynasties, including emperors, princes, military officers, gifted scholars, beautiful women, gods and immortals, and men tilling the land or women weaving. This marked the beginning of the transformation of China's mainstream ceramic art from "refined" to "popular."

By the Ming Dynasty, popular culture decoration represented by color painting was used not only by folk kilns, but also by official kilns. Blue and white porcelain made by the Ming official kilns was used as sacrificial objects and bequeathed to foreign countries as gifts. They were completely different from the solid color porcelain pursued by official kilns in previous dynasties. Before the Ming Dynasty, Chinese porcelain was dominated by single color plain wares. While back in the Song Dynasty, the Cizhou kilns began making polychrome porcelains such as "iron rust" wares and black background sgraffito wares, and in the Yuan Dynasty blue and white wares pushed polychrome porcelain up a grade, these polychrome wares were still monotonous in color with the former being black and white only and the latter blue and white only. In addition, though these polychrome wares were widely acknowledged throughout folk society, they were not appreciated by the imperial court, scholar-bureaucrats, or the aristocratic upper class, and thus were not mainstream ceramic art at the time. The Ming Dynasty marked Chinese ceramic art's transition from an era dominated by plain ware production to an era dominated by polychrome ware. The Jingdezhen kilns were especially dazzling with a great variety of polychrome wares developed on the basis of blue and white porcelain, such as *sancai* (three-color) porcelain, red and green porcelain, *jincan* (golden polychrome) porcelain, *doucun* porcelain, and *wucun* (five-color) porcelain. The decorative patterns, subject matter, painting techniques, tools, and materials used were unprecedentedly enriched, boosting blue and white porcelain production in many places at home and

abroad and making China the epicenter of the world's porcelain. All these made the Ming Dynasty an extremely important period in the history of Chinese ceramics.

Polychrome porcelains grew from traditional Chinese ceramic art, yet they carried an ornate, flowery, and somewhat flamboyant beauty, a secular beauty, in sharp contrast with the quaint and refined beauty embodied in preceding Chinese ceramics. This was a vivid expression of popular culture in ceramic art.

Anthropologist Robert Redfield in his series of works introduced the concepts of "Great Tradition" and "Little Tradition." Great Tradition refers to the tradition of the introspective minority in a civilization, and Little Tradition refers to the tradition of the non-introspective majority. Great Tradition is nurtured in the school or the church, while Little Tradition grows and exists in the life of village communities. This pair of concepts is similar to the concepts of "elite culture and mass culture," "refined culture and popular culture," and "sacred culture and secular culture." Using these concepts, we can see that over time, Chinese ceramics basically progressed from elite culture to mass culture, from refined culture to popular culture, and from sacred culture to secular culture. I believe there are two reasons for this.

Firstly, urbanization and commercialization promoted the development of a market economy and the rising urban popular culture, and the arts were liberated from divine ceremonies and rituals enabling them to enter people's everyday lives as objects of appreciation. Redfield stresses the impact of Great Tradition on Little Tradition. He believes that in modern civilizations urban areas represent Great Tradition while rural areas represent Little Tradition, and that with the progress of civilization, the countryside is inevitably "eaten away" and "assimilated" by cities.²⁹ Following such views, it could be said that Chinese society began moving toward modernity after the Yuan Dynasty, and the secularization of ceramic art was one of the signs of this migration.

Secondly, the inflow of Western culture also contributed to the secularization of ceramic art. European porcelain traders started placing orders with Jingdezhen folk kilns in the mid to late Ming Dynasty. In addition to purchasing varieties, Jingdezhen was already making, these traders requested the craftsmen to design a large number of new models and patterns suited to the culture, customs, and aesthetic tastes of Western customers to better cater to foreign market needs. Craftsmen in Jingdezhen had to create, based on the required shapes and decorative patterns, which in turn gave rise to new styles and varieties of Jingdezhen ceramics.

European culture also influenced the aesthetic preference of China's imperial court. For instance, Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty not only invited European artists to serve the royal family in the palace and to participate in the architectural design of the Yuanmingyuan imperial garden but also gave orders to set up an "Enamel Workshop" in the "Zaobanchu" (Office of Manufacture) where European artists created porcelain-body enamel together with Chinese painters and craftsmen. Additionally, many of the porcelain wares fired by the Jingdezhen imperial kilns were made following the drawings and designs provided by painters of the "Zaobanchu,"

²⁹ Xia Jianzhong, *Theoretical Schools of Cultural Anthropology—The History of Cultural Studies*, China Renmin University Press, 1997, p. 156.

the “Ruyiguan” (Institute of Indulgence, an agency tasked with investigating Western scientific achievements) and the “Qintianjian” (the Imperial Board of Astronomy) in the palace. European artists in the imperial palace worked with Chinese painters and craftsmen daily, influencing and inspiring each other. It was partly due to the impact of European art that Chinese ceramics, with Jingdezhen at its center, assumed a flowery, ornate, and overly elaborate style, which after the mid-Qing Dynasty replaced simple and natural beauty to become the main pursuit of Chinese ceramic art and remained the mainstream trend until the end of the Qing and even into the Republican era.

Anthropological research has traditionally aimed most of its attention at remote Indigenous tribes. In such isolated communities with little contact with the outside world, cultural evolution probably only involves the ideological component, the sociological component, and the technological component. But for an open and civilized society, there is yet another component, namely, external information, and influences. The earlier we go back in history, the more closed human society has been and the less intercultural communication has occurred. Back then, the effect of the information component was weak and social mobility was low. As mankind approached modernity or the modern era, communication between countries or regions became more frequent and social mobility speeded up. From the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the development of foreign exchange and trade, the development of China’s ceramic art inevitably accelerated and moved toward commercialization and secularization, a transition in which the role of the information component could not be ignored.

Understanding Chinese Society Through Ceramic History

Ancient China as a Plebeian Society

Influenced by Western evolutionary theory, previous researchers, especially those around the founding of New China, mostly believed that all societies progressed along the same line from primitive society to slave society, feudal society, capitalist society, socialist society, and ultimately communist society. When looking at Chinese society, however, people found that such an historical progression did not always apply. The traditional view is that from the Qin and Han dynasties to the end of the Qing Dynasty China was a feudal society. Yet scholars represented by Qian Mu believe that in the Qin and Han dynasties China began a transformation from ancient aristocratic society to a plebeian society rather than a feudal society, a view that is evidenced in the study of the history of Chinese ceramics.

One example is the maturity of Chinese porcelain in the Eastern Han Dynasty, which I believe was not the arbitrary result of technological advances but was more closely related to the cultural trends at the time, and specifically, the social emphasis on the literati and the general social disdain for luxurious lifestyles. Before the Han Dynasty Chinese society was centered around the aristocratic class who led extremely extravagant lives and used bronze, gold, silver, and lacquerwares as daily

utensils, while ceramics, used only by common people as daily necessities or ritual objects, did not occupy a significant position in aristocratic life and was therefore not taken seriously by the court. But when it came to the Han Dynasty, especially the Eastern Han, the life of the rich was constrained, and the use of luxury objects as daily utensils was no longer encouraged. This is where porcelain wares came in. Simple, mild, but noble, with a jade-like texture, porcelain accorded perfectly with the aesthetic of the Chinese literati. The earliest porcelain wares were mainly used as burial objects, but as firing techniques matured, porcelain products grew to be more pleasing to the eye and more practical. Thus, they became more common in the everyday lives of the royal family, aristocrats, dignitaries, officials, and common people. They entered every corner of the Chinese people's lives and became the most important daily utensil in Chinese history.

A more important factor influencing the development of ceramics was the Imperial Examination System created during the Tang Dynasty. The examination system offered grassroots men an opportunity to enter the supreme political realm through study and examination. Most of these men were from the countryside. Qian Mu states: "That is because the rural environment was the best breeding ground for ideal talent, one that had genius, knowledge, aspiration, and good ethics. Urban society, bustling with industry and commerce, was not an ideal place for the nurturing of such people. They entered the government from the countryside and then returned to the countryside from government. Many famous figures across different dynasties, having accomplished outstanding achievements in politics, retreated to the rural quiet to enjoy the rest of their lives surrounded by beautiful landscapes and fertile lands. Such choices resulted from the literary and artistic edification they received during their early years in the countryside. Even those who remained in cities after retirement somehow turned their surrounding environments rustic and country-like. It was almost mandatory that retired scholar-bureaucrats would incorporate in their residences some small garden architectural feature with vivid rural overtones and a strong interest in nature."³⁰ In this way, the seeds of traditional culture remained in rural areas across the country, with its roots growing deeper and deeper and its branches reaching higher and higher. With the Imperial Examination System as the motivation, all villages in the country produced aspiring men who studied hard, and as a result now almost every place in China boasts famous historical figures and historic sites. The countryside became the incubation chamber of Chinese culture.

The significance of the Imperial Examination System to ceramics was amplified by the fact that before the Ming Dynasty, when ceramic production became a specialized urban profession, potters were also farmers and their lives involved both ceramic production and farming. Thus, the abovementioned rural-incubated culture was bound to influence the artistic creation of potters at the time, which was beneficial to the development of the ceramics industry because ceramics were not only practical commodities but also handicraft works that embodied the thought, interests, and philosophies of the Chinese literati. Progress of the handicraft industry

³⁰ Qian Mu, *An Introduction to the Cultural History of China*, The Commercial Press, 1994, p. 161.

and commerce promoted the production and circulation of ceramic products while progress in literature and the arts elevated their artistic taste.

Inscriptions first appeared on the porcelain wares of the Changsha kilns in the Tang Dynasty. The inscriptions included ware names as well as words and poems promoting the ware, with poems being the most prevalent. For products of the Changsha kilns, poems were mostly inscribed below the spout of bell mouth pots, and some on amphora bellies, saucer centers, or pillow surfaces. The poems or sentences, mostly originating from folk poetry and proverbs, and rarely containing allusions, were easy to understand. The inscriptions, engraved by craftsmen for the use of the common people, also led to the plebeian trajectory of the written language and calligraphy, the mastering of which were no longer the privilege of imperial aristocrats or the cultural elite. This makes the following statement by Qian Mu much easier to understand: “Ancient literature was more used by the aristocratic society, followed by religion; ancient arts were more used in religion, followed by the aristocratic society. This all changed in the Tang Dynasty, when literature and arts started serving the everyday lives of common people. This was a major leap forward in the history of Chinese culture.”³¹ This statement is fully reflected in the porcelain art of the Tang Dynasty.

Porcelain had always been favored by the literati, aristocrats and common people for its simplicity and jade-like texture, and in the Song Dynasty, it replaced metal wares in the royal family’s sacrificial ceremonies to Heaven and Earth as it was deemed to represent “quality and sincerity.” This shows that the Chinese people chose to use ceramic wares not by chance but based on certain values. In fact, an artificial creation is never solely technological; there are always cultural reasons behind it.

After the Qin and Han dynasties, China was transformed from an aristocratic society featuring a hereditary system to a plebeian society. Then, the inception of the Imperial Examination System gave common people a chance to become government officials through study and examination, a system which was quite advanced for the time. From its inception, a dedication to study became the focus of Chinese parental instruction for succeeding generations. The ancient Chinese aspiration for and stress on study was well expressed in porcelain decorations, such as the typical images of “Reading while grazing the cattle with one’s book hung on the bull’s horn” and “Fishing, woodcutting, plowing, and reading.” These images also depicted the basic lifestyle of the early Chinese. They chose to do farm work while studying because on the one hand they yearned for the simple and free pastoral life, while on the other they aspired to enter the government and fulfill their political ambitions. From a sociological point of view, although the social structure of ancient China was strictly stratified, the examination system served as a mechanism for common people to ascend the social ladder and to change their fortunes through study. While studying, they appreciated artistic performances, craft arts and decorative images, which were also edifying experiences.

³¹ Qian Mu, *An Introduction to the Cultural History of China*, The Commercial Press, 1994, p. 170.

Through the above examination of ancient Chinese ceramic art, it can be seen that ancient China was a society of civic-minded individuals, a society which held simplicity, morality, and knowledge in high regard. This makes it a much more advanced culture compared to the aristocratic culture of Europe of the same period.

The Early Maturing Chinese Culture

Liang Shuming believed Chinese culture was an early maturing culture, and Qian Mu was of the same opinion. He argued that Chinese society had been an early maturing society from as early as the Qin and Han dynasties when China had built comprehensive institutional systems. Then in the Sui and Tang dynasties, China completed the basic systems for all humanistic creativity in literature and arts.

This is true of the development of Chinese ceramics. Porcelain production matured in the Han Dynasty. In the Tang Dynasty, while celadon kilns were not as widespread as they would later become, Southern kilns represented by the Yue kilns and Northern ones represented by the Yaozhou kilns laid the groundwork for the emergence of the many celadon kilns, each with their own characteristics, in the Song Dynasty. In addition, the white porcelain firing technique of the Xing kilns laid the foundation for the appearance of the Ding kilns' white porcelain and Jingdezhen's *qingbai* porcelain, egg-white porcelain, and white porcelain after the Song Dynasty. If not for the emergence of the white porcelain, the polychrome porcelains of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing would not have flourished. The colorful glaze ware and black glaze porcelain of the Tang Dynasty laid the foundation for the flambé glaze wares of the Song Dynasty such as Jun ware, hare-fur porcelain, oil-spot porcelain, and tortoiseshell glaze ware. Then there is the tricolor glazed earthenware of the Tang Dynasty, which, though not suitable as tableware since it was low-fired lead-glazed pottery, but it still aided the development of glazed tiles which were used in later generations for building temples and palaces. Products of the Changsha kilns deserve special attention because their underglaze color painting, inscriptions, and decoration combining calligraphy and painting, sowed the seed for the black and white porcelain of the Cizhou kilns in the Song Dynasty, for the blue and white porcelain of Jingdezhen in the Yuan Dynasty, and for the blue and white *doucai* porcelain, *wucai* porcelain, and famille-rose porcelain of Jingdezhen in the Ming and Qing dynasties. From all this, it can be seen that the decorative means and expressive techniques of various porcelain varieties in later dynasties found their beginnings in the Tang Dynasty. These beginnings not only refer to technology; it also involved the formation of cultural ideas and artistic aesthetics. Chinese culture before the Sui and Tang dynasties, featuring bold and heroic values, lauded the bravery of soldiers, while after Sui and Tang it moved toward elegance and gentleness and featured more of a literatus temperament. It could be said that though ceramics during the Tang Dynasty were not as prosperous as they were in the Song, the Tang Dynasty, marking the beginning of a new style, was an important turning point in the history of Chinese ceramic art.

Liang Shuming believed that the standard of a culture achieving maturity is the inner rationality of its individuals and in this regard Chinese culture matured much earlier than Western culture. Western culture has its roots in religion while Chinese culture, taking a different path, focuses on morality rather than religion and maintains customs, discipline, and order through morality.³² Westerners generally believe that religion is the inevitable experience of a society, yet China has never had a religion in the real sense apart from primitive religious activities. What happened is that early in Chinese history Confucianism transfigured primitive religions into rites and music, from which art was born to edify people's sentiments and improve people's self-cultivation. Ceramic wares, as a part of this process, were both ritual objects and works of art.

The two major philosophical schools in China, Confucianism and Taoism, both non-religious, regarded life as their foundation and emphasized nature rather than artifice. This philosophy is reflected in Chinese ceramic art's preference for bringing out the natural beauty of the material itself, which is considered to be real ingenuity. Chinese pursue the "union of Heaven and man," which in artistic practice became the "union of the object and the soul." Chinese craftsmen avoid impairing the inner quality of the object. Rather, they endeavor to bring out the beauty of the object itself and add radiance to it. Such is the ideal of Chinese craft arts. It is also why Chinese people often praise craft work as the "secret workings of nature" or "Heaven's workings through man's hand." These sayings show that the Chinese refuse to tamper with natural objects through artificial work. This does not mean that Chinese people are unwilling to apply human effort. It is just that they do not wish to damage, conquer, or replace nature with human effort. The goal is always to improve nature through human effort. Such philosophical thinking started to manifest itself in the ceramic art of the Tang Dynasty and reached its peak in the Song Dynasty. During this time, the craftsmen ingeniously took advantage of material properties themselves to achieve natural beauty effects. These effects included the glaze colors of azure, light greenish blue and plum green, the ice crackle pattern, "golden threads and iron lines," the crab claw pattern, "purple rim and iron feet," the flambé glaze of the Jun kilns, and the earthworm trail pattern.

The Ancient Chinese liked surrounding themselves with calligraphy, paintings and poetry and used every opportunity to edify people's sentiments through art. Thus, close attention was paid to the decorative images even on daily utensils made of porcelain, which were often flowers, birds, fish, and insects, which created a serene and peaceful atmosphere. Even wares of a single color without decoration were not entirely blank. They often featured more intricate pursuits in terms of texture. Different art forms permeate each other, and different philosophies have been expressed in literature and the arts throughout history. Ceramic art has always been a critical vessel for philosophical ideas. From Chinese ceramic works we can observe the cultural pursuits of the Chinese people. It can also be seen that Chinese culture is one that integrates everyday arts with moral concepts and uses art instead

³² Liang Shuming, *The Fate of Chinese Culture*, CITIC Press, 2010, p. 49.

of religion to express a moral orientation. It was an early maturing culture that was once admired by European society.

At a certain stage this, early maturing of Chinese society hampered the country's pace toward industrialization and as a result, the once strongest nation in the agricultural era lagged behind when the Western world entered the industrial era. But today, as mankind enters post-industrial civilization, material production has reached a certain degree of saturation and the ecological environment has been seriously damaged. Under these circumstances, it is being realized increasingly that the artistic ideal of ancient China, one that advocated nature, worshiped life, and pursued truth, may offer valuable inspiration for the future development of humankind, a quest that invites further examination.

Ancient China as a Manufacturing Power

The early maturing of Chinese society contributed to China's highly developed handicrafts in the ancient past. Yet China's industrial backwardness in the last century has led to many people's fallacious perception that ancient China was merely an agriculturally advanced country. They fail to realize that China was once also a major manufacturing power. China started exporting handicraft products to surrounding countries in the Han Dynasty and expanded the market to East Asia, Southeast Asia, West Asia, Africa, and Europe in the Song and Yuan dynasties. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the geographical discoveries of the Europeans accelerated globalization and at the same time pushed Chinese handicraft exports to its zenith. Of China's exported handicrafts across different dynasties, porcelain has always been one of the most important.

The scale and volume of the porcelain trade alone shows that China was once a manufacturing power similar to what it is now. What is different is that now China manufactures and exports low-cost daily goods while previously the porcelain, silk, furniture, gold and silver wares, lacquerwares, etc. China made and exported were the most expensive luxuries in the world. From 1700 to 1820, the average annual growth rate of China's economy was three times higher than that of Europe and China's GDP accounted for one third of the world's total. One contributing factor of this economic success was that at the time porcelain and other handicraft products from China were luxurious and trendy commodities, heavily demanded by many countries. As the products were exported, silver flowed into China, especially from European countries. Behind the popularity of Chinese handicrafts at the time was not only the strength of China's manufacturing, but more importantly, foreign countries' admiration for Chinese values, aesthetic tastes, and the Chinese culture in general. In European countries at that time, the most sought-after household decorations were Chinese style ornamental objects, including porcelain, lacquerware, furniture, gold, and silver ware, with porcelain being the most popular. These porcelain wares, embellished with various scenes of Chinese life, with dramatic and fictional stories, with flowers, birds, fish, and insects, and with Chinese landscapes, filled Europeans

with curiosity and fascination for Chinese culture. China became the exotic ideal land of the European imagination. The sweeping popularity of Chinese culture influenced European aesthetics and arts and had a considerable impact on the Enlightenment which was taking place at the time. What China exported, then, was more than commodities—it also exported ideas, philosophy, and values embodied in those commodities.

The year 1820 was the 25th year of the Jiaqing era in China's Qing Dynasty. In that year, China was still the largest exporter and the leading economic power in the world, exporting large volumes of porcelain to Europe and America. Then, only 20 years later, the Opium War broke out, in an instant driving the Chinese empire to the verge of collapse. Subsequently, China lost its status as a manufacturing and exporting power, and even domestic manufactured products began to be imported from the West. Handicraft products such as ceramics and textiles, once China's strong suit, started to be replaced by Western machine-made items. It is still a vivid memory for many that until the 1960s the Chinese market was pervaded by imported industrial products whose names all started with the character *yang*, meaning foreign. Kerosene was called "foreign oil," cotton cloth "foreign cloth," and matches "foreign kindling."

This change fits well A. R. Radcliffe-Brown's description: the unity of a culture will be in serious turmoil because of a collision with a very different culture and may even be destroyed and replaced; such cultural disintegration is very common in today's world—from the Americas or the South Pacific to China and India.³³ The impact of the new industrial civilization turned China from a major exporter into an importer, from a strong country into a weak one, and from a culturally advanced country into a backward one. It was against this background that we forgot our history. Many major museums in Europe and America display various refined porcelain wares, furniture, gold and silver wares, lacquerwares and silk shipped from China that represent the highest manufacturing standards of ancient China, while in Chinese museums we mostly see luxury objects of the imperial palace and aristocracy but not such exquisite works. This has led many current young Chinese to overlook the fact that China was once a manufacturing powerhouse. They only regard her as once a backward agricultural civilization. Now China has again become a major exporter, but what we export is mostly cheap goods rather than fashion or luxury products. We lack design capacity and our own brands. In most cases we only manufacture based on foreign designs. The fundamental reason for the difference is that in ancient times China was a culturally developed country. Its cultural system and values were a model that the rest of the world admired and learned from. Thus, at that time China was exporting culture and values as well as goods, and this culture and these values are the most important thing a country can offer to the outside world. All commodities are essentially carriers of culture and ideology. This, in another way, shows that the determining factor of social transformation is the ideological component rather than the technological. Currently, China will achieve breakthroughs in technological and cultural innovation only if she produces thought and ideas that represent the new era.

³³ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Method in Social Anthropology*, translated (into Chinese) by Xia Jianzhong, Huaxia Publishing House, 2002, p. 67.

The Contemporary Value of Chinese Ceramic History Research

Historical studies are more than explorations of the past. They are to benefit the present and the future. As an anthropologist, I have examined and written about the history of Chinese ceramics to gain and share with readers a deeper understanding of the origin and development of Chinese society and culture, namely, the yesterday of our country, which hopefully will benefit its today and tomorrow.

As Benedetto Croce argued, while history is not contemporary, if it is not regarded as a mere hollow echo and is given true meaning, all history is contemporary history. “Like contemporary history, the precondition of its existence is that the stories it tells must reverberate in the mind of historians.”³⁴ Past history reverberates in our minds because of its close relation to present-day life. “Contemporary history no doubt comes directly from life, and history which is not called contemporary history must also come from life because it goes without saying that the only thing that would motivate people to study the facts of the past is an interest in the present life. Hence, past facts are looked at by historians with a mind to not a past interest but a current interest.”³⁵ It is also for this that while I am writing about ancient history far removed from the present day, every step along the way I cannot resist comparing the past with today, for I know that present-day China grew out of the past and that we will understand the root of many current phenomena only if we know their past. This is exactly how Lucien Febvre put it: “It is a need every human group recognizes at some point of its evolution: people look for value in or attach value to “past” behaviors, events, and trends. These behaviors, events, and trends indicate reality, make people understand reality and help people live in reality.”³⁶

Karl Popper believes the usefulness of history lies in its close relationship with present reality. Some of the questions that arise from contemporary life require the historians’ input of a past perspective. “We need to know how our difficulties are related to the past so as to know which path we shall take to go forward and solve the main tasks we face and choose.”³⁷ Therefore, in a sense, all history is “contemporary history,” for all history researchers rethink and rewrite history from the standpoint of life today.

The writing of this book is in a sense influenced by the concept of Cultural Self-consciousness championed by Fei Xiaotong. Cultural Self-consciousness means that people living in a certain culture should have adequate knowledge of that culture, of its origin, formation, characteristics, and development trends. Such knowledge is

³⁴ Benedetto Croce, *History: Its Theory and Practice*, translated (into Chinese) by Fu Rengan, The Commercial Press, 1982, p. 2.

³⁵ See Footnote 34.

³⁶ Xu Hao & Hou Jianxin, *Schools of Contemporary Western Historiography*, China Renmin University Press, 1996, p. 91.

³⁷ Xu Hao & Hou Jianxin, *Schools of Contemporary Western Historiography*, China Renmin University Press, 1996, p. 69.

necessary if a culture is to be more strongly independent in its cultural transformation and to achieve autonomy in the task of making cultural choices that are suited to the new environment and new era.³⁸ My purpose in writing this book is similar, that is, to understand Chinese culture and Chinese society through a study of China's ceramic history and to explore the future path of Chinese culture.

Fei Xiaotong's Cultural Self-consciousness requires us not to think about Chinese culture and history in isolation, but to perceive Chinese culture and history from a global perspective and from the standpoint of the interests of all human beings. Fei Xiaotong argues: "The cultural contacts following economic globalization will inevitably bring huge changes, and we should be prepared for this worldwide cultural contention. On the one hand, we should recognize the goodness in traditional Chinese culture and study our own history from a modern scientific approach in the mission of achieving Cultural Self-consciousness and creating a splendid modern Chinese culture, and on the other hand we should learn about and understand other cultures in the world, learn to handle and resolve problems arising from cultural contacts, and contribute to the common future of all humanity."³⁹ It is with such a mission in mind that I adopt a global vision when studying the history of Chinese ceramics, always accommodating its interaction with Western culture, thought, economy, and trade.

This book is also intended to contribute answers, albeit incomplete, to broader questions raised by Fei Xiaotong, namely, "Why are we living this way? What is the meaning of living this way? What results will such living bring us? That is to say, having developed to this stage, the human race needs to know where our cultures came from, how they took their present form, what is their essence, and where will they take human beings."⁴⁰ Examining the history of ceramics with these questions in mind, my research yields some new understandings about traditional Chinese culture. Naturally, arising from my personal research, these understandings are not automatically validated or comprehensive.

As mentioned above, all history is contemporary history. History is not the dead past. It is alive. What it has to offer is not some sealed treasure inviting us to take it as it is. It requires us to search for and assemble numerous fragments in order to truly embrace it. It takes constant re-visiting and re-understanding. People in different eras have different ways of understanding and obtain different nutrients from history, according to the needs of their respective times. That is why people in different eras interpret and write history in different ways and from different standpoints.

³⁸ Fei Xiaotong, "Words on 'Cultural Self-consciousness,'" *Academic Research*, Issue 7, 2003.

³⁹ See Footnote 38.

⁴⁰ Fei Xiaotong, "'Cultural Self-consciousness' and the Historical Task of Chinese Scholars," *Inheriting, Learning, Research*, SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2002, p. 360.

Writing Ideas

The knowledge and insights the history of Chinese ceramics is able to offer is far beyond what has been mentioned above. Since the birth of pottery, the production of ceramics has been in existence for about 10,000 years. Throughout this long history, ceramic wares have accompanied the entire course of the development of the Chinese nation, including its culture, politics, economy, and science and technology. It would be a daunting task for anyone to attempt a comprehensive discussion of this huge and complex subject through individual effort.

Therefore, in this book, I restrict myself to my own field and examine the history of Chinese ceramics purely from the perspective of the anthropology of art. My focus is on the contributing factors to the aesthetic and artistic styles of ceramics in different dynasties and on the interaction between the ideological, sociological, technological, natural, and informational components of Chinese culture as reflected in the process of ceramic production development. And the study seems to point to the following conclusions: art is born of a range of factors including material and spirit, religion and labor; the ideological component acts on the technological component to bring changes to the sociological component; Chinese history should not be divided along mechanical evolutionist lines into primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist, and socialist periods but should be reexamined from an anthropological viewpoint, and the history of ceramics shows that after the Qin and Han dynasties China was a plebeian society rather than a feudal society; attention should be given to spatial diffusion in addition to temporal evolution in the study of the history of Chinese ceramics. Another research result is the realization that not only do the ideological, sociological, and technological components as suggested by White contribute to the historical changes of a civilization, but so also do nature and information, and that in modern times, the information component, which represents diffusion and communication, is playing an ever more significant role. As the dissemination of information speeds up, so does the tempo of social change.

This work gives more weight to the information component, i.e., to the global ceramic trade and cultural exchange. Previous work on the history of Chinese ceramics has often spent more time on the Song Dynasty as that period boasted more kilns than any other period in Chinese history. This work, however, devotes its most comprehensive and richest chapter to the Qing Dynasty, because that was when Chinese ceramics enjoyed their widest distribution and the broadest contact with other countries. Selling not only in China, but also to Asian, African, and European countries as well as the emerging American market, the ceramics trade at that time was an early model of trade globalization. By then, countries around the world were no longer isolated from each other. They all joined a collective historical tide in a complex and changing era, and the development of China's ceramics industry was one wave in that tide. With the rise of the Western world, the acceleration of information, communication, and exchange around the globe altered the political, economic, cultural, and social development modes in every country.

“The other culture” and “the other” are among the most important concepts of anthropology. The general idea is to use the exotic culture of “the other” as a mirror to look at one’s own culture and to reflect upon it to facilitate improvement. While “the other culture” in traditional anthropology is defined in terms of geographic distance, I believe temporal distance may also cause cultural estrangement and “otherness.” To us, the ancient world and culture are also “the other” and “the other culture.”

Another important anthropological concept is the idea of the “field.” Fieldwork is how anthropologists obtain first-hand research materials and the field is where they meet cultural groups face to face. When our research object is history, the “field” in this sense, namely, living groups with whom we may interact and talk, is no longer present. But the “field” of ancient culture is not entirely absent. It remains in the silent wares, ruins and relics that have survived. To explore such a “field” is like talking to the ancients. In this manner, we can use ancient culture as a mirror to look at our present culture and reflect on it, which may help us find a correct path to the future.

Anthropology as a discipline originated in the West. I have long pondered how best to apply it to the study Chinese culture and history and how to develop anthropological theories with Chinese characteristics. As a venerable civilization, China has immense volumes of historical literature, rich tangible archaeological resources, and historical relics, which, if fully explored, well utilized, and carefully studied in combination with the present reality would certainly open a new door for anthropological studies in general and for branch studies including art anthropology and historical anthropology. This would remove many of the limitations on previous anthropological research, draw worldwide attention to Chinese anthropological studies, and promote the reconstruction of specialized historical studies in China such as cultural history, art history, and economic history. These are some of my objectives while writing this *History of Chinese Ceramics*.

The above are some of my ideas about the writing of this book. They are mostly about underrepresented aspects of previous ceramic history studies and problems I have been exploring. As this is perhaps the first attempt to look at the issues from an anthropological perspective, immaturity and limitations are bound to exist and further studies will be required to address the questions in more depth.

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