

Hana Novotná article in Issue #1 of Yarrobil magazin „CELADON A MYSTERIOUS COLOUR“, 2015



# CELADON A MYSTERIOUS COLOUR

Celadon glass used to be the closely guarded secret of ancient Chinese potters and had been used throughout the Dynasties following its discovery dating back to the Han Dynasty in the Zhejiang Province 206 BC-220 AD. At the peak of its popularity, during the years 907-969 under the rule of the Five Dynasties, ceramics glazed with the 'celadon' colour were used solely by the Emperor's court. The quality of the bronze, as well as the glaze recipe, had been carefully researched, developed and improved. It was not until 1368, during the Ming dynasty, that porcelain appears decorated in white and blue glaze causing the popularity of celadon glaze to decline. The question is as follows - why was celadon so popular in China and used for so many centuries? The answer needs to be sought from both the philosophical and technical points of view.

The introduction of celadon - from shades of green, through to turquoise and also to brown-green, marks one of the 'stone' revolutions in the history of the potter within a short period as a medium between earthy and divine spheres. There is a Chinese saying that reads 'Gold has value but jade is invaluable'. And Fang Liu wrote that Chinese ceramics were the 'Epitome of beauty joined with reason of the west and reason - medicine of spiritual world'. The similarity between the beauty of jade and celadon was discovered when the latter was first used for mirrors and later porcelain began. Although the desired colour depended on many factors, but the presence of iron oxides in glaze or in liquid and its firing in the reducing atmosphere of the dragon kilns were the crucial factors. The origin of the 'dragon kilns' was very sophisticated. The smoke temperature had to rise gradually to reach the necessary temperature and maintain that temperature for the time of reduction followed by a slow cooling. Adding that containing water became helpful to achieve the desired shade.

In China, such products were called 'qing ci'. It is said that in 17th century France, when Chinese porcelain first appeared in Paris in the winter of 1671, it was in the pasteurized version. It is said that in 1820, Celadon was the name of the best shaped character in the play.

Historically, the three centuries of rule that divided Northern and Southern Song (960-1279) were characterized by

an economic growth that brought with it technical progress and evolutionary production had risen, partly due to a rise in the popularity of tea drinking. During this period the speed of production increased, improved materials were used, an atmosphere of optimism in the kilns. The dominant celadon producing provinces during this time was Zhejiang and its prototype celadon kilns are now considered the cradle of celadon ware. Amongst the most famous are the Yue kilns, named after their geographical site in the north of the Province, around the Hangzhou Lake. These kilns produced a variety of wares from fine porcelain to stoneware of high, better and even 'Ji' from trees.

While porcelain work consisted of organic substances and 65-70% inorganic oxides was the key material giving the glaze its distinctive shade and transparency, it was the reducing atmosphere of the dragon kilns that provided the glossy effect on the surface and further necessary sufficient to allow all the finely carried oxides and refuse to become perfectly distinguishable. The Yue kilns with a long tradition dated back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907) were considered the 'lungs of all kilns'. Parts were about the Yue porcelain and glorified its colour and shape. Celadon from the Yue kilns are also described in the annals of Japanese literature.

Another important centre of celadon production, is in the South eastern border of the Province, called Longquan.



Detail of a Chinese celadon jar with lotus and dragon glaze. Northern Song, 11th century.

Here there is one of the oldest Chinese celadon kilns, which accounted for the largest amount of production amongst all the celadon kilns. Production of the celadon ware has existed since the period of the Five Dynasties (907-960) and it continued under the Northern Song Dynasty.

The more developed phase of porcelain production can be traced to the Southern Song (1127-1279), from the Southern Song (1127-1279), from the Ming (1368-1644) era, when celadon was already being produced on vessels of a different

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celadon. Longquan represented the largest School of southern celadons. Even though Longquan was the centre of production, celadon kilns have been found in surrounding areas and along the local rivers. The area was rich in raw materials needed for porcelain production making business relationships with other provinces and other countries more established. During the height of their production, 50-60 meter long dragon kilns burned up to 10,000 ceramic wares in every firing. According to the historical sources, up to 300 porcelain kilns could be found in the area having little doubt that the Zhejiang Province was one of the leaders in porcelain production within China.

During the Northern Song Dynasty, celadon porcelain production was stopped. They began making coloured traditional Yue celadon from the Tang Dynasty even though the beginning was strongly derived from the Yue originals, the trend began to take over and Longquan developed and asserted its own unique style.

By example large habited jar with a wide neck were typical. The peak era of celadon in Longquan can be seen in the years 1127-1279. Products from this era were called Di or Qi (Di means 'young brother', Qi means 'older brother') after two of the five official kilns belonging to the Emperor of the Northern and Song Dynasty.

A typical feature of Longquan production was its prominent glaze 'ice cracking' which consisted of creating cracks underneath the glaze to reveal colors from the bottom layer

that producing various 'spiral effects'. The glaze with large dark cracks and small yellow cracks is known as 'poisonous' meaning 'gold thread and iron wire'. During the following period the system of the 'ice cracking' technique gradually faded out to be lost for ever.

In South-west China, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, had been chosen as a centre for the Emperor's kilns for practical reasons as it was geographically positioned in a valley surrounded by a belt of mountains. The city was located in the middle of a new mountain range as well as being surrounded by a belt of mountains from a higher level was called the 'earthen period' Jingdezhen was called the capital city of porcelain. It served the emperor like the glaze with white-blue wash was called 'Jingde' and was dominated by using the firing of white.

Later production of Jingdezhen was seen in the so-called 'blue and white' which was produced in the highest quality and used in the highest quality of the glaze. The white glaze was in agreement with the former being

Qilin vase with red and white decoration, Jingdezhen, Northern Song Dynasty. Photograph courtesy of the author.



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*Porcelain Dish, Qi ware, Southern Song, AD 1125-1275, Shanghai Museum, Shanghai*  
 Photo: courtesy of the author

covered with a thick layer of glaze that is almost white with a soft turquoise bluish. The forms and glazes from this 'style' were appropriated and produced in many countries beyond China.

There remains a connection between the ancient material of porcelain and the ancient glaze, celadon today. Many artists use celadon to help enhance the potential of their expression in the contemporary ceramics field and the collaboration between potters, celadon and artist can be found on vessels and installations around the globe. There are trends, some new interpretations of porcelain and celadon as not only a utilitarian material but also as a part of conceptual practice.

Porcelain dealing with an intentional actualization of forms and colours are appearing more frequently and with increasing success.

This article has been written as a reminder of the historical context of celadon use in China and may be best understood in a kind of analogy to the past - especially those aspects of art that deal with using traditional and patterns as a feedback to the special moments of concept when making a work of art. Our insight concludes a work of art. Our insight concludes that the fascination with celadon is still present, that this important colour is still allowing and appealing, and the legacy of the old masters is still current.

Notes

- 1. Hani • human, Chinese porcelain the porcelain lies in the East of China, close to East China Sea.
- 2. In other words - gold means as gold but jade includes something which comes to be thought with gold and means for the Chinese jade used to represent the state for virtues - wisdom, justice, mercy, nobility, courage. China also used to be called a Jade Kingdom. The word jade also appears in a number of "mobile languages" - Chinese jade symbol communication with Gods, Shamanism, the 13th century, Yixiang because the higher culture of human - Jade Emperor.
- 3. All of the following represent some form of the 14th century of the Jade Emperor.

4. Feng Lin, Chinese Ceramics, University Press, 2013, Cambridge

5. "Shanglin kilns" were constructed in the particular parameters, its proximity to bodies of the quantities, its access to rich in wood and coal to transport paths, quality of water and soil. The very high with several chambers into the stacks, in order to take advantage of the stack effect. Changed distance from the bottom chamber to the top one. Also other types of kilns were used, e.g. the "flower kiln" or small scale kilns with health construction.

6. Some of the famous Chinese, displayed and used celadon, porcelain in various with various colours.

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