



Chinese Ceramics in the Late Tang Dynasty

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The first half of the Tang dynasty (618–907) was a most prosperous period for the Chinese empire. The capital Chang'an (modern Xi'an) in Shaanxi province was a magnet for international traders, who brought goods from all over Asia; the court and the country's aristocracy were enjoying a life of luxury. The streets of Chang'an were crowded with foreigners from distant places—Central Asian, Near Eastern, and African—and with camel caravans laden with exotic produce. Courtiers played polo on thoroughbred horses, went on hunts with falconers and elegant hounds, and congregated over wine while being entertained by foreign orchestras and dancers, both male and female. Court ladies in robes of silk brocade, with jewelry and fancy shoes, spent their time playing board games on dainty tables and talking to pet parrots, their faces made up and their hair dressed into elaborate coiffures.

This is the picture of Tang court life portrayed in colorful tomb pottery, created at great expense for lavish burials. By the seventh century the manufacture of sophisticated pottery replicas of men, beasts, and utensils had become a huge industry and the most important use of ceramic material in China (apart from tilework). Such earthenware pottery, relatively easy and cheap to produce since the necessary raw materials were widely available and firing temperatures relatively low (around 1,000 degrees C), was unfit for everyday use; its cold-painted pigments were unstable and its lead-bearing glazes poisonous. Yet it was perfect for creating a dazzling display at funeral ceremonies (fig. 35). Stoneware, which in China had already been produced in parallel with earthenware for some 2,000 years, was much more demanding to manufacture, required much higher temperatures (more than 1,200 degrees C), was prone to warp or crack in the kiln, and was considered less appealing due to its limited and subdued color range of olive green, brown, and a neutral off-white. It was not in great demand.

The rebellion of An Lushan in 755, though it was quelled after a few years, put the country into turmoil and proved a most sobering event with a lasting effect on the glory and grandeur of the empire. Weakened central authority, a shaken and disoriented bureaucracy, and actual physical damage afflicted on the countryside triggered a shift in values. While imperial lifestyles and burials remained lavish, outside the court the display of riches was no longer a goal in itself. Already in the first half of the eighth century repeated imperial edicts had been issued against increasing ostentation at funerals; they bore fruit in the second half of the century, when interments were stripped of excessive pomp, and virtually no more ceramics were produced specially for burial.

With confidence in the traditional ruling classes undermined, new forces gained influence in society, and not through such conventional ladders of success as inheritance or state examinations. The move toward greater sobriety set free a change in aspirations, an interest

Fig. 34 Large lidded jar. Cat. 276.

LEFT

Fig. 35 *Sancai* (three-color) glazed figure of a camel laden with goods, Shaanxi or Henan province, Tang dynasty, 7th or early 8th century. Meiyintang Collection.

Fig. 36 White stoneware bottle, Hebei province, Sui dynasty, late 6th or early 7th century. Meiyintang Collection.

Fig. 37 Gongxian fragment of a tea grinder recovered from the Baihe kiln site, Gongyi county, Henan province.



in connoisseurship rather than wealth, and a more sophisticated approach to luxury goods that focused less on the obvious values of precious materials than on inherent qualities like workmanship and artistry.

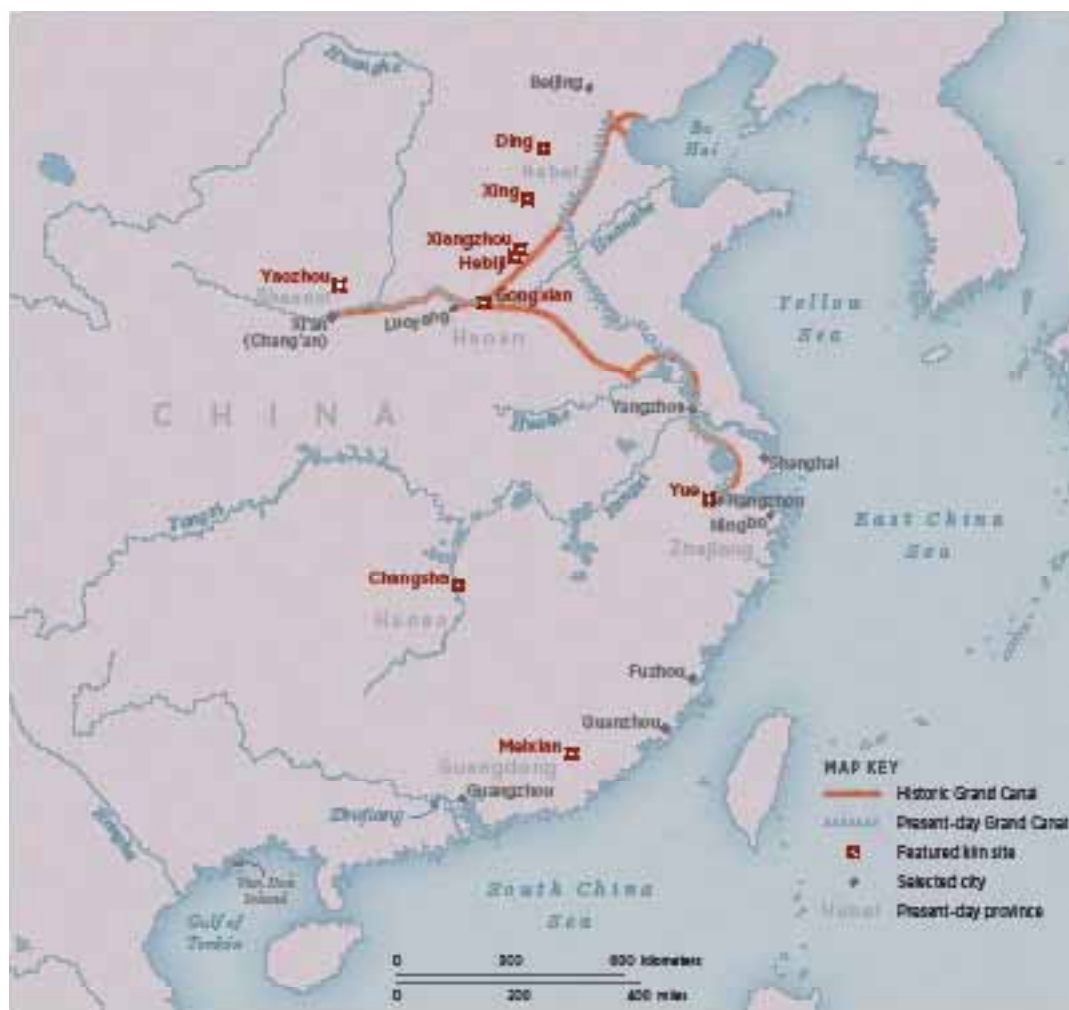
A new kind of vessel, made of ceramic, thus arrived on Chinese tables. Some ceramics developed a distinct style—still heavily potted but often pure white, with a glossy colorless glaze that formed thick glassy drops. Even if not quite on par with the aristocracy's preferred materials in the prosperous period known as the High Tang,¹ such as gold and silver, mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell, or foreign glass, the ware was undeniably attractive (fig. 36).

The full swing toward an acceptance of ceramics in the highest places came with the new fashion for tea-drinking in the Tang dynasty. Reflecting this trend, in his well-known manual on tea, *Chajing* (The Classic of Tea), written between 760 and 780, the poet Lu Yu (730s–circa 804) elevated the consumption of tea into a ceremony to be celebrated in style. Tea was then consumed very differently from today. Tea leaves, often shaped into cakes, were ground to a powder, infused with hot water in large bowls, and whisked into froth, or else added to a cauldron of boiling water, stirred, and then ladled into bowls. Mixed with salt and sometimes spices, herbs, fruits, and other aromatics, tea often resembled a soup more than a beverage.

Lu Yu lists and carefully describes more than twenty accoutrements as required for the preparation of tea. Tea bowls were definitely ceramic, and here Lu Yu is adamant: it had to be either Yue ware from Zhejiang or Xing ware from Hebei; others he declared unworthy.² By ranking different types of tea bowls and passing judgment on their quality, beauty, and suitability, Lu Yu was probably the first to express an aesthetic appreciation of ceramics. At the same time he propagated the names of specific manufacturing centers. Ceramics had never before been associated with kiln names; now these became brand names for fine tablewares.

Other items—such as the tea bowl stand; ewer for hot water; container for tea, salt, and other spices; mortar for grinding the tea; plate for accompanying food; and incense burner—could be

Fig. 38 Major kiln sites in 9th-century China.



of various materials, such as lacquer, wood, or metal, but they, too, could be ceramic. Examples of all these shapes have been recovered from the Belitung wreck, including several wheels for tea grinders (fig. 37), a type made by various kilns, including Gongxian in Henan and Changsha in Hunan. Ceramics, of course, also made perfect vessels for wine, in China usually a grain-based fermented or distilled drink that was stored in large covered jars, heated up, and poured from bottles with a narrow opening. Both these procedures of tea and wine preparation were similar to those still kept alive in Japan today (fig. 39).

Between the mid-eighth and late ninth centuries, Yue and Xing ware are repeatedly referred to in literature, particularly poetry, as symbols of beauty, elegance, taste, novelty, and wealth. Neiqiu (one of the Xing kilns) wine bottles are thus mentioned, together with jade cups, in connection with different wines.³ White porcelain bottles from Neiqiu and Duan inkstones—equally precious—are said to have been used by everybody, the noble as well as the lowly, a remark that should probably be taken as a metaphor for the affluence and prosperity of the times rather than as a literal observation.⁴ The likeness of Yue ware to jade and Xing to silver, noted by Lu Yu, was taken up by various other writers. It related not only to the colour and tactility of these ceramics, but also to the resonance of their high-fired stoneware material. During the Wuzong reign (840–46) a certain Guo Daoyuan is said to have used twelve Yue and Xing ware



ABOVE

Fig. 39 Preparation of tea and wine, mural from a Liao dynasty (907-1125) tomb of 1093 showing the typical tea utensils of the Tang still in use, but wine bottles replaced by ewers.

bowls filled with varying amounts of water to play a musical scale—just like performances still done with glasses today. Their tone is said to have surpassed that of chimes made of jade.⁵

Yue and Xing wares were even compared to the twin souls *hun* and *po*, a Daoist concept of interacting opposites that form a whole, which probably reflects on their significance as the major ceramic representatives of the south and the north, respectively.⁶ By the late ninth century, when the imperial household included fourteen vessels of Yue ware in its magnificent gift of containers of food, tea, incense, and relics of the Buddha to the Famensi, a temple near Chang'an, these ceramics had reached a level that was hard to surpass. Yet by that time, not only was the emperor's veneration of the temple's Buddha bone severely criticized by the educated elite, but the use of these fine ceramics was also denounced, as they had become a prerogative of the rich. One writer mourned in his verses the excessive quantity of trees used to fire these wares, poetically describing the deforestation as "Robbing a thousand mountain peaks of their kingfisher-blue." The erstwhile objects of admiration became symbols of the decadence of the times.⁷

Outside interest in Chinese ceramics rose through increased contact with these miraculous novelties that were hard as stone and sparkling like metal, did not easily crack, crackle, or chip—like ceramics usually did—and remained dense, immaculately clean, and hygienic, even after prolonged use. A proper mystique developed around them through seafarers' tales, especially where the actual objects had never been seen. The Arab merchant Sulayman recorded in 851, probably after having seen or heard of some translucent Xing wares, "The Chinese have a fine clay of which they fashion drinking vessels that are as delicate as glass and through which one can see the water, despite that they are of clay and not of glass."⁸ Of course, the majority of Tang stonewares, including all those on the Belitung wreck, was not of this magic quality.

With the growing demand at home and abroad, new kilns sprang up in many provinces, and those that had made low-fired tomb ceramics before now changed to making high-fired tablewares and other utilitarian ceramics. In China, a taste for the unmannered beauty of monochrome ceramics, which focused on the vessel's material and shape, crystallized at this time and reached its full maturity in the Song dynasty (960–1279), when variety was at its peak. Abroad, a delight in color and ornament called for a different approach. Workshops less highly regarded inland, such as Gongxian, which made lesser white stonewares, and Changsha, which produced a poorer version of green stonewares, responded by adding colored decoration to their wares. The Gongxian kilns, China's erstwhile tomb furniture suppliers, adapted some of their former coloring agents, such as copper and cobalt, to their new wares to create bright green splashes and blue designs. The Changsha kilns used iron and copper for brown, green, and occasionally red designs painted under the glaze, and for monochrome glazes. The cargo included examples with a striking and exceedingly rare monochrome copper-red glaze, albeit very degraded.⁹ Located far from China's seats of power, centers of commerce, and similar kiln centers, the Changsha kilns (fig. 38) are a case apart in the history of Tang ceramics, since they operated quite independently, creating their own techniques, shapes, and designs.

These more colorful ceramics found an eager clientele abroad. Chinese ceramics had reached western Asia by the fifth century, and occasionally even earlier,¹⁰ but the onerous transport across the desert via camel caravans did not make ceramics trade goods of choice, and until the mid-Tang dynasty they remained rare abroad. Proper boat traffic with opportunities for mass transport from the southeastern ports of China to trading posts all across Asia and as far as Africa developed from the late eighth century onward, and the trade of Chinese ceramics to the Near East seems to have been well established by about 800.¹¹ Circumstances improved after 829, when an edict granted imperial protection to foreign merchants operating in Guangdong, Fujian, and Yangzhou.¹² Yet this did not last long; trade was brutally brought to a halt with the sack of Guangzhou by the rebel leader Huang Chao, who in 879 devastated the port and killed vast numbers of its foreign merchants; according to some accounts they comprised more than half of the city's population.¹³ Thereafter, it was apparently not until the tenth century that



Fig. 40 This green-splashed cup from Henan and a white cup from Hebei in the north share a Central Asian metal form with a gold cup, probably from Jiangsu in the south. Cats. 224, 272, 299.

Fig. 41 These Xing, Yue, and Guangdong bowls share a stylistic unity despite the distance between their respective kilns. Cats. 266, 238, 259.



maritime trade recovered. The voyage of the Belitung ship may have taken place in this period of the highest trade activity, circa 829 to 879.

The Tang authorities, who closely monitored all international trade, do not seem to have considered ceramics valuable or rare enough to restrict their export. Although at that time China no longer held a monopoly on the production of silk, the export or sale to foreigners of fine silk fabrics (together with that of pearls, gold, and other items of value) were forbidden by an edict of 714. Stoneware ceramics, on the other hand, where China retained an absolute monopoly, never seem to have been affected by any trade restrictions.¹⁴ Perhaps these would have been too difficult to survey given the wide distribution of stoneware manufacturing throughout China.

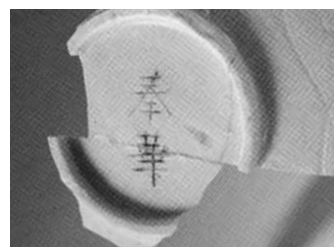
Trade in ceramics therefore could be either a private transaction or an affair of state. Much exchange of goods with foreigners was conducted directly at the ports, where Chinese ceramics were for sale or boats could be filled with the help of local officials. Alternatively, trade could be conducted via national channels as a kind of barter, where an arriving “embassy,” which could consist of foreign envoys or simply merchants, formally offered “tribute” to the court and received “gifts” in return. Foreigners, who had no direct access to workshops located inland, could specify what kind of wares they wished to receive. An official involvement of the court with the cargo of the Belitung ship might explain its splendid and surprising load of gold and silver objects, the valuable component of fine Yue and Xing wares, as well as the inclusion of two ceramic items with inscriptions suggesting a court connection.

A bright green-glazed bowl bears the character *ying* (fig. 43), which more typically is found on white Xing wares (fig. 44) of the latter half of the ninth and tenth centuries. *Ying*, meaning “surplus,” is believed to be an abbreviation of *da ying ku* or *bai bao da ying ku*, “Great Surplus Storehouse [of a Hundred Treasures],” an official Tang treasury containing items used at court.¹⁵ A dish with green splashes on a white ground is inscribed *jinfeng*, or “respectfully offered as tribute” (fig. 45). This inscription is better known from Ding wares (fig. 46), where it was engraved after firing.¹⁶ The two pieces from the Belitung cargo most likely come from the Gongxian kilns of Henan, which are known to have offered ceramics as tribute to the court. It is therefore possible that they originally were offered by the kilns to the imperial house, and then awarded by the court to an “embassy” that arrived with the ship.

The inscription of such characters was by no means monitored or restricted, however, and the meaning cannot necessarily be taken literally. Enhancing epithets such as these, which were meaningful in connection with another ware, were often copied by lesser workshops, especially if pieces were meant to be sold on the open market. The inscription *guan* (meaning “official”), for example, inscribed on Ding wares from around the same time, not only has been discovered in excavations in a Tang context but also at Liao (907–1125), Five Dynasties (907–60), and Northern Song (960–1127) sites, which included tombs and temples, thus raising serious questions about the meaning of “official.”¹⁷ The character *guan* also was engraved on pieces from lesser kilns, where any official connection seems even more doubtful. The precise significance of these inscriptions is therefore uncertain.

On the other hand, the vast majority of vessels on this boat—some 57,000 ceramics from the Changsha kilns, professionally packed in Guangdong storage jars (see p. 55)—must have exceeded by far the capacities of such tribute trade; it also seems unlikely that such quantities would have been stocked at port awaiting a buyer. Here, a more direct connection from merchants to the kilns is more probable. The remarkable stylistic uniformity displayed by the Changsha wares might also point to a single delivery. Although foreigners usually did not place orders directly from the kilns, the representation of a curly-haired foreigner on one of the Changsha bowls attests to their presence in this inland region, away from traditional trade routes.

Unfortunately, the greatest portion of these Changsha wares, the bowls and ewers, were made similarly throughout the ninth century, and products of different decades do not seem to



RIGHT

Fig. 42 Changsha bowl with head of Central or West Asian man. Cat. 166.

LEFT

Fig. 43 Green-glazed bowl and detail of its base incised with the character *ying* ("surplus"). Cat. 230.

Fig. 44 Xing bowl incised with the character *ying* ("surplus").

Fig. 45 Detail of a green-splashed dish, incised with the characters *jinfeng* ("for tribute"). Cat. 231.

Fig. 46 *Ding* bowl incised after firing with the characters *jinfeng*.



manifest clear distinguishing features. Although one Changsha bowl bears a roughly incised date on the outside (fig. 12), its reign date is so sketchily engraved that it is identified as the Baoli period (825–26) more through negative than positive evidence. The other types of ceramics, which are equally characterized by great stylistic unity, display a more short-lived style. Yue vessels echo shapes in gold (e.g., four-lobed square dishes; four-lobed round dishes; quatrefoil-oval bowls); Yue wares share many forms with Xing (e.g., conical and rounded bowls with *bi*-disc foot, wine bottles); Hebei white and Henan green-splashed wares have a foreign cup shape in common with the gold (fig. 40); Yue, Guangdong, Xing, Ding, and Gongxian wares made use of the same distinctive foot in form of an ancient jade disc (*bi*), and so on (fig. 41). The Yue wares offer the most useful comparative material for dating this cargo, which points to the 840s.¹⁸ Shapes found among gold, silver, and Yue wares also have been discovered replicated in stone in a tomb of 845.¹⁹ This consistent style did not last long, as shapes became more distinct in proportion, four-lobed forms were superseded by five-lobed ones, ceramic quality was further refined, styles like the green-splashed and blue-decorated wares were discontinued, and kiln centers such as Gongxian declined while others, such as Ding in Hebei, rose to prominence.

The amazing quantity and great variety of this find, which includes the finest wares from the major kilns, offers a unique cross-section of the ceramic production in the late Tang.²⁰ It illustrates a poignant moment in time, on the very threshold of the potters' most glorious period, and thus provides an important marker in the history of Chinese ceramics.

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Twelve centuries ago, a merchant ship—an Arab dhow—foundered on a reef just off the coast of Belitung, a small island in the Java Sea. The cargo was a remarkable assemblage of lead ingots, bronze mirrors, spice-filled jars, intricately worked vessels of silver and gold, and more than 60,000 glazed bowls, ewers, and other ceramics. The ship remained buried at sea for more than a millennium, its contents protected from erosion by their packing and the conditions of the silty sea floor. *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds* explores the story of both the sailors and the ship's precious cargo through more than 400 gorgeous photographs and essays by international experts in Arab ship-building methods, pan-Asian maritime trade, ceramics, precious metalwork, and more.

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