

Porcelain, Jingdezhen and Chinese History

by France Pepper

Porcelain, often called “china” in English is arguably China’s most famous export. It was sought after in the Near East, East and Southeast Asia, and Europe for centuries, eventually becoming prized in America as well. Fired clay objects have been manufactured in China as far back as its Neolithic period (ca. 6500-1700 BCE) and have played a significant role in the history of Chinese art, technological innovation, as well as the Chinese economy. What is porcelain and what role did Jingdezhen play in its history?

Porcelain is a type of ceramic material made by heating the raw materials, generally clay in the form of kaolin, which is the key ingredient in porcelain, in an extremely hot kiln (to temperatures between 1,200 °C (2,192 °F) and 1,400 °C (2,552 °F)) Porcelain’s raw materials were in abundance in China and kiln technology became highly developed over centuries, making China the world innovator of porcelain. Jingdezhen, located in the northeast of Jiangsu Province, had an abundant supply of kaolin, ultimately making the city famous in China and the world. High demand for porcelain from the imperial court, local consumption and the growth of exports led to the continuous expansion of Jingdezhen’s porcelain industry, and this once small town eventually became known as the “porcelain capital.”

Because of their superior quality, porcelain objects were sent from Jingdezhen to the imperial court since early times. During the Song and Yuan dynasties (tenth to fourteenth centuries), there were no specified imperial workshops, and a selection was made of the very best products from each firing batch at the larger kilns. In the early Ming dynasty (at the end of the fourteenth century), the first imperial wares were made in an area at Jingdezhen called Pearl Hill where they continued to be made until the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911.

However, archaeological evidence indicates that the earliest porcelains produced in the town of Jingdezhen go back even earlier than the Song dynasty, to the very end of the Tang in the tenth century. A Tang period discovery in 1998 off the coast of Indonesia known as the Belitung shipwreck yielded shards of blue and white wares which were to become Jingdezhen’s most famous type of porcelain.

The process of making fine porcelain is complicated and traditionally involved many people with varying skills, working on a kind of production line, rather than as individual craftsmen. The concept of a ceramic production-line dates to third century BCE when the ruler of Qin unified China and declared himself its first emperor. He constructed a massive tomb complex complete with an army of over six thousand life-size soldiers and horses made of terracotta. Raw

materials were gathered, clay was molded, shaped and modeled, after which sections of each figure were fired separately (i.e. the head, the torso), followed by hand painting.

This organization of labor and materials was unprecedented and, although it is not likely that the production-line manufacturing of the terracotta army set the stage for later production-line manufacturing in China such as porcelain-making at Jingdezhen, it is apparent that large-scale projects requiring tremendous organization and supervision occurred throughout Chinese history.

Similarly at Jingdezhen, raw materials were mined and turned into clay. A production-line then took over, beginning with kneading the clay, forming the shape of the object on the wheel, glazing, decorating and firing. Depending on the type of glaze and decoration, many steps could ensue in varying orders. As porcelain technology became more sophisticated, it allowed for innovative glazes and decorations to be developed and, eventually, the Qing court established superintendents to oversee a properly organized industrial workshop and kiln complex to supply the court with utilitarian wares for eating and drinking, ritual vessels for performing rites, and decorative art objects.

Several significant innovations contributed to Jingdezhen's fame in the Qing period; notably, kiln technology and blue and white underglaze porcelain. The egg-shaped kiln, so-named because it resembled an egg lying on the ground, would accommodate a large number of pieces at one firing, and would allow precise control of a reducing atmosphere which was achieved by closing most of the kiln vents, thus allowing a minimum intake of oxygen and thereby producing reducing gases such as hydrogen and carbon monoxide. This is an essential requirement for the firing of certain colors.

The other major advances were in glaze technology, among which blue and white porcelain evolved and became synonymous with Chinese porcelain. What made it so desirable was the stunning effect of the painted design in blue against the pure white body and the translucent sheen of the clear overglaze. The blue could not be scratched or chipped away because it was protected by the clear glaze, hence the term underglazed blue and white. This glazing 'secret' was not successfully replicated in Europe or elsewhere until the eighteenth century.

Paralleling the demand for imperial porcelains was an entire private industry focused on the domestic Chinese market comprised of the elite literati connoisseurs, wealthy citizens, and common folk, as well as consumers from abroad. The former, whose taste ranged from decorative motifs with landscape, to bird and flower, to references from literary classics for example, contrasted with people from Islamic cultures living in the Near East, who were more inclined toward large dishes for communal eating and vessels with Koranic inscriptions. Europeans were known to request special commissions of entire dinnerware sets decorated with family crests and coat of arms.

The insatiable demand for Chinese porcelain eventually led to environmental problems. The Jingdezhen kilns burnt only wood and straw. Coal, the more typical form of fuel, distorted the color of the glazes, often turning the porcelain a yellow color. Straw was used at small, private kilns making coarse domestic ware, while wood, especially pine, was relied upon for fuel at the large porcelain factories. The problem of obtaining fuel had become acute by the Qing dynasty—the hills around Jingdezhen had long since been deforested, and the wood was brought in from far away. By the twentieth century it was necessary to transport wood for hundreds of miles, and the fuel had become so scarce that a city regulation banned its use anywhere except in the kilns. It was not until modern times that a proper reforestation program was launched, and many of the hills around the town are now covered with sapling trees.

After the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, porcelain demand from the imperial court ceased and most of the country was in turmoil for several decades. In the 1920s -40s, porcelain production in Jingdezhen was largely left to private interests. When the Communist Party, headed by Mao Zedong, defeated Chiang Kai-shek and his Kuomintang Party (KMT) in 1949 and established the People's Republic of China (PRC), Mao began to implement political and economic policies in line with Marxist ideology. The concept of the 'iron rice bowl' prevailed, a term used to refer to an occupation with guaranteed job security, as well as steady income and benefits. Traditionally, people considered to have iron rice bowls included military personnel, members of the civil service, as well as employees of various state-owned enterprises through the mechanism of the work unit. The work unit controlled everything from salaries, to housing, to marriage and childcare, to health care. They were the principal method of implementing party policy and bound workers to their work unit for life. State-run Jingdezhen porcelain factory workers were part of this system until the late 1990's (see Jingdezhen timeline).

When Deng Xiaoping came to power, he launched a series of economic reforms in the 1980's which became the foundation of China's transition from a socialist economy to a "socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics." With these economic reforms underway and enterprises now responsible for the bottom-line, the iron rice bowl jobs were some of the first to go. Suddenly, people who had lived and worked in a planned economy and were promised job security for life, found themselves unemployed, with no benefits and no future. Jingdezhen state-run porcelain industry workers were no exception. Up to 70,000 workers lost their jobs when all the government-run porcelain factories closed. The government was no longer willing to subsidize all the expenses related to running the industry and the work unit was dissolved, leaving everyone stranded.

As Deng's famous quote "To get rich is glorious" became the new slogan of China, entrepreneurialism took off. However, for a generation of people who were not programmed to be entrepreneurs and were essentially government employees, the outcome was devastating.

Having to rely on younger family members for support, losing dignity and financial independence was difficult.

On the other hand, many who were forced to find solutions became entrepreneurial, as we see in the film. Gong Meihua opens a mahjong parlor with her husband, works on national holidays and has no choice but to leave her daughter at home unattended after school. Yang Yajun and Jiang Huaqing became self-employed and operate their own porcelain-making businesses. Their resourcefulness and resilience are typical of young Chinese finding their way in a somewhat chaotic, ‘every man for himself’ economy.

In spite of its financial tribulations, Jingdezhen’s importance as a porcelain center continues to evolve. Most recently, an exhibition by world renowned artist Ai Weiwei at the Tate Modern in London (12 October, 2010 - 2 May, 2011) displayed 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds in the museum’s Turbine Hall. Each seed was individually sculpted and painted by specialists working in small-scale workshops. In 2009, an exhibition titled *Traditional Jingdezhen Wares from Contemporary Kilns* at The University Museum and Art Gallery of the University of Hong Kong was co-presented with the Cultural Bureau of Jingdezhen and featured high quality modern reproductions of ancient wares. These imitations were regarded as works of art in their own right and recognized by curators as such.

While one might hope that the people portrayed in the film might benefit from the new attention drawn to Jingdezhen and its artistic heritage, they are by no means rich as a result of their entrepreneurialism. However, many in China have become millionaires and billionaires. ‘Socialism with Chinese characteristics’ is now being referred to as ‘capitalism with Chinese characteristics’ and many so-called “bamboo capitalists” are emerging. At last count, 90% of China’s 43 million companies were private.

By contrast, the elder Feng Shangsong interviewed in the film, was the head of the labor bureau and in charge of wage reform in Jingdezhen’s porcelain industry since the 1950’s. He participated in Mao’s revolution, worked for the party, rose through the ranks to become a leader, and worked for the government for forty years. He feels he made a significant contribution to the well-being of the workers during his tenure and is proud of his work. As he reminisces about Mao times when a planned economy eradicated unemployment, he points out that under a market economy, even college graduates don’t always find work. He further points out that the gap between rich and poor is widening, even though the government is doing its best to help resolve the disparity and lower the rate of unemployment. Like many people from his generation, he is resigned to the fact that the road to socialism is long.

As the country charges forward into the twenty first century, its government and citizens face monumental problems, of which Jingdezhen’s porcelain industry is a microcosm. Growing

environmental problems, rising unemployment and inflation, and percolating social unrest are all issues past Chinese rulers have had to confront-some successfully and others not. Regardless, the can-do attitude and persistence of most individuals prevail, just like the enduring beauty of a blue and white porcelain vase.