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Porcelain: From China to the World

One of China's most important gifts to the world is the invention of porcelain. For centuries, Chinese bowls, plates, and cups made their way to Western dining rooms, bringing elegance and beauty to people's lives. Learn how this important craft was developed and why some pieces are highly valued today.

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人民教育出版社



Jingdezhen

Before You Read

This story is about Chinese porcelain. While historically Chinese porcelain comes from many areas of China, the main focus of our story will be on Hebei **Province**,¹ in north central China, circling Beijing; Henan Province, south of Hebei; and Zhejiang Province, on the Chinese coast south of Shanghai. The story will then center on Jingdezhen, a city in Jiangxi Province, southwest of Zhejiang. Finally, the story will briefly mention Guangzhou, a port city on the southeast coast of China.

A. What Is Porcelain? Read the sentences. Then complete the text with the correct form of the underlined words.

Something that is common happens often.

When a thing is dominant, it has the most important place.

Things that evolve gradually develop over a long time.

When something exceeds something else, it is bigger or better.

To innovate means to improve on something, or make something new.

Luxurious is used to describe things that are quite pleasant and expensive.

Porcelain—as opposed to mere **ceramics**²—is one of China’s great **(1)** _____, which is thought of as a **(2)** _____ white ceramic that is **translucent**³ in character and has been fired at a higher temperature than normal ceramics. For many, porcelain **(3)** _____ most ceramics in both beauty and strength. It often contains kaolin, a soft white clay, and porcelain stone—a kind of white rock. Porcelain **(4)** _____ in China over a period of more than three thousand years. However, in the last seven hundred years, the most **(5)** _____ kind of porcelain has been that produced in the town of Jingdezhen. Given its origins, it is no wonder that a description **(6)** _____ used for porcelain, no matter where it is made, is “fine china.”

¹ **province**: one of the districts that some countries are divided into with its own local government

² **ceramics**: objects made out of clay after having been fired

³ **translucent**: clear enough to allow light through

B. How Jingdezhen Porcelain Is Made. Read the diary entry and look at the photos in this reader. Then answer the questions below.

10 June

I’ve been so busy learning how to make blue and white porcelain at the Jingdezhen pottery workshop that I haven’t had time to keep up my diary as I had hoped. It’s not just about learning traditional pottery techniques. After a day of hard work, I need to clean up my workspace and then I usually take a bath. Then since I don’t want to waste this chance, there is also sightseeing, enjoying Chinese food, and making new friends. My life is packed!

As I’m an experienced potter, I’ve asked the school to take me through all the steps, from the very beginning. (Most of the students are just here to learn how to decorate pots that have already been made.) The process begins with porcelain stone and kaolin which have been dug out from the hills around here. These are processed and turned into a fine white powder. When I’m ready to use it, I mix the powder with water and turn it to a cream-colored clay. Then the fun part begins! I take the clay and put it in the middle of the floor to work it with my feet, and then I knead⁴ it with my hands until it is silky smooth. After that, I take some to a potter’s wheel and throw a pot. The clay is so soft and smooth that it is a little hard even for me to handle. This is not for beginners!

After I get the pot perfect, I let it partly dry. Then I use tools to shave off some of the clay and touch it up. Once it is completely dry, I paint the pot with a pattern using a blue underglaze⁵ made from cobalt.⁶ (I say “blue,” but at this stage it is black.) When I am satisfied with my design, I use a special tool to blow a thin layer of creamy white glaze⁷ all over the pot. After this dries, I can fire the pot in the electric kiln.⁸ This causes the creamy white glaze to become clear like glass. Meanwhile, the underglaze pattern turns a brilliant blue.

Of course, my work isn’t as good as the Jingdezhen potters, but I’m happy with it so far, and I’m excited to be learning some new techniques!

1. Have you ever seen fine china like Jingdezhen porcelain? What was it like?
2. What do you know about Chinese porcelain?
3. Why do you think Chinese porcelain might be so valuable?

⁴ **knead**: to press with the fingers and hands

⁵ **underglaze**: a pattern added to pottery prior to the main glaze

⁶ **cobalt**: a shiny silver-white metal

⁷ **glaze**: a thin, shiny coating used on ceramics

⁸ **kiln**: a special oven used for baking clay object





- ⁹**ware**: manufactured goods of a certain type
¹⁰**imperial**: of an emperor or an empire
¹¹**dynasty**: a period of time when members of the same family rule a country
¹²**crackle**: a pattern of cracks on the surface of porcelain or a painting

It is October 3, 2017. The room at the auction house in Hong Kong is full of people, but most are not bidding. Instead, they are taking pictures of what has turned out to be a historic occasion. The object of their attention is a plain 13 cm (5 $\frac{1}{8}$ in) piece of porcelain. Blue-green, but otherwise without decoration, it is a bowl made for washing brushes, but it has now sold for a record-breaking \$294 million Hong Kong dollars (equivalent to almost US \$38 million). No other single piece of porcelain has been sold for this much money before.

As Sotheby's Nicholas Chow explained, "We didn't expect quite that price, but we knew there was going to be a fight. Every time there is a piece of Ru ware⁹ ... there's always a battle, because it is the most talked about, the most celebrated of all wares in the history of Chinese ceramics."



Ru ware is a kind of porcelain produced in Ruzhou (in modern-day Baofeng, Henan Province), China for the imperial¹⁰ court around 1100, during the Northern Song Dynasty¹¹ (960–1127). It is much admired because of its color, which is poetically described as "approaching the blue of the sky after rain." Many—but not all—Ru ware pieces contain "ice crackle."¹² This effect is caused by what is known as "glaze crazing," which occurs when the ceramic is fired, and then cools and shrinks at a different temperature than the glaze which has been applied to it, causing the glaze to crack. Unfortunately, the kilns at Ruzhou were quite small and were only in existence for around 20 years, so few pieces were ever produced. Today it is thought that there are fewer than 100 examples of Ru ware left in existence, and since World War II, only about six pieces have come on the market. Given its rarity and its beauty, the Ru ware brush washer sold at auction in 2017 is considered

to be of the highest quality for Chinese porcelain. However, people who are not experts in Chinese porcelain may be puzzled that a simple little bowl could be worth so much money. What is the attraction? What is the fascination? Why the high price?

While porcelain did not fully develop until the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220), it had its beginnings in the Shang Dynasty (ca 1600–1046 BCE). **Ritual**¹³ objects made of bronze were all the rage back then, but they were too expensive for the common people, so ceramic ware was used as a substitute. Today this is called proto-celadon pottery. While proto-celadon pottery contained many of the characteristics of porcelain, its clay was not pure white, and typically it was glazed dark green, though the colors range from browns to yellows.

Later, celadon porcelain emerged. “Celadon” is a French word that refers to the color of **jade**,¹⁴ which is mostly green, but actually refers to a variety of colors ranging from gray, to brown, to milky green, and to deep green. Jade has an important place in Chinese culture. Prized for its beauty, not only has it been traditionally used for a number of decorative and ritual items, but it represents many desirable human qualities, such as goodness, purity, intelligence, and justice. A line in the ancient collection of Chinese poetry, known as



¹³**ritual**: related to ceremonies and actions to mark important days or events
¹⁴**jade**: a green or white stone used for jewelry



Fact Check

1. How many pieces of Ru ware are thought to exist?
2. What was early Chinese pottery used as a substitute for?
3. Why was celadon porcelain so popular?



The Night Revels of Han Xizai



Yue ware

the *Book of Songs*, says, “When I think of a wise man, his merits appear like jade.” Early on, the translucent quality of celadon porcelain—along with its hardness and sound when knocking on it—reminded people of jade, and so for centuries it was the dominant type (Ru ware, for example, is a kind of celadon). Later on, even when other kinds and colors of porcelain were developed, people often still thought of porcelain in terms of jade.

One of the earliest types of celadon was Yue ware, which was developed in Yuezhou (modern-day Zhejiang Province) during the Eastern Han Dynasty. While proto-celadon ceramics had mostly been used to reproduce bronze ritual objects, with Yue ware Chinese porcelain

began to be widely used for serving food and drink, and many Yue ware bowls, cups, and plates survive to this day. These pieces are all of a uniform color (often, light gray with a hint of green), but often have decorative designs. Yue ware became common in households throughout China and was even exported overseas. Early on, Yue ware was associated with tea drinking. For example, Lu Yu (733–804), the Chinese Sage of Tea, believed that Yue ware made by far the best cups for drinking tea because the green color of the glaze matched the color of the tea.

During the Tang Dynasty (618–907), Yue ware was considered the great porcelain of the south, while Xing ware, produced in what is modern-day Hebei Province, was considered the great porcelain of the north. As Xing ware is white, it reminded many people of snow and silver. Since the glaze on Xing ware is often quite thin, patterns carved¹⁵ into the porcelain

¹⁵ **carve:** to shape something by cutting it

A. Multiple Choice. Answer the questions below by choosing A, B, C, or D.

- When it comes to ceramics, the word *fire* means _____.
A. flames
B. to reflect light
C. to bake in a kiln
D. to form
- If something is *all the rage*, it means that it _____.
A. is quite popular
B. makes people angry
C. makes people crazy
D. is quite expensive
- What is NOT a reason jade was popular?
A. It was thought to be beautiful.
B. It was expensive.
C. It could be used for many decorative and household items.
D. It represented many desirable human qualities.
- If something *comes into its own*, it _____.
A. reaches new heights of quality
B. becomes expensive
C. reaches the common people
D. becomes successful
- What is NOT a reason given in the text to explain why something like Chinese porcelain is still of great value today?
A. It is evidence of a past age.
B. It can be used for a short time and then thrown away.
C. It is what remains of the imagination, the labor and the love of its maker.
D. It is high-quality and not factory-made.

B. Label the Pictures. Label the pictures with the words below.

Delftware fencai Guan ware Jun ware qingbai wucai



C. Answer the Questions. Use information from the passage to answer the questions below.

- What impresses the author most about Jingdezhen porcelain?
- What does the contrast in popularity between handmade Jingdezhen porcelain and factory-made porcelain say about the modern world?
- Which of the different kinds of Chinese porcelain do you prefer? Why?



Shipwreck Porcelain— Witness to Cross-Cultural Exchange

Track 2

Today, high-quality antique porcelain is quite rare because even though millions of pieces were made and distributed throughout China, Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, many did not survive the ravages of time. As a result, there are great holes in our knowledge of the development of Chinese porcelain. Fortunately, there is one source of porcelain that is helping to fill in the gaps—shipwrecks.

One of the oldest of these shipwrecks is the remains of an Arab dhow that sank near the island of Belitung, Indonesia in 830, during the Tang Dynasty. Discovered in 1998, the ship contained more than 60,000 pieces of porcelain. Interestingly, most of the pottery is colorful Changsha ware, made in Hunan. However, Yue ware and early Ding ware are

included. There is even an example of blue and white ceramic, probably made for the Middle East—the earliest known blue and white ware in existence. The wreck has great historical importance, and the collection of items has been put on public display in a museum in Singapore.

Another important old shipwreck is the *Nanhai One*, a Chinese ship that sank near Yangjiang, Guangdong, during the Southern Song Dynasty, and which was found in 1987. Like the Belitung shipwreck, it is in excellent condition. In an effort to learn as much information as possible about the wreck and its treasure, a steel container was lowered over the site and was gradually excavated over a period of nine months. Around 13,000 porcelain pieces were discovered among 180,000 items of bronze, gold, lacquer, jade, etc.

Similar shipwrecks have been found throughout Asia and along the Maritime Silk Road, dating from as far back as 1500. Many of the porcelain pieces from these wrecks have ended up in museums. However, porcelain items from other less historically important wrecks have been sold at auction. These include the porcelain from two wrecks found off the coast of Vietnam: the Vung Tau, which sank in the 1690s carrying nearly 50,000 pieces of porcelain; and the Ca Mau, which sank between 1723 and 1735 carrying more than 130,000 pieces of porcelain. In the case of both ships, most of the pieces were Jingdezhen blue and white porcelain. As these were all made for export, the design of many of them include Western elements, such as European houses and churches.

It is impossible to overestimate how important such shipwrecks are for understanding the history of Chinese porcelain. The location of the wrecks, the kind of ships, and the other items in the cargo all tell a story that enriches our understanding of this important Chinese treasure.

 **Word Count:** 433
Time: _____

