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Changing Current of Chinese Export Porcelain: From Celadon to Blue-and-White

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The Silk Road of the Sea

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From the 8th Century onward to the present day, Chinese porcelain has been exported to Southeast Asia, the Middle East, the Near East, Europe and America. Evidence of this immense trade in porcelain from China during those many centuries can be found along the old inland silk route. Likewise, on the maritime route, westward from China, pieces and shards of Chinese porcelain have been found in great quantity at ruins and along coasts. At these sites I have come across many of these items dating from T'ang dynasty, including the Five Dynasties and T'ang Yueh-yao Celadons, and also Yuan Blue-and-White ware, polychromes and others of Ming and Qing Dynasty.

All these shards scattered along the routes westward from China suggest that some quantity of the export porcelain was carried by sea, and some by the old inland silk route. On the whole, much of the Chinese export porcelain was too heavy, too bulky, and too fragile, to have been carried in large quantities by the inland routes. Therefore, most of it had to go by sea, initially perhaps as ballast for the main cargo of silks and other luxuries.

My research, along the old ports of the sea routes, through Korea, Manila, Hochimin, Bangkok, Singapore, Bombay, Karachi, Aden, Djibouti, Hormuz, and Siraf, has found collections of porcelain ranging from intact pieces in local museums to numerous ruins, all of which indicate that huge quantities had been imported to these places. By contrast, the places along the inland routes through the inner parts of China and USSR, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey, had much less to show. At the old trade centers such as Kabul, Alma Ata, Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara, no significant collection of porcelain, either in quantity or quality was found.

Besides Asia and Africa, there are many fine collections in Europe and America, which prove the extensive export of Chinese porcelain over the old silk routes and particularly along the sea route.

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Chinese porcelain has been a major export product from China to the rest of the world for a long time. Among its illustrious history, the Blue-and White porcelain has dominated the scene, since it took over its predecessor, the Celadon porcelain, in the 13th Century. My research focuses upon the transition from Celadon porcelain to the Blue-and-White in the export market, and especially upon the role of Arab merchants in bringing this change. Arab merchants played a double role; as a purveyor of the Persian cobalt to China, and then as a purveyor of its end product, the Blue-and White, back to the Islamic world (and to Europe). While the Celadon was highly valued by Chinese for its abstract quality, namely virtue, the Blue-and-White had an aesthetic appeal to Arabs and to a wider market because of its vivid color and ornamental style. The change of the major export commodity of the Chinese from the Celadon to the Blue-and-white was triggered due to the taste and influence of the Arab merchants.

Chinese porcelain was an object of praise and adoration, since the rest of the world lacked the knowledge to create this hard ceramic which gave out a hard metallic sound when hit. While other ceramics were made out of ordinary clay and baked at 800°C, Chinese porcelain was made of Kaolin, which was able to bear 1300°C in the kiln. As early as the 3rd century, Chinese used Kaolin to produce this fine, precious porcelain. Due to its rarity, its ownership became a status symbol.

Originally the Celadon was designed as a man-made-jade, to reflect the Chinese yearning for the propitious stone, enshrining the nine virtues. As jade is supposed to bring good luck and virtue to a person who wears it, the light-green monochrome colored piece of the Celadon was believed by the Chinese to evoke the same effect as jade.

Chinese Celadon was much sought after in the Philippines, Indonesia, Persia and even in Egypt and Turkey. In such countries Celadon vessels were held as poison testers, by those in power, since it was believed that the Celadon would change its color when exposed to poison, the earliest Chinese Celadon was exported from Yuezhou in the latter half of the 10th century (Five Dynasties), In the later periods, however, the production center moved to Longquan. My survey in the Philippines, Indonesia, India, the Near East and the coast of Africa has proved that a large amount of Longquan Celadon was exported to these sites especially between the

early 14th and the early 15th century, a period which is identified as the golden period for the export of the Celadon.

Before the introduction of Blue-and-white in the export market, its predecessor, Celadon, had been the main export porcelain product from China for over 400 years. It seems that there was a great demand for porcelain. The Blue-and-white was then quickly seized upon by the Arab merchants for its novelty and attractiveness. Within a very short span of time, the Blue-and-white came to be produced at an industrial scale at Jingdezhen, which is known for its quality Kaolin, very white and sticky and which produced better quality porcelain.

Persian cobalt was the key ingredient of the fine Chinese Blue-and-white. Fragments of the blue-and-white from the 10th century were recently excavated from the archeological sites in China; the quality of that Chinese cobalt, however, is inferior. Even in the 14th and 15th century, good cobalt had to be imported from Persia via the Arab merchants.

The supplier of the Persian cobalt was also the exporter of the Blue-and-white. The Arab merchants must have chartered the products immediately and transported them from Chuanzhou or Quanzhou, the major seaport of Yuan dynasty. This would explain why complete pieces or shards of Yuan Blue-and-white are found in Istanbul, Ardebil, Delhi or Fostat, much more than inside China itself.

While Chinese placed greater value on monochrome ceramics and believed in the supernatural power of the Celadon to bring favor and good luck, Arab merchants preferred the more flamboyant and vividly ornamental Blue-and-White. After the 14th century in Jingdezhen, the production was dictated by the Arabs who wanted it for export. Influence of the Arabs was recognizable in the deviation from characteristically Chinese features of the manufactured products. For example, some items resemble forms of metallic vessels, lantern bases, etc found in the Middle East.

The Blue-and-White could have been developed in China without the Arabs, and there is no doubt that Chinese potters had the necessary skills to develop it. But the rapid development over a comparatively short period would not have been possible without the stimulus generated by the Arab's entrepreneurial demands. Without them the change would have been much slower.

Timetable

T'ang (618-906)	Beginning of the export of Three colored ware and white porcelain.
Five Dynasties (907-960)	Yue-Yao Celadon exported westward from China as far as Fustat, Egypt.
Song (960- 1279)	Longquan Celadon becomes the main export product
Yuan (1260-1368)	Beginning of mass-production of Blue-and-white at Jingdezhen.
Ming (1368-1644)	Blue-and-white, and later polychrome porcelain, exported in huge quantities. Export of Celadon declines.