

A Chinese ewer from the Tang dynasty (618 – 906 AD)



The custom of tea drinking developed and grew in popularity in China during the 7th and 8th centuries AD, though it might not be tea as you know it – with drinkers often adding onion, spices, ginger or orange to the drink. Along with this surge in popularity came some formalisation of the etiquette of drinking tea and a desire to use the right vessels. In particular there was increasing consumer demand for suitable vessels for pouring the water for the tea. Everyday pottery for prosperous Chinese of this period was made of stoneware and to meet this growing demand many Chinese potteries made stoneware ewers like the one in the picture above, which is 23 cm tall. The design and the glazing of this pot indicate that it was made in northern China at this time, in the Tang dynasty.

The glaze is probably fluxed by wood-ash and/or limestone, similar to the more famous celadon glazes that were being used in southern China at the time. Northern and southern China have very different geologies and therefore different clays, and the histories of ceramics in the north and south are quite different – often developing independently, with occasional periods where the potters of one region learn from what is being done in the other. There is a long history of glazed stoneware in southern China going back to the bronze age, but stoneware clays in the north required higher firing temperatures and until about the sixth century the northern potters concentrated on earthenwares. In the sixth century glazed stonewares suddenly appear in northern China, with no evidence of any prior developments, and it seems likely that the northern potters learned from their counterparts

in southern China. However, they couldn't simply take the southern glazes and use them without modification, because of the higher firing temperatures of the northern stonewares. Indeed, the earliest glazed northern stonewares have glazes that are very fluid during firing and the pots of that early period are often designed with horizontal ridges to catch glaze runs. Although the glaze has not run during firing on my ewer it is interesting to see that it has not been glazed all the way to the bottom – a common precaution where there is a concern that the glaze might run when fired, to avoid the pot sticking to the kiln furniture. However, you can see from differences in glaze thickness that the glaze did run down the pot from the rim and the handle during the glazing process. It appears that the pot was held upside down by the foot and dipped in the glaze, but then stood upright again before the glaze had dried.

One obvious difference between this ewer and the celadon vessels of that time from southern China is the colour. The celadon pottery of southern China was green and this pot is yellow. This is due to the different atmospheres in the kilns – the southern celadons were fired in reduction and the yellow northern stonewares were fired in oxidation. The yellow glazes continued to be popular in the north in the 8th and 9th century, but were gradually abandoned in the 10th century as many northern potters moved to reduction firing, maybe to compete with the enormously successful southern celadons.

The pot would have been fired in a wood-fired kiln. It has been reported that pots in some of the northern kilns were raised on broad fireclay pillars, to avoid the bottom of the pot being underfired. Looking at the base of my pot there is a circular marking (see photograph below) which suggests that the pot was stood on a cylindrical support when it was fired.



Looking at the sides of this pot, where the glaze ends, you can see a narrow band of white, which shows that the surface of the pot under the glaze was coated in a white slip before glazing. This technique was common at the time, presumably to make the yellow colour brighter when the clay body was dark due to its iron content. It was in the Tang dynasty in northern China that porcelain was first made and it has been suggested that the white slip coatings on these stonewares may have been an important step towards this, as the northern potters moved from using their white clays as slip coatings to using them for the body of a pot.

It is interesting to see how the pot itself was made. It will have been thrown and it looks as if the rim was rolled. The handle and the small lugs on either side are of the 'two-bar' design common at the time. The very pronounced vertical grooves in the outer faces of the handle and lugs are matched by similar grooves on the inner faces and it is very likely that the handles and lugs were made by using two coils of clay side by side.

Surprisingly, the major auction house where I bought this pot claimed it was made in the Song dynasty (960 – 1279 AD), but there are many features which indicate that it was made earlier than that, in the Tang dynasty – the colour of the glaze, the shape including the dumpy spout, the two-bar handles and lugs and the flat-based foot (i.e. not recessed). I must admit there is a certain satisfaction in spotting a mistake by the auction house, but it is also a warning that auction house descriptions cannot always be relied on.

Many people are familiar with the idea of the so-called 'Song standard' of Bernard Leach, where he supposedly argues that Chinese Song dynasty ceramics set the standard for ceramic beauty. However, if you read the famous first chapter of his book 'A Potter's Book', entitled 'Towards a Standard', he generally refers to Tang and Song ceramics together and in the preface to that book he says 'Accepting the qualities of the pottery of the Tang and Song dynasties as the height of ceramic beauty ...', so maybe it should be called the 'Tang and Song standard'. I'm not sure he had this yellow stoneware in mind at the time though.

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