

## A porcelain dish from China, 800 – 1000 years old



When Chinese porcelain arrived in the West in quantity in the 16<sup>th</sup> century it was dramatically different from the stonewares and earthenwares that people were familiar with. It was whiter, lighter, smoother and even translucent. Marco Polo had compared it to cowrie shells (porcellana), after which he named it. However, if you look at the history of porcelain in China itself you find that it resulted from a gradual development of stoneware ceramics over centuries. In fact the Chinese have no separate word for porcelain, they use same word (ci) for both porcelain and stoneware and everything between. In the West, before Chinese porcelain arrived, the role of porcelain was taken by glassware. The Chinese used very little glass, probably because they had porcelain.

White ceramics have been prized for thousands of years, no doubt for many reasons – for example as a symbol of purity and maybe as an imitation of silverware. A white base also maximises the brightness of overlying coloured decoration. Whiteness is difficult to achieve though. Most clays contain iron and other elements which colour them various shades of brown or, in reduction firing, grey. For this reason, much of the early whiteware was made by coating the pots in a white slip made from scarce and highly valued deposits of white clay. Rarely, substantial deposits of pure

stoneware clay were found which could be used to make white pots without the need for a slip coating.

Porcelain, as it is known in the West, is not just defined by its whiteness, but also by its thinness and delicacy. Such refined whiteware was first produced in northern China around the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. However, translucency was easier to achieve in southern China because their clays had a higher silica content. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, in the Song dynasty, the potters of southern China were starting to make delicate translucent porcelain with a very pale blue or blue-green clear glaze (the colour resulted from iron in the glaze materials). The Chinese of the time described this pottery as white, but in modern times it is called qingbai (pronounced 'ching by'), which means blue-white in Chinese. Qingbai pottery was hugely popular and eventually it was manufactured at locations across most of southern China.

This qingbai dish, probably made in the Song dynasty (960 – 1279 AD), is 15 cm in diameter and very thinly potted (it weighs only 150 g). In the base of the dish there is a delicately carved design which is faintly visible due to thickening and darkening of the glaze in the carving. The design probably represents a plant of some sort, with a central bud and tendrils and leaves around it. It can be seen more clearly in the photo below, where a light is shone behind the dish, demonstrating the translucency of the porcelain.



The clay the 10<sup>th</sup> century Chinese potters were using was called petuntse (which is Chinese for 'little white bricks!'). This was a rare natural mix of just the right amounts of the ingredients needed to make delicate translucent porcelain which could be thrown on the wheel. Later in the Song dynasty the best deposits of petuntse started to run out and the clay had less alumina and more natural fluxes (potassium and sodium). This caused the bodies of the pots to warp during firing and the potters switched to firing dishes upside down in stepped saggars. This meant that the rims had to be left unglazed, as you can see on this dish. The base of this dish also has a slightly domed shape, which could well be a result of sagging in the kiln while being fired upside down. Later on in China

the problem of warping was solved by mixing the petuntse with kaolin. This allowed them to make larger pieces. The earliest piece of documented porcelain to have reached Europe, the famous Fonthill vase discussed at length by Edmund de Waal in his book *The White Road*, was qingbai ware from that later period (brought to Europe in 1338).

Although the Chinese porcelain clays could be thrown on the wheel, they do not have great plasticity, and the thinness and lightness of their pots was achieved by turning the leather-hard clay after throwing. The potters of the Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644 AD) continued to develop and improve their porcelain, making it whiter and thinner, reaching the extremes of so-called eggshell porcelain, which was described as *totai* (meaning 'bodiless'). They also, of course, produced large quantities of white porcelain with blue brushwork decoration, which spread around the world. The later years of Chinese porcelain and its re-invention in Europe is a grand tale about which many books have been written.

A great deal of Qingbai pottery was made in China between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, and not all of equal quality. I think this dish is a rather nice example and I was quite pleased when I discovered a picture in a book of an almost identical dish in the collection of the Ashmolean Museum. Although qingbai wares were made at many places in south China, the best were made at the famous so-called 'porcelain capital of the world', Jingdezhen. Jingdezhen started its rise to prominence in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and reached its pre-eminent peak in the Ming dynasty, when it produced huge amounts of porcelain which were exported around the world. It was a town full of small pottery workshops and specialists, and in modern times it was overtaken by large integrated factories elsewhere in China and overseas. However, it remains a town dominated by ceramics, as I saw when I visited it ten years ago. The following photos show some typical Jingdezhen scenes from that trip:



