

A pot from stone age China (around 2000 BC)



The pot in the photo is more than 4000 years old. It comes from the Chinese stone age (Neolithic) and was made by a people called the Majiayao, who lived on the upper reaches of the Yellow River between 3300 and 2000 BC. These people are particularly known for their high quality painted pottery and archaeologists have found the remains of large pottery workshops. The style of this pot shows that it comes from the final years of this culture (later than around 2300 BC) when the pottery had declined in quality – in earlier periods some very large and beautifully decorated pots were made.

The jar is very thinly potted and surprisingly light to hold. Although it is about 13 cm high and 16 cm wide it weighs less than 400 grams. Although the potter's wheel had been developed in China by that time, this pot was probably handbuilt. It looks as if the bottom part of the pot was formed in a bowl-shaped mould and there is a clear corner in the profile which probably marks the point above which the pot was coiled. The complex geometric design has been painted on – mainly in a dark, almost black, brown but also with some thicker bands in a lighter brown colour. Presumably these colours came from naturally occurring minerals rich in iron and maybe manganese, which would have been carefully collected for this purpose. It is tempting to think that the many bands of five parallel lines were painted with a brush with five tips bound together.

The pot would have been fired in a kiln. Simple up-draught kilns were commonly used in the Chinese Neolithic and there are no soot marks on this pot that might indicate a bonfire firing. The firing temperature would probably have been between 800 and 1000 C. There is no glaze – glazes weren't used in China until ash glazes on stonewares around 1500 BC.

It seems amazing that something so fragile should have survived intact for 4000 years. The reason is almost certainly that this pot would have been used in a funeral ritual and then buried in the tomb, not to be uncovered again until the 20th century. The West was unaware of Chinese Neolithic pottery until the end of the 19th century, when a major railroad-building programme revealed many tombs

in northern and central China. Before then western collectors only knew of Chinese porcelain made since the 14th century. The discovery of older pots from tombs and their display at exhibitions in the west in the early 20th century generated a new interest in old Chinese ceramics, though even then the interest was mainly in Song and Tang ceramics, not Neolithic pottery.

In recent years you may have seen Chinese Neolithic pottery used in a deliberately shocking way by the artist Ai Wei Wei. In one artwork he is seen in a series of photos holding a large Neolithic pot and then deliberately dropping it so that it shatters on the ground. In other artworks he has painted over the surfaces of Neolithic pots with modern designs such as coca-cola logos. Although I realise that there are quite a lot of these Neolithic pots in the world and a handful fewer won't make much difference it still pains me to think that something so fragile which has survived against the odds for four, five or even six thousand years should be deliberately destroyed.