

Two Chinese tea bowls – 13th century or 20th century



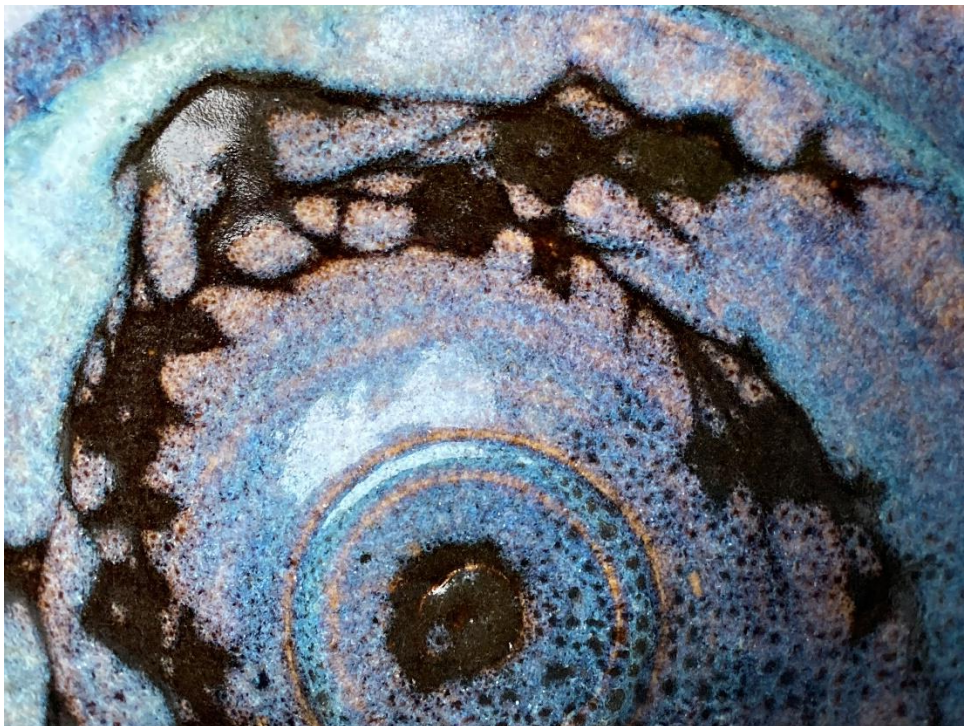
For English speakers, Chinese names can be difficult to remember, because there are no easy linguistic points of reference. Sometimes circumstances conspire to add to the confusion. I have written before about the Cizhou (pronounced tsoo-joe) potters from northern China, and also the southern Chinese makers of tea bowls from Jian. This note is about another pottery area in southern China, about 275 miles west of Jian, called Jizhou, where pottery was produced until the 14th century. After the period when the pottery was made, the name of the area of Jizhou was changed to its present name of Ji'an. (For those who are interested, the significance of the apostrophe is that Jian is pronounced as one syllable, whereas Ji'an is pronounced as two syllables). The potters at Jizhou were influenced by the pottery styles of the Cizhou potters and also of Jian.

By the end of the 12th century the Chinese custom of drinking whipped tea in dark teabowls was well established and the potters of Jian had been making teabowls for two hundred years. The Chinese elite classes continued to favour Jian teabowls, but as the practice of drinking whipped tea spread to the middle classes demand for dark teabowls increased and other potteries saw an opportunity to supply this market. The potters of Jizhou, who had been making white pottery, decided to switch to black (or very dark brown) glazes, especially on teabowls.

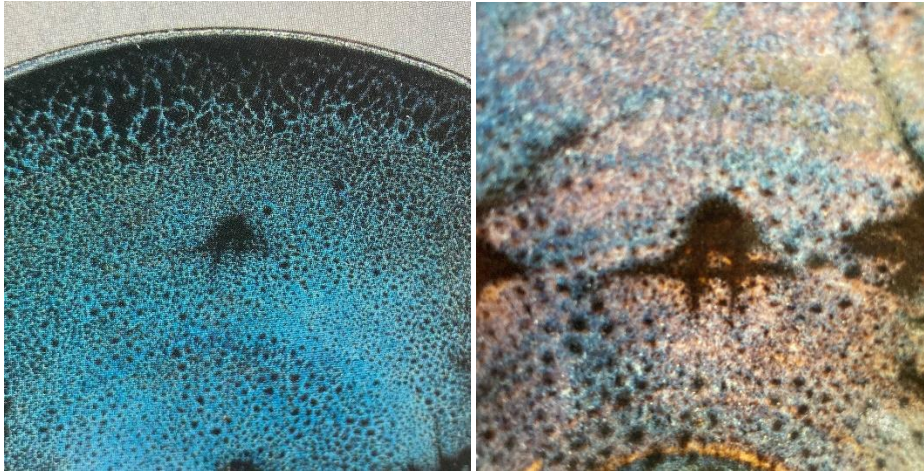
The clays available to the Jizhou potters were almost white, very different from the dark high-iron clays used by the Jian potters. If, as I believe, the highly prized glaze effects on the Jian teabowls (such as the 'hares-fur' glaze) were a result of the high iron content of the body clay, then the Jizhou potters would not have obtained these effects if they followed the methods of the Jian potters. Luckily, it seems that the Jizhou potters were particularly inventive and they developed several novel decoration techniques, some of which were only ever used by them prior to modern times.

One decorative technique was to splash spots of a clear glaze over their dark brown glaze before firing. This would dilute the brown glaze locally, resulting in lighter amber-coloured splashes in the fired glaze. If the chemical compositions and firing conditions were just right then these splashed areas could sometimes develop a milky opalescence and even a blue or purple colour, produced by an extremely fine suspension of different composition glass, as seen in Jun pottery. This opalescent effect is believed to be promoted by the presence of phosphorous and it is notable that the Jizhou brown glazes tend to have particularly high phosphorous levels. In Jizhou pottery these splashed effects reminded people of the patterns and colourations on the shells of certain tortoises and they have been referred to as tortoiseshell glazes.

On some teabowls the Jizhou potters developed this effect in combination with a novel technique in which they applied pieces of paper, cut into complex shapes, to the surface of the brown glaze before firing and then sprayed their clear glaze over the surface. Removing the paper after applying the clear glaze exposes an area uncoated by the clear glaze, which would fire dark brown in contrast to the surrounding surface. The tea bowl (13 cm wide) on the right in the picture at the head of this note was made using this method. The Jizhou potters used a number of different designs for their paper patterns – the one on my bowl is sprigs of plum blossom (see close-up photo below). These stand out in dark brown against a mottled blue opalescent ground. On the underside of the bowl the clear glaze has been splashed more sparingly, as is usual for these cut paper resist decorated bowls, producing opalescent blue blobs.



There is a similar paper-cut design on a bowl in the Art Institute of Chicago, published in a classic book by Robert Mowry on Chinese brown and black glazed ceramics ('Hare's Fur, Tortoiseshell, and Partridge Feathers', Harvard University Art Museums, 1996). In the book Mowry comments on a small mark between the two arms of plum blossom on the Chicago bowl, which he says may represent a butterfly or could be an accidental mark. Interestingly, my bowl has a slightly larger similarly shaped mark at the same position, which suggests that it is not accidental (though I suppose my bowl might be a copy of the Chicago bowl). Although it doesn't look much like a butterfly, the mark does have a distinctive shape – see below (Chicago bowl left, mine right).



Although the Jizhou potters were the only ones to in China to use this paper resist technique prior to modern times, the idea didn't necessarily come out of nowhere. For centuries, artisans in China had been using paper resist techniques when dyeing textiles. Also, the Ding potters in northern China had been using complex cut patterns in gold leaf to decorate special bowls.

The technique for which the Jizhou potters are probably best known is one which uses one or more leaves of a plant on the surface of the bowl. The bowl (16 cm wide) on the left in the photos at the start of this note is an example. Somehow the potters have managed to reproduce the shape and veining of the leaves in amazing detail – see the two close-up images below.



In modern times this technique has caused a great deal of debate, as various potters have tried, and usually failed, to reproduce the effect. I suspect the technique is quite simple, but very dependent on the composition of the dark brown glaze. You can see in my photos above that there are two effects happening. The first is a lightening in the dark brown colour to an amber gold, especially along the veins of the leaves. This seems a very similar effect to the amber splashes in the tortoiseshell glazes discussed earlier in this note. When it burns in the kiln, the leaf will produce ash, and plant ash is almost certainly also the prime constituent of the clear glaze used in the tortoiseshell decoration. In the thicker parts of the leaf more ash will be produced and this can react with the brown glaze to cause a lightening of the colour. The second effect taking place is the production of many tiny almost white spots – more so on one leaf than the other. I suspect that these are spots of opalescence, similar to what is seen much more intensely on my other tea-bowl. If you look closely at the close-up photo of my paper-cut teabowl on the previous page you can see that the lighter area is made up of a myriad of tiny bluish-white or purplish-white spots.

The idea is that the Jizhou potters attached the leaves to the surface in some way which managed to survive the early stages of firing without the leaves coming adrift or shrivelling, and that the pattern of ash which resulted when the leaf burned reacted with the brown glaze to produce the effects we see. The question is why it is not generally possible to reproduce this effect. The American glaze specialist, John Britt, found that to achieve leaf patterns in fired pots he had to first create a leaf impression and then fill the impression with a wash containing titanium (see 'The Quest for the Illusive Leaf Bowl', John Britt). However, I find his resulting effects unconvincing and I don't believe this was the technique used by the Jizhou potters. I suspect that the amber colours and the opalescence will only be produced for a quite specific composition of glaze, which presumably the Jizhou potters happened upon by chance.

Compared with their inventiveness in glazing and decoration, the Jizhou potters apparently showed little interest in devising new shapes for their pots. The shapes of my two bowls match the two main shapes of Jian teabowls – presumably that is what their customers expected their teabowls to look like. The one significant difference is that the Jizhou bowls have very small and shallow foot-rings. It has been speculated that, as the foot-ring on teabowls is generally unglazed, the Jizhou potters were concerned that, with their light coloured clay, a deeper foot-ring would attract attention and be viewed unfavourably compared with the dark clay of Jian teabowls. This could also explain why the dark glaze on these bowls is taken right down to the start of the foot-ring, unlike Jian teabowls.

Finally, I have to ask the question whether my two bowls are authentic bowls made by Jizhou potters in the 13th century or modern reproductions. Having examined the bowls closely I can't find anything visible in the clay, the shape, the glaze or the decoration which conflicts with evidence from 13th century bowls. For a while I thought that the glossy surface of my leaf bowl might be an issue, as several leaf bowls in museums have matt surfaces to their glazes. However, as I read more widely I learned that authentic bowls come in both matt and glossy forms, for a quite interesting reason. The dark brown glazes on these bowls contain an unusually large amount of magnesium. Magnesium has an unusual effect in glazes – if fired above around 1260°C it tends to act as a flux and increase the glossiness of the glaze, whereas if fired at a lower temperature it has the opposite effect. It is believed that Jizhou pots were fired at temperatures between 1220°C and 1290°C, so you can see how some might have turned out glossy and others with a matt surface.

However, I do think my bowls are more likely to be reproductions, as they are lacking any signs of the wear you would expect to see in an 800 year old pot. I suspect the auctioneers thought this as well as, when I bought them, they avoided expressing any opinion about their age, and their value estimates were well below what more obviously old teabowls have sold for in the past. Their lack of signs of wear suggests to me that their makers did not intend to deceive, as a faker would surely

have faked signs of wear as well. Although you might think the difficulty in producing the leaf effect makes it less likely that the leaf bowl is a reproduction, there are reports on-line of modern potters in China successfully producing the leaf effect (and not saying how they did it). I think these two bowls are masterpieces of glazing and decoration whether they are new or old.

Kevin Akhurst

June 2023