

A Study on the Export of Chinese Porcelain and Its Cultural Influence from the Perspective of the Belt and Road Initiative

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Keywords: The Belt and Road, Export of Porcelain, Cultural Influence

Abstract: Porcelain is one of the great inventions of the Chinese people. Since prehistory, Chinese ceramics have experienced a long process of development from early pottery to primitive porcelain, from coarse porcelain to fine porcelain, from monochrome glazed porcelain to colorful porcelain, from self-sufficiency to export, and gradually become a handicraft with both practicality and artistry. In the eyes of the Western world, porcelain is a symbol of Chinese culture, occupying a significant position in ancient China's foreign trade. As a commodity, the export of porcelain began in the Han Dynasty, went through the Tang, Five Dynasties, Song, and Yuan Dynasties, and entered a new era in the Ming and Qing Dynasties with the prosperity of blue and white porcelain export, which to some extent promoted exchanges between China and the world. Export porcelain has both strong practicality and high artistic appreciation. The practicality of porcelain comes from the daily needs of users, but it also affects their living habits to a certain extent. The artistic value of porcelain is reflected not only in its decorative, ornamental, and collectible value, but also in its subtle influence on people's aesthetic taste. During the process of exporting, Chinese porcelain went overseas along the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road, continuously influencing and changing various fields such as economy, culture, art, religion, technology, and life in the countries and regions along the route, and even influenced the social and cultural construction of these countries and regions.

1. Introduction

Porcelain is one of the great inventions of the Chinese people. Since prehistory, Chinese porcelain has experienced a long process of development from early pottery to primitive porcelain, from coarse porcelain to fine porcelain, from monochrome glazed porcelain to multi-color porcelain, from self-sufficiency to export. It has gradually become a handicraft with both practicality and artistry, which is deeply loved by people all over the world. As one of the earliest global commodities, the export of porcelain began in the Tang Dynasty, went through the Five Dynasties, Song Dynasty, and Yuan Dynasty, and reached its peak in the Ming and Qing Dynasties with the

prosperity of blue and white porcelain exports, which to some extent promoted exchanges between China and the world.

2. The main scope of Chinese export porcelain

Due to the large volume, bulky and fragile nature of porcelain, transportation by land alone is limited and costly. Through the rapid development of the Song and Yuan dynasties, the shipbuilding and navigation technology in the early Ming Dynasty had reached an unprecedented level. From 1405 to 1433, the third year of Yongle to the eighth year of Xuande in the Ming Dynasty, Zheng He led a fleet of seven voyages to the Western Ocean, reaching as far as the Red Sea coast and the eastern coast of Africa. Chinese tea, silk, and porcelain also followed the fleet to more than 30 countries and regions in Asia and eastern Africa. The trade between China and South Asia, Southeast Asia, West Asia, and Eastern European countries was unprecedentedly prosperous, and a trade system mainly based on tributary trade was gradually established. The geographical discoveries from the 15th to the 17th century further promoted the prosperity of maritime trade. With the opening of new shipping routes and the establishment of the East India Company in various countries, China's trade scope expanded to Europe and America. Chinese porcelain also began to enter the lives of Western nobles and aristocrats through the "Maritime Silk Road" and quickly gained a "Chinese style" in some European and American countries.

3. The main categories of Chinese export porcelain

Since the large-scale export of porcelain in the Tang Dynasty, China has exported countless types of porcelain through the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and "Maritime Silk Road", including Yue kiln celadon, Yue Kiln white porcelain, Changsha kiln blue glazed painted porcelain, Jingdezhen kiln blue and white porcelain, blue and white porcelain, and various over-glaze colored porcelain. Among them, the Ming and Qing dynasties were the peak periods of Chinese porcelain export. According to the production process, the exported porcelain during this period can be divided into two types: under-glaze blue and white porcelain and over-glaze colored porcelain.

3.1 Blue and white porcelain

Blue and white porcelain is an under-glaze colored porcelain made with cobalt material as a coloring agent. It is called "blue and white" because the under-glaze cobalt material appears blue after being fired at high temperatures. According to archaeological evidence, blue and white porcelain should have originated in the Tang Dynasty. However, mature blue and white porcelain appeared in Jingdezhen during the Yuan Dynasty. With the promotion of foreign trade during the Yuan Dynasty, blue and white porcelain gradually matured and formed a unique situation in the Ming Dynasty. It further developed and improved in the Qing Dynasty^[1].

At the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, the blue and white porcelain fired in Jingdezhen often served as gifts and tribute, which became a medium for cultural exchanges between China and East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, West Asia and Africa. At the same time, it was loved by people all over the world. The blue and white porcelain gradually became an important trade product in the "Maritime Silk Road", of which the most representative was the "Clark Porcelain", which was popular in Europe during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Clark porcelain was first fired in Jingdezhen and was also replicated in Zhangzhou, Fujian in the late Ming Dynasty. This type of porcelain is mainly made of circular bowls, plates, and basins, as well as carved objects such as military weapons and boxes. As the main export porcelain of the Ming Dynasty, the artistic style of "Clark Porcelain" mainly caters to foreign consumers, and its decorative style is often tailored to the

preferences of overseas consumers. The layout often adopts a combination of outer ring lighting and floor patterns or spacing patterns, with common auspicious patterns such as lotus flowers, banana leaves, tulips, and some religious patterns painted inside the lighting. In the center, natural landscapes or garden dwellings with strong Chinese style are often painted.

3.2 Glazed Colored Porcelain

Glazed color refers to the ceramic decoration technique of using various colored pigments to draw patterns on the glazed surface of ceramics with high strength that have already been fired, and then re-firing them into the kiln to solidify the color materials at low temperatures. Influenced and inspired by Tang tri-color glazed ceramics, the earliest glazed colored porcelain in China was created and fired in the Song Dynasty. It rapidly developed with the emergence of blue and white porcelain in the Ming Dynasty and gradually matured in the Qing Dynasty, giving rise to various types of colored porcelain such as multicolored porcelain, famille-rose porcelain, Canton porcelain and enamel painted porcelain. With the flourishing development of porcelain trade during the Ming and Qing dynasties, in order to meet the growing overseas market, “customized porcelain” that was processed and produced according to the specific requirements of foreign merchants gradually emerged^[2]. As the decorative artwork provided by Europe mostly came from European prints and oil paintings, compared to blue and white porcelain, colorful painted porcelain could better meet the needs of Western consumers. The enamel painted porcelain with a wide export range and a large export quantity were multicolored porcelain, famille-rose porcelain and Canton porcelain.

3.2.1 Multicolored porcelain

Multicolored porcelain was first created in the early Ming Dynasty and was a new type of porcelain with over-glaze painting pioneered by Jingdezhen kilns. Due to the lack of blue color in Ming Dynasty materials, blue and white pigments were used to replace the blue color in porcelain decoration, forming unique blue and multicolored porcelain. During the Jiajing and Wanli periods of the Ming Dynasty, folk kilns also began to produce colorful porcelain. The colorful porcelain produced by them was brightly colored and decorated, which was the peak period of the development of colorful porcelain in the Ming Dynasty. By the Kangxi, Qianlong, and Yongzheng dynasties of the Qing Dynasty, China’s porcelain making technology had reached a historical peak.

The overglaze blue pigment in the Kangxi period replaced the underglaze blue and white of the Ming Dynasty, enabling the decorative techniques of painted porcelain to be fully overglaze painting, promoting the development of multicolored porcelain and completely changing the dominant position of blue and multicolored porcelain in the Ming Dynasty. Qing Dynasty multicolored porcelain was most famous during the Kangxi period. Besides the commonly used red, green, yellow, brown and purple, gold and black pigments were also widely used, making the colors even more gorgeous and diverse. It gradually replaced blue and white porcelain as the main type of export porcelain. Until the Yongzheng period, due to the fact that famille-rose porcelain better conformed to the artistic conception of Chinese painting, multicolored porcelain began to decline. What was seen were mostly small items, and the paintings were more delicate. After the reign of Emperor Qianlong, there were basically no separate multicolored porcelains, but they were often used together with powder-painted porcelain and enamel-painted porcelain.^[3]

3.2.2 Famille-rose porcelain

In the middle and late Kangxi period, the porcelain craftsmen in Jingdezhen were inspired by the production process of enamel color, and created a new kind of over-glaze color porcelain based on the multi-colored porcelain of the Kangxi period. This kind of porcelain was applied with arsenic

containing foundation make-up on the burned body glaze, and washed with a pen after being painted. Because of the emulsification of arsenic, the color produced a powdery effect, which has the artistic effect of traditional Chinese painting, and is called “famille-rose porcelain”. Due to its elegant and delicate features of the Eastern culture, famille-rose porcelain has been loved by Europeans since its export and has become the most exported type of porcelain after multi-colored porcelain.

3.2.3 Canton porcelain

Canton porcelain is a type of porcelain produced in Guangdong during the Qing Dynasty. It is a kind of painted export porcelain that emerged in response to the demands of the foreign trade market. Due to the trade policy of “one port for trade” implemented by the Qing government during the Qianlong period, Guangzhou was crowded with merchants from all over the world who urgently needed to order Chinese porcelain. At that time, Jingdezhen, the “porcelain capital”, was located inland, and the customization, production and transportation of porcelain required a lot of manpower, material resources and time.

Therefore, some Chinese merchants fired white porcelain in Jingdezhen and shipped it to Guangzhou, recruited Jingdezhen painters to teach porcelain painting skills in Guangzhou, opened a furnace and baked it on the south bank of the the Pearl River, and gave birth to a unique kind of porcelain in the history of Chinese export-Ganton porcelain. Canton porcelain absorbed the artistic patterns of Chinese brocade and the stage decoration techniques of Chinese opera, and borrowed the gold-fired enamel technique and Western painting techniques introduced from the West to produce brocade-painted porcelain, which was like thousands of golden and colorful threads interwoven on brocade, showing a magnificent and elegant style^[4]. Canton porcelain is exquisitely made, with rich and diverse patterns and decorations, strict composition and design, and elegant and charming figures. It has high ornamental and collection value.

In the early 16th century, porcelain produced in Guangzhou began to be introduced to Portugal, marking the beginning of the export of Canton porcelain. In the 17th century, Canton porcelain began to mature and became the main type of porcelain exported from China to Europe at that time. In the 19th century, Canton porcelain shone brightly and became a highly sought-after treasure by European royal families. In the 1940s, Canton porcelain gradually declined due to war, and production was temporarily interrupted until it resumed production in 1956.

4. The cultural influence of Chinese export porcelain

Chinese porcelain for export is not only a commodity, but also a carrier of rich cultural connotation. The Chinese decorative style and Chinese cultural elements on porcelain have been recognized and accepted by the people of countries and regions along “the Belt and Road”, and gradually have a profound impact on the culture, art, religion, economy and social life of countries and regions along “the Belt and Road”. China’s export porcelain has crossed the barriers of distance and language, telling the world’s fascinating “Chinese story” in its unique ceramic language, and spreading the traditional “Chinese story” and Chinese culture to countries around the world along the “the Belt and Road”.

4.1 Influence on political life

Since Chinese porcelain entered Europe in the 16th century, due to its scarcity and high price, only the nobility and royalty could afford to purchase and collect it. As a result, from the King of Portugal to the Tsar of Russia, the rulers of various European countries all fell in love with Chinese

porcelain. It is said that King Philip II of Spain has been the first European monarch to collect Chinese porcelain on a large scale. He collected as many as over 3,000 pieces of Chinese porcelain, becoming the largest porcelain collector in Europe in the 16th century.

In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, Chinese porcelain had “directly or indirectly entered almost all European royal palaces and aristocratic halls” (Robert Finlay, 2015). European royal families had “porcelain rooms” dedicated to displaying Chinese porcelain, and wealthy families had wooden cabinets dedicated to displaying Chinese porcelain. The middle class also began to hang Chinese porcelain plates as decorations on walls, which were placed on fireplaces. Polish King John III Sobieski specially displayed Chinese blue and white porcelain in the side hall of his palace, the Wilanów Palace; King Louis XIV of France built the Trianon Palace specifically for his collection of Chinese blue and white porcelain. Louis XIV and Queen Manderon also commissioned merchants from the East India Company to customize porcelain statues of their couple wearing Chinese clothing in China^[5].

The courts of Germany, Austria and Italy also showed great interest in Chinese porcelain. Their palaces were filled with Chinese porcelain, which was often transformed into various decorative items. The most passionate collector of Chinese porcelain was Augustus II, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland. To obtain 151 Chinese blue and white porcelain jars from King Frederick William I of Prussia, he even exchanged them for 600 fully armed Saxon guardsmen on horseback. Therefore, during the 16th to 18th centuries in Europe, Chinese porcelain often served as gifts in political exchanges among monarchs and was frequently bestowed as royal favors upon nobles and ministers. Chinese porcelain played an important role in the political interactions of Europe.

4.2 Influence on economic life

As one of the early globalized commodities, porcelain sparked a craze for imitating Chinese porcelain once it entered foreign markets. From the early imitation of Tang Dynasty tri-colored porcelain by “Nara tri-color glaze”, to the learning of the manufacturing techniques of Chinese celadon by “Anzhen Celadon”, to the absorption of Chinese blue and white porcelain style by firing “Imari Porcelain”, Japan, which is separated from China by a narrow strip of water, has never stopped the pace of imitating Chinese porcelain. The “Koryo celadon” in North Korea mainly borrowed the firing techniques of celadon from the Yuezhou kiln in China; Turkey, Iran and Vietnam are the best countries to imitate Yuan blue and white porcelain; Painters in the Middle East have a popular trend of imitating the patterns of Chinese blue and white porcelain, especially using dragon, phoenix and other patterns from Yuan blue and white porcelain as creative materials.

After Chinese porcelain entered Europe in the 16th century, some European countries established their own porcelain factories and competed to imitate Chinese porcelain, such as the “Bow” porcelain factory in England, Virginia factory and Royal Ceramics factory in France, the Meissen factory in Germany, and the Delft factory in the Netherlands. The bowls made by Germany imitated Jingdezhen blue and white translucent exquisite porcelain craftsmanship, and the “Delft Blue Porcelain” produced by the Netherlands imitated Chinese blue and white porcelain, all of these enjoyed high reputation in the world.

Therefore, China’s export porcelain has promoted the development of handicraft manufacturing in the countries and regions it has visited, thereby promoting the development of local porcelain industry and economic prosperity. At the same time, there has been a significant increase in Sino foreign exchanges focused on porcelain manufacturing technology. For example, as early as the 5th century AD, the Japanese Emperor sent envoys to invite Chinese porcelain craftsmen to Japan to teach their skills. Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty once requested French missionaries to return to China and invite the best enamel artists to enter the Qing Palace to guide the firing of

“enamel colored porcelain”. The export of Chinese porcelain directly promoted economic exchanges between China and various countries and ethnic groups around the world.

4.3 Influence on cultural life

The decorative patterns on Chinese export porcelain made Europeans full of reverie about Chinese life. They made Chinese style clothes based on the imagination of the characters in the decorative patterns. Pompadour, the favorite concubine of Louis XV of France, loved Chinese porcelain very much, and made the decorative style of Chinese porcelain into a dress pattern. People called the dress patterns of her porcelain patterns “Pompado style”, which had a profound impact on the furniture design and architectural style of France at that time. The decorative elements of mountains, water, flowers, pavilions, and towers in Chinese porcelain garden patterns were introduced to the West along with Chinese porcelain, bringing a new concept of the integration of man and nature to Europe, and triggering the emergence of natural style garden landscapes in Europe in the 18th century, such as the Chinese Pavilion and Nanjing Tower in the Royal Botanic Gardens of England. The decorative elements of Chinese porcelain have influenced various fields of cultural life in Europe, including painting, architecture, clothing, and design.

5. Conclusion

The extensive export of Chinese porcelain through the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “Maritime Silk Road” has had a subtle impact on the living customs and cultural etiquette of the regions along the route, and has also enabled countries around the world to learn from and recognize Chinese culture and traditional aesthetics. From the perspective of the globalization of Chinese porcelain exports, porcelain has brought world culture to China and Chinese culture to the world. Chinese porcelain that absorbs foreign cultures not only meets the needs of other countries, but also gives the ancient Chinese Empire a new understanding of the world.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the 2024 Jingdezhen Social Science Planning Project “Research on the Cultural Influence of Jingdezhen Porcelain Export on Countries along the ‘Belt and Road’”. (Project No. 24SKGH034).

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