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Collectors, Collections and Museums

The Field of Chinese Ceramics in Britain, 1560–1960

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Introduction

Ceramics have been produced in China for over eleven thousand years and many of the ceramics that populate our lives in the twenty-first century are types which were either invented in China or manufactured there at a very early date. One of the most significant types of Chinese ceramics in terms of global distribution and consumption is porcelain, which is a material that has been produced in China for over fifteen hundred years. It is used in China to make objects for eating, drinking, temple ritual, display and other purposes but it is also used by numerous other cultures and in multiple locations beyond China. Its presence is so ubiquitous, in fact, that Chinese porcelain has given a colloquial name to all types of fine white ceramics, which are usually, as a result, described as 'china'.

This generic term was used very early in one world culture which historically has consumed Chinese porcelain in great quantities. In Britain, where Chinese porcelain was first encountered in the sixteenth century, the material has had a notable impact on both culture and society which is still being felt today. It is closely associated here with tea drinking, fine tableware, interior decoration and even collecting as a field of specialisation. More than any other type of Chinese object, ceramics have proved to be uniquely popular in Britain, to the extent that the only museum of Chinese ceramics outside China is located here. This museum, the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, was founded in 1950 and it represents the culmination of over four hundred years of engagement with Chinese ceramics in Britain.

Britain's relationship with Chinese material culture is a product of its trade and diplomatic relations with China. The consumption of Chinese porcelain in Britain parallels the history of trade in various Chinese commodities, from tea to textiles and ultimately porcelain. With its long engagement with both Chinese material culture and China as a political and geographical entity, therefore, Britain represents a distinctive example of the influence of foreign material culture

on domestic consumption patterns and behaviour. Chinese porcelain was and is used for eating, drinking, architectural display and collecting in Britain and the different types in use in different periods represent distinct changes in taste which were often influenced by Britain's political and economic relations with China. Maritime trade was thus an important early influence, as was the drinking of tea which required new vessels. This trade and resulting monetary imbalances also led to wars with China which brought British soldiers to China who returned with loot from imperial palaces, thus exposing the British market to a new kind of Chinese porcelain. Porcelain even became an important influence on British art in the nineteenth century when a fashion for blue and white brought new and influential collectors on to the scene, such as the painter J. M. Whistler (1834–1903). These collections formed a first wave of collecting, rather than using, Chinese porcelain which culminated in the founding of the specialist museum devoted to the material in the twentieth century.

The significance of the museum's founder, Percival David, in the history of Chinese ceramics in Britain is not generally acknowledged. In the field of Chinese art, David is a prominent figure, famous for his connoisseurship of both Chinese ceramics and Chinese rare books. For reasons which will be explained here, David is generally seen as a collector of Chinese art who specialised in ceramics, rather than a ceramics collector and therefore part of a long tradition of such collecting in Britain. He did, of course, collect paintings and other types of Chinese art but his focus was ceramics and his first purchases were porcelains. He was even inspired to begin collecting by an encounter with Chinese porcelain at a relative's home in Hove, on the south coast of England [see Chapter Four]. He is, however, the only ceramics collector in Britain to have founded a museum and his focus on ceramics was nurtured in Britain, where he chose to reside permanently, after moving from India in 1912. Ironically, his museum is not well-known in Britain but his collection is a benchmark for collectors and dealers of Chinese art worldwide. The museum's collection is thus important in the wider Chinese art community but unknown locally. Part of the problem is to do with the disconnect between the seemingly separate fields of what are generally known as 'Chinese export porcelain' which was made for the export market and thus not

consumed in China, and 'Chinese taste ceramics', such as those collected by David which purport to represent Chinese imperial taste. However, the two fields of ceramics should be more closely linked because they are both a product of the long history of consumption of Chinese ceramics in Britain. There is also a misconception that 'Chinese taste' ceramics are somehow not mass-produced like export wares but this is generally untrue. With few exceptions, the individual Chinese ceramics collected as art works worldwide were originally made in factories, on an assembly line, by anonymous craftsmen.

Thus the apparent strangeness of a museum in Britain devoted to Chinese ceramics has to be offset by the long and continuous history of British engagement with China and Chinese things and the real passion for ceramics that has characterised this engagement over the last four hundred years. It also has to be seen as a product of the activities of a very determined (and wealthy) collector who sought to create a new field of enquiry (for Britain) and a lasting legacy for himself and his things.

In order to consider the significance of Chinese porcelain in Britain and the role of collectors like David in establishing this material in the public domain, it is important to place the David collection in a British historical context. The collection itself has a history, as well as the ceramics within it (an aspect which has been much published), which were selected to represent the development of ceramics in China but were subject to forces which give them a different identity: David's taste, his bank balance, availability in the market and competition from other collectors. It is also important to be familiar with the material itself, porcelain, and the terminology that accompanies it. The term 'porcelain' was used almost exclusively in Britain to describe Chinese ceramics before 1900. In fact, to be correct, the term 'ceramics' would be more accurate when looking at material from about 1900 onward because this is when other types of ceramics such as stonewares and eathenwares began to be appropriated in Britain. In China, of course, stonewares were admired from an early date and thus the British consumption of non-porcelain ceramics can be attributed in part to the concurrent emergence of taste in the more 'au-

thentic' wares made for Chinese consumption.[1] After 1900, earlier Chinese ceramics became more widely available in Britain and some collectors began to specialise in non-porcelain ceramics such as Song (960–1279) stonewares or earthenware burial figures of the Tang dynasty (618–906). David collected both stonewares and porcelains, which still make up the largest group in his collection, but the David collection only emerges as an entity in the period between 1914 and 1960, which is rather late in the history of ceramic collecting in Britain. Thus from a chronological perspective, this book will be concerned mainly with porcelain, but at times, other ceramics will be considered.

Aspects of the history of Chinese porcelain in Britain have been discussed elsewhere but these studies are generally very brief and restricted to short time periods or individual consumers.[2] What is lacking is a comprehensive study of the history of Chinese porcelain in Britain from the first encounters in the sixteenth century onwards and a consideration of the consequences of the consumption of this material in and for Britain, something which has yet to be published. A first step in this direction would be to consider how and why Chinese porcelain was acquired and collected in Britain and in what contexts. One point which this book will demonstrate is that the collecting of Chinese porcelain in Britain very much reflected Britain's relationship with China, both economically and politically, and that these 'things' helped to define the British conception of China as a place, both as 'other' and as part of the fabric of British life. As an attempt to con-

1 Other contributing factors were new exposure to early wares through railway building in China which uncovered tombs, the development of archaeology in China which had a similar effect, the privileging of so-called 'craft' ceramics by British potters and the inclusion of these 'simpler' and more 'rustic' wares in the Modernist aesthetic in Britain.

2 For example, Philippa Glanville, 'Chinese Porcelain and English Goldsmiths c. 1560 to c. 1660', *The V&A Album*, 3 (1984), pp. 246–265; Anna Jackson and Amin Jaffer, eds., *Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500–1800* (London, 2004); John Ayers, Oliver Impey, J. V. G. Mallet, *Porcelain for Palaces*, Oriental Ceramic Society (London, 1990); Dawn Jacobson, *Chinoiserie* (London, 1993); and D. S. Howard, *A Tale of Three Cities: Canton, Shanghai and Hong Kong, Three Centuries of Sino-British Trade in the Decorative Arts* (London, *c.*1997).

struct a contextual history, the structure of this book is therefore necessarily both chronological and thematic. It begins with pre-twentieth-century British encounters with China and Chinese porcelain and the influence of this material on British culture. A discussion of the development of Chinese ceramics as a specialist field for collectors with a growing body of related literature in the first half of the twentieth century follows, demonstrating how these activities influenced both the types of ceramics collected in Britain and the public display of Chinese ceramics. The final section examines the development of Chinese ceramics into a more complex, historiographical field of enquiry with an institutional base in the Chinese ceramics museum founded in 1950s by a single, very influential, collector.

This is not, therefore, a history of the production and manufacture of Chinese ceramics, a subject which has been amply covered elsewhere,[3] nor a straightforward history of Chinese porcelain in Britain, although a history of this type is certainly needed. This book is informed however by knowledge of these features in a way that has been lacking in studies of Chinese porcelain in British contexts. Such studies are not normally written by sinologists or by historians of domestic Chinese ceramics [studies of Chinese 'export porcelain' are numerous] thus this book will be somewhat more precise in its description and discussion of the wares that came to Britain and will not be utilising the popular terminology of Chinese porcelain that has developed in the last hundred years in Britain except to clarify and correct misconceptions. For example, this book will not refer to porcelain as 'china' because this term is imprecise and can refer to bone china which was not produced in China itself. For clarity, wherever possible, the original Chinese terms for shapes, decoration and other features will also be included and will be presented in *pinyin* romanisation.

3 The most recent and most comprehensive study of Chinese ceramic technology is by Rose Kerr, ed., *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 5, part XII, *Ceramic Technology* (Cambridge, 2004 b). A shorter summary with particular reference to stoneware and porcelain can be found in Stacey Pierson, *Earth, Fire and Water: Chinese Ceramic Technology, a Handbook for Non-Specialists* (London, 1996).