



ČĪNĪ

ČĪNĪ (lit. “Chinese”; borrowed in Arabic as *šīnī*), generic term for Chinese ceramic wares, including porcelain, a translucent, white-bodied ware fired at very high temperatures. From at least as early as the Tang period (618-907 c.e.), ceramics were being fired at high temperatures in China; that they were also exported to Persia is clear from both literary sources and archeological finds.

Tang period. Among the earliest specific references to Chinese porcelain is that of the merchant Solaymān al-Tājer al-Sīrāfī, who in 243/851 described his journeys from the Persian Gulf to India and China. He recorded, for example, that “[The Chinese) have a fine clay, from which they make drinking cups fine as glasses, through which you can see the gleam of water, though they are made of clay” (Sauvaget, p. 16; Kahle, 1956a, p. 335). This remarkable description of translucency, the classic property of porcelain, could apply only to the finer Tang white wares. Solaymān’s contemporary Ebn Ḳordāḏbeh (p. 69) mentioned the following four most important Chinese ports for foreign commerce (see Kahle, 1942, pp. 335-36; cf. M. Hartmann in *EI*¹, I, pp. 841-42): Lūqīn (according to Kahle, possibly Long-bian/Lung-pien, “about 12 miles south-east from Chiaou-chou, near present Hanoi in Tonking”; cf. *Taḏkerat al-molūk*, ed. Minorsky, comm. p. 244 and n. 4, with references), Ḳānfū (modern Canton; cf. *Taḏkerat al-molūk*, ed. Minorsky, comm. p. 224 and n. 2, with references), Ḳānjū (ms. variant Jān-jū; modern Quan-zhou/Ch’üan-chou, see [chinese-iranian relations vii. persian settlements in southeastern china during the tang, sung, and yuan dynasties](#)), and Qānṭū (according to Kahle, Jiang-



du/Chiang-tu, modern Yang-zhou/Yang-chou; Hartmann, prefers the ms. variant Qan-su, which he identifies with Hang-zhou/ Hang-chou); Ebn ẖordāḏbeh further remarked that Lūqīn was well stocked with porcelain (*al-ḡazār al-jayyed al-ṣīnī*). Tang-dynasty ceramics, including white and cream-colored stonewares, “Dusun” storage jars, Changsha (Ch’ang-sha) painted stoneware from Hunan province, and other types, have been found in quantity at Sīrāf, the major medieval port on the eastern Persian Gulf coast (Whitehouse). Similar material has also been found in excavations at Susa (Rosen-Ayalon, pp. 8, 221), Qaṣr-e Abū Naṣr (old Shiraz; Whitcomb, p. 67), Ray (cf. Rosen-Ayalon, p. 15 n. 11), and Nīšāpūr (Wilkinson, pp. 254-58). At the last site white and cream-colored porcelaneous ware, mottled ware, and one fragment of a mold-decorated Changsha painted stoneware ewer from south central China have been excavated. The introduction of **cobalt** blue in the decoration of Chinese *sancai* (*san-ts’ai* “three-color”) pottery depended on ore of Persian origin. Although the distribution of *sancai* was long thought to have been limited to China itself, recent discoveries in Sri Lanka of sherds in the same context as Tang white wares are evidence that it was an export product in approximately the same period (3rd-4th/9th 10th centuries).

Song (Sung) period. Similarities in Tang-dynasty material found on the Persian Gulf coast, at Foṣṭāṭ (old Cairo), on the east coast of Africa, and in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Far East suggest that most Chinese exports reached Persia and the Near East by sea (Whitehouse and Williamson). This well-established maritime trade continued during the Song (960-1269), Yuan (Yüan; 1271-1368), and Ming (1368-1644) periods (Gray, 1984, pp. 191-93; Pope, pp. 19-25; Carswell, 1985b; idem, 1989). The presence at Nīšāpūr of fragments of the Song glazed ware known as *qingbai* (*ch’ing-pai*, lit. “blue-white”; Gray, 1984, p. 144, pls. M, N, 115-27, 129), with carved and combed decoration (Wilkinson, pp. 257-58, no. 14; cf. Gray, 1984, p. 194), demonstrates that Chinese wares continued to reach that city after the end of Samanid rule there in about 385/995. According to Ṭa’ālebī (d. 429/1038), “The Arabs used to call every delicately or curiously-made vessel and such like, whatever its real origin, “Chinese,” because finely-made things are a speciality of China They also have fine, translucent pottery (*al-qadā’er al-mostašaffa*), used for cooking purposes; a piece of this may be used equally for boiling things (*qedr*), for frying (*meqlāt*) or simply as a dish (*kāsa*) for eating from. The best of these are the delicate, evenly-pigmented, clearly-resounding apricot-coloured (*mešmešī*) ware, and after that, the cream-coloured (*zabadī*) ware with similar characteristics” (pp. 220-21; tr. p. 141). Bīrūnī (362-440/937-1048) described the



manufacture of Chinese porcelains and their derivatives and compared them favorably to Persian imitations. He too mentioned the distinction between the apricot- and cream-colored Chinese originals (p. 226). Exactly which of the surviving Northern Song dynasty (960-1127) ceramics are to be identified with these terms is still a matter of conjecture, though Yue (Yüeh; an early Song stoneware usually incised or carved and covered with a pale glaze; Gray, 1984, pp. 25-26; pls. 1-2, 4-12) and the slightly later celadon (Long-quan/Lung-ch'üan, named for a district in Chekian province where it was manufactured; Gray, 1984, pp. 160-62, pl. 130) seem to fit best the description "apricot-colored." On the other hand, *qingbai* and other white porcelains seem to belong to the cream-colored category. More important is Bīrūnī's description (p. 227) of what he saw in the house of a merchant from Isfahan who lived in Ray: bowls (*qeṣā'*), dishes (*uskarrajāt*), bottles (*nawfalāt*), trays (*aṭbāq*), jugs (*akwāz*), drinking vessels (*mašāreb*), ewers (*abārīq*), hand basins (*ṭosūs*), baskets (*mahārež*), incense burners (*majāmer*; not mentioned in Beirut ed.; cf. Kahle, 1956, pp. 338 n. 3, 342), lamps (*manārāt*), lamp standards (*masārej*), and other objects (*adawāt*) of Chinese porcelain. Known Song wares of the 4-5th/10-11th century can be matched with most of these types, which may also have included both Northern Song forms and *qingbai*.

Yuan and Ming periods. Under the Yuan dynasty two great travelers, the Venetian Marco Polo (1254-1324) and the North African Ebn Baṭṭūṭa (writing ca. 759/1357; Pers. tr., II, pp. 733-34), wrote detailed descriptions of Chinese porcelain and its manufacture. Cobalt blue was particularly popular for the decoration of porcelain in the early 8th/14th century. The novelty of such decoration on the massive wares produced at the kilns in Jingdezhen (Ching-tê-chên) may well have been inspired by Persian and other Muslim merchants who were permanently established on the China coast. Only a century later, under the Ming dynasty, Persian cobalt blue was superseded by a local Chinese cobalt blue (Gamer). That these early blue-and-white wares were exported in quantity to India, Persia, and the Near East is clear from the number of pieces surviving in those areas. For example, although there are no records of the export of Yuan and early Ming porcelain to Persia, fragments of 8th/14th-century blue-and-white ware have been found at Old Hormoz on the Persian Gulf (Weisner). A major source of information about the use of Chinese porcelain in Persia is to be found in illustrated manuscripts, where it is often depicted as an appurtenance of court life and as an accessory to various drunken debauches. It has also been remarked that the large size of many of the early blue-and-white dishes and bowls made them particularly



appropriate for serving such Near Eastern dishes as pilaf. The impact of Chinese blue-and-white ware on Persian pottery is apparent almost from the beginning of its import (see [chinese-iranian relations xi. mutual influence of chinese and persian ceramics](#)); both the forms and designs of the Chinese prototypes inspired Persian potters (see Carswell, 1985a), but they were never able to reproduce the true composition of porcelain, for kaolin, the fine white clay necessary for the thin, translucent body was not available to them. They worked with earthenware fired at much lower temperatures than porcelain, for example, a fine, white quartz-based ware that had been introduced in the 7th/13th century (Allan; see [ceramics viii. the islamic period, 5th-9th/11th-15th centuries](#)). The Persians' control of the cobalt-blue pigment was, however, technically inferior to that of the Chinese.

A large number of Yuan and Ming porcelain and celadon pieces were also included in the royal collection that Shah 'Abbās I (996-1038/1588-1629) donated to the shrine of Shaikh Ṣafī at Ardabīl in 1020/1611 (see [ardabīl iv. ardabīl collection of chinese porcelain](#)). The Ardabīl collection is one of two great imperial collections of Chinese export ware surviving in the Middle and Near East, the other being that of the Ottoman sultans in the Topkapı Sarayı in Istanbul. Much of the material in Istanbul must have been captured during the military campaigns of Salīm I (Selim Yavuz, 918-26/1512-20) and his successor, Solaymān II (Süleiman Kanuni; 926-74/1520-66), in Persia, Syria, and Egypt (cf. Kahle, 1956, pp. 348-50). A contemporary chronicler, Jalāl-al-Dīn Moḥammad Monajjem Yazdī, prepared a detailed inventory of Shah 'Abbās's gift to the Ardabīl shrine, tabulating 1,162 pieces and twenty-nine different types (*Tārīk-e 'abbāsī*, B.M. Add. 27.241, Pope, 1956, p. 49; cf. Jalāl-al-Dīn, 1985, based on two defective 13th/19th-century manuscripts, where the total given is 1,221 pieces, though 1,283 are actually listed under twenty-seven types). Although Western travelers frequently referred to the Ardabīl shrine, it was not until ca. 1047/1637 that one of them, Adam Olearius, specifically mentioned the porcelain collection, in his description of a building "called *Tzenetsera* [i.e., *čīnī-sarāy*] In the Neeches of the Vault . . . above three or four hundred vessels of Porcelane; some, so large, as that they contain'd above 40 quarts of Liquor" (p. 179). By the 13th/19th century the collection had been placed on the floor of the shrine to prevent its being destroyed by earthquakes (Morier, pp. 255-56; Fraser, p. 296; Holmes, p. 38; von Thielmann, II, pp. 33-34; Sarre, II, p. 41). The collection was transferred to the National Museum in Tehran in 1314 Š./1935. It was definitively catalogued by John A. Pope in 1950.



Later Chinese export wares. In the 11th/17th century Persian blue-and-white ceramics had achieved such a standard of quality and the “Chinese” decoration was so convincingly rendered that the myth arose that it was made by Chinese potters who had settled in the West. It is noteworthy, too, that Persian blue-and-white ceramics were exported in quantity to Southeast Asia, where they must have come into direct competition with Chinese export porcelain. Chinese wares continued to be popular in Persia, and in the 12-13th/18-19th centuries porcelain with enameled decoration in the “Canton style” was often inscribed in Persian or Arabic, frequently with the names of the patrons and the dates.

See also ceramics, islamic period.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

J. W. Allan, “Abū’l Qāsim’s Treatise on Ceramics,” *Iran* 11, 1973, pp. 111-20.

Abū Rayḥān Moḥammad Bīrūnī, *Ketāb al-jamāher fī-ma’refat al-jawāher*, Beirut, n.d. J. Carswell, “Ṣīn in Syria,” *Iran*, 17, 1979, pp. 15-24.

Idem, *Blue-and-White. Chinese Porcelain and Its Impact on the Western World*, Chicago, 1985a.

Idem, “Chinese Ceramics from Allaippidy in Sri Lanka,” in *A Ceramic Legacy of Asia’s Maritime Trade*, Kuala Lumpur, 1985b, pp. 31-49.

Idem, “China and the West. Recent Archaeological Research in South Asia,” *Asian Affairs* 20 (76)/1, February 1989, pp. 37-44.

Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, tr. M.-‘A. Mowaḥḥed, *Safar-nāma-ye Ebn Baṭṭūṭa*, 2 vols., Tehran, 1348 Š./1969.

J. B. Fraser, *Travels and Adventures in the Persian Provinces on the Southern Banks of the Caspian Sea*, London, 1826.



H. Garner, "The Use of Imported and Native Cobalt in Chinese Blue and White," *Oriental Art*, N.S. 2/2, 1956, pp. 48-50.

B. Gray, "Blue and White Vessels in Persian Miniatures of the 14th and 15th Centuries Re-examined," *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, 1948-49, 1949, pp. 23-30.

Idem, "Persian Influence on Chinese Art from the Eighth to the Fifteenth Centuries," *Iran* 1, 1963, pp. 13-18.

Idem, "The Export of Chinese Porcelain to India," *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, 1964-66, 1967, pp. 21-38.

Idem, "The Export of Chinese Porcelain to the Islamic World. Some Reflections on Its Significance for Islamic Art before 1400," *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, 1975-77, 1977, pp. 231-62.

Idem, *Sung Porcelain and Stoneware*, London, 1984.

W. R. Holmes, *Sketches on the Shores of the Caspian . . .*, London, 1845.

Jalāl-al-Dīn Moḥammad Monajjem Yazdī, *Tārīk-e'abbāsī*, ed. S. Waḥīdnīā, [Tehran?], 1366 Š./1987.

P. Kahle, "Chinese Porcelain in the Lands of Islam," *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, 1940-41, London, 1942, pp. 27-46; repr. in *Opera Minora von Paul Kahle. Festgabe zum 21. Januar 1956*, Leiden, 1956a, pp. 326-50.

Idem, "Chinese Porcelain in the Lands of Islam. Supplement," in *Opera Minora von Paul Kahle. Festgabe zum 21. Januar 1956*, Leiden, 1956b, pp. 351-61.

R. Krahl, *Chinese Ceramics in the Topkapi Saray Museum*, 3 vols., London, 1986.

Ma Huan, *Ying-yai sheng-Lang. "The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores"* [1433], tr. and ed. Feng Ch'eng-chün, Cambridge, 1970.

J. Morier, *A Second Journey through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor . . .*, London, 1818.

A. Olearius, *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors Sent by Frederick Duke of Holstein . . .*, London, 1669.



- J. A. Pope, *Fourteenth-Century Blue-and-White. A Group of Chinese Porcelains in the Topkapu Sarayı Müzesi*, Istanbul, Washington, D.C., 1952.
- Idem, *Chinese Porcelains from the Ardebil Shrine*, Washington, D.C., 1956.
- M. Rosen-Ayalon, *La poterie islamique*, MDAF 50, Mission de Susiane, Ville royale de Suse 4, Paris, 1974.
- F. Sarre, *Denkmäler persischer Baukunst*, 2 vols., Berlin, 1901-10.
- Solaymān al-Tājer al-Sīrāfī, *Selselat al-tawārīk*, ed. L. Langlès, Paris, 1811; tr. G. Ferrand, *Voyage du marchand arabe Sulaymān en Inde et en Chine rédigé en 851 suivie de remarques par Abū Zayd Ḥasan (vers 916)*, Paris, 1922; ed. and tr. J. Sauvaget, *Aḥbār aṣ-Ṣīn wa l-Hind. Relation de la Chine et de l'Inde rédigée en 851*, Paris, 1948.
- Abū Manṣūr ‘Abd-al-Malek b. Moḥammad Ṭa‘ālebī Nišābūrī, *Laṭā’ef al-ma‘āref*, ed. E. Abyārī and H. K. Şayrafī, Cairo, 1960; tr. C. E. Bosworth, *The Book of Curious and Entertaining Information. The Laṭā’if al-ma‘ārif of Tha‘ālibī*, Edinburgh, 1968.
- M. von Thielmann, *Journey in the Caucasus, Persia and Turkey in Asia*, 2 vols., London, 1875.
- T. Volker, *Porcelain and the Dutch East India Company as Recorded in the Dagb-Registers . . . 1602-1682*, Leiden, 1954.
- U. Weisner, *Chinesische Keramik auf Hormoz*, Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, Kleine Monographien 1, Cologne, 1979.
- D. S. Whitcomb, *Before the Roses and Nightingales. Excavations at Qasr-i Abu Nasr, Old Shiraz*, New York, 1985.
- D. Whitehouse, “Some Chinese and Islamic Pottery from Siraf,” in *Pottery and Metalwork in T’ang China*, Percival David Foundation Colloquies on Art and Archaeology in Asia 1, London, 1970, pp. 35-40.
- Idem and A. Williamson, “Sasanian Maritime Trade,” *Iran* 11, 1973, pp. 29-30.
- C. K. Wilkinson, *Nishapur. Pottery of the Early Islamic Period*, New York, 1973.