

## THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY BARCELONA

### CHINA IN THE SPOTLIGHT THE SPREAD OF BLUE-AND-WHITE PORCELAIN

Texts were important for the European discovery of China. But the first notices from China were not only textual. For millennia, Chinese objects had been reaching Europe.

First came the silks that were already preeminent in the Roman Empire, and gave to China its first name in the west, *Serica*, the land of silk. During the middle Ages these silks clothed the civilian and religious authorities of both Christian Europe and the Islamic world.

When the Mongol invasions established an unprecedented connection across Eurasia, their textiles shot through with gold thread, the so-called "**cloth of gold**" (*nasij*), **adorned the ceremonial clothes of all Eurasia, carrying along with them long lines of the phags'pa script** that the Chinese Mongol emperors were trying to introduce in China.

We have already seen it in 14th century paintings in the silks that trimmed the soldiers' hats in the *Crucifixion* of Giotto, and in the *Madonna and child* of Filippo di Memmo. The extremely inquisitive Italian renaissance painters not only included silk tissues into their paintings: occasionally, as in the *Martyrdom of the Franciscans* painted by Ambroggio Lorenzetti, some real Mongol faces and Mongol hats appeared peeping out from the crowds.

Chinese blue-and-white porcelain followed suit, and it spread so widely that it has been called the first truly global product. The systematic use of Persian cobalt, used for underglaze blue decoration, gave the Ming dynasty blue-and-white porcelains an unmatched quality and transformed them into supreme luxury items.

By the middle of the 14th century, Chinese porcelains could already be found all around the Indian Ocean, and by the end of the century Chinese blue-and-white porcelains were regularly crossing Central Asia and were usual tableware in the princely courts of Persia.

The Muslim world knew about blue-and-white Chinese wares long before the Europeans did. Direct contacts between Europeans and Chinese began to occur at the very beginning of the

15th century, when González de Clavijo went to the court of Tamerlane in Samarkand as ambassador of the King of Castile.

He witnessed the arrival of a caravan of 800 camels coming from Cathay and the coming of Chinese ambassadors to the court of Tamerlane. He described the presents brought by them as the richest and most precious that he had ever seen.

He concluded that the craftsmen of Cathay were the more skilful by far than those of any other nation. By then, Chinese porcelains were on the brink of reaching Europe that had already heard about them through the book of Marco Polo that contains a quite accurate description of Chinese porcelain.

In the first decade of the 15th century the Zheng He expeditions disseminated Chinese porcelain all along the shores of the Indian Ocean. Quite a lot of Chinese ceramics ended up on the **eastern coasts of Africa: the fact that they were embedded in the Wassili chieftains' tombs** attests to the ritual importance that Chinese porcelains achieved there.

When, after the end of the Zheng He expeditions, the Chinese fleets left the Indian Ocean for good, the Ottoman Empire began to slip towards it through the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. **And that's how an enormous quantity of Chinese ceramics began to arrive at the Topkapi** palace in Istanbul, that today houses more than 10,000 of them, often adapted to the Turkish taste with the Chinese ewers covered with a silver stopper.

One main reason for the bountiful flow of Chinese porcelain in the 15th century was the extremely abundant production of it in China itself: in only one year, 1433, the Jingdezhen kiln received an imperial order for almost 50,000 pieces of porcelain.

Princely gifts all over the west began to contain some of these pieces. As early as 1461 the Sultan of Egypt offered a small quantity of them to the Venetian Doge, and more reached Venice as gifts from the Mameluke sultan in the end of the century.

In 1487 Lorenzo da Medici was already acquiring his first blue-and-white porcelains and Vasco de Gama returned from India in 1499 with a piece of Chinese porcelain that he brought as a present to the king.

With the arrival of the new century, but even before the Portuguese sent their first ships to China, the Ming blue and white porcelains were appearing in Renaissance paintings.

Their importance propelled them right to the middle of the paintings. The first one appeared in Andrea Mantegna's Adoration of the Magi, painted in 1500.

The painting highlights the special gifts that the three Magi carry for the Messiah.

In the very center stands the gift carried by a bearded and bareheaded king Caspar, a precious Chinese blue-and white cup, equal in value to the amber and gold jars that the other two kings are offering.

The Mantegna vase is in tune with the great variety of dishes that were presented in small bowls in the Chinese banquets since Song times. But the Mongols had introduced new culinary habits, centered on communal feasts, in which great jars were a better choice. And these also reached Europe.

In 1514, a series of great blue-and-white **Ming porcelains appeared in Giovanni Bellini's The Feast of the gods**. Right in the middle of the painting, a couple of big Ming bowls are being used to serve the gods, while another rests on the ground.

The Portuguese arrival in China in 1524 immediately resulted in Chinese porcelain being brought to Lisbon.

For almost half a century, the Portuguese smuggled, joined pirates and traded, depending on the opportunities. But well before their settlement in Macao, the Portuguese were already active middlemen and regular customers of the Chinese production of porcelains and silks, and had a direct involvement in the design and production of the Chinese craftsmen that were catering for the Portuguese market.

This is obvious, for instance, in this porcelain vase, one of the six made especially for a Portuguese ship captain in 1552.

Later on, the quantity of blue-and-white porcelain reaching Lisbon will completely cover with 261 blue-and-white dishes the ceiling of the Dos Santos palace. By the end of the 16th century, Chinese blue-and-white porcelain had become a regular item in European courts; Philip the 2nd, who since 1581 was also king of Portugal, owned 3,000 pieces, some of them made especially for him with the arms of Castile and Leon.

The oldest known piece of Chinese porcelain for the Spanish market was ordered by the Augustinians by 1575 and bears their emblematic bifacial eagle.

Bowls with coats of arms, sometimes painted upside down, went hand by hand with the jars decorated with religious sceneries and anagrams of most of the religious orders, Augustinians, Dominicans, or Jesuits, or pious sentences like this Ave Maria.