

# CHINESE FOLK POTTERY

as Artistic Collectibles and Historical Relics



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# Chinese Folk Pottery as Artistic Collectibles and Historical Relics

by  
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**H**istorically and technologically speaking, Chinese potters were many centuries ahead of the rest of the world in cracking the secret of firing clay at very high temperatures, creating beautiful utensils that were far more durable and easily cleaned than those made anywhere else. This advanced technology was used to make both imperial and folk wares. Chinese and imperial pottery wares are finely finished, and they are not only well preserved in international museums but also highly appreciated by Chinese and non-Chinese connoisseurs and scholars. Chinese folk wares are relatively unknown in the West; they are, however, often well potted, and may be even better designed than their imperial counterparts. To introduce Chinese folk pottery as artistic collectibles and historical relics, this essay sketches their artistic, cultural, and technological features. Developed from the presentation given at the 2013 symposium and exhibition co-sponsored by the University of Michigan Museum of Arts (UMMA) and the Confucius Institute at the University of Michigan (CIUM), this short essay calls for more appreciation and preservation of Chinese folk pottery in the West.

## Why does Chinese folk pottery deserve more attention?

To experience the beauty, culture, history, and technology Chinese folk pottery embodied, one only needs to examine any representative items, such as the 20th century blue-and-white plate displayed at the U-M exhibition last fall (Figs. 1 and 25). Its design speaks volumes.

In the center of the plate is a plant confined in an unglazed ring while the outer ring is decorated with two lively looking fish. This fish pattern is in fact borrowed from 15th century examples made by government potters of Emperor Xuande 宣德 (reigned 1425-1435). Unlike its models, the 20th century and folk plate took much less fuel to make. Its unglazed ring indicates that several plates were stacked for firing so as to save fuel and kiln space, while imperial plates, without unglazed rings, had to be fired individually and at much greater cost.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

One may ask which plate is better. The answer will of course depend on one's taste and use of the utensil, which might have nothing to do with the artistic and practical value of the plate as a collectible item.

Chinese potters devised advanced industrial management systems centuries ago, aiming at streamlining production and rationalizing labor division. One early example of such systems can be found at the burial ground, in Xi'an, China, of the First Chinese Emperor or Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇, who died in 210 B.C. There, archaeologists have recovered several thousands of terra cotta soldiers (Figs. 2 and 26) and chariots, apparently all made within two decades. The figures were composed from molded parts with details finished by hand. Producing so many figures so quickly could only have been possible with big and well-planned industrial systems, such as the one the Qin court employed. Its streamlined mode of production – through division of labor – reflects a tradition of Chinese pottery that has been passed down through centuries, refined by empirical wisdom and well tested by marketing results.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 6



Fig. 5



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

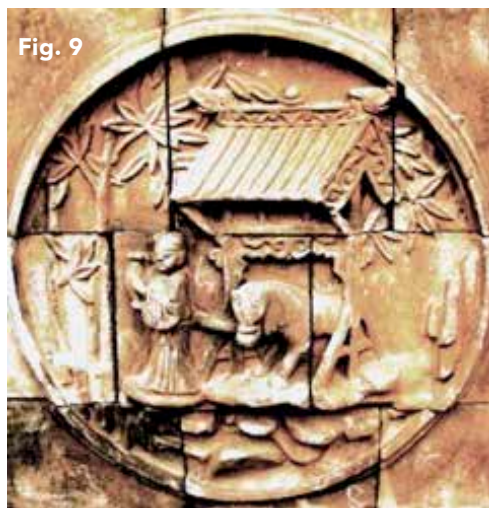


Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

With such a mode of production, Chinese folk potters continuously and effectively produced beautiful and functional ceramics. Chinese craftsmen mastered their pottery technologies well, a fact that is attested by pottery related products. Sometimes fired clay was replaced with other materials depending on the status of the users. Richer folks might have preferred a silver jug whereas commoners were happy with pewter instead of ceramics (Fig. 3).

In addition to their beauty and functions, Chinese folk pottery deserves attention because they demonstrate Chinese people's identities and their cultural and social living (Fig. 29). Pottery is a basic utensil in Chinese lives. Many Han and non-Han Chinese users would not use anything besides pottery. Han people all over China, now and then, seem to prefer boiling water in a kettle with an upright-handle, like the one in Fig. 4. Samples of this design had graced imperial kitchens as well as roadside vendors (Figs. 5 and 6). The same seems to apply to non-Han Chinese ceramics. The black teapot (Fig. 7) collected from Tibetan potters living in Yunnan is a case in point.

It is part of a tea ware set for serving yak milk tea to guests. Today, such sets embody the cultural identity of the Tangdui 汤堆 people there (Fig. 27). Another similarly ethnic-specific object is an egg-shaped yak milk churn made in Tibet (Fig. 8). Some pottery objects are widely used in China. For instance, religious buildings generally have decorative wall tiles or animal-shape roof tiles. Those in Figures 9 and 10 are examples collected separately in North and South of China. Some pottery objects seem to stay within certain regions. Most people in South and Southeast China make medicinal tea from side-handled kettles like the one in Figures 11 and 12. Side-handled pots for brewing regular tea, which are smaller in size, are favored by serious tea drinkers in both Southeast China and Japan. Southern Chinese have a clever way of keeping ants away from their pickled food and sauces when stored in jars. They use a jar with two rims that form a "moat" around the mouth. They fill this moat with water, and then place a bowl upside down between the two rims to serve as the lid (Fig. 13). The design goes back to the ninth century.



**Fig. 14**

It stands to reason that double-rim jars are popular in regions where ants are normal household members. But are the jars originally Chinese? They turn up in markets not only in Guangxi and Guangdong, China, but also in Laos, and Thailand. Lately, they have even reached Canada (Fig. 14). Could the design be Southeast Asian in origin? Did people in North China formerly use it too? Even if these questions cannot be definitively answered for the time being, they make it clear that Chinese people move with their ceramic wares, crossing cultural, geographical, and historical boundaries.



**Fig. 15**

The ceramic pillow like that in Fig. 15 makes another representative example of such traveling Chinese wares. Few Americans can imagine anyone sleeping on such a hard thing. Similar pillows were, however, used not only in China as early as the sixth century A.D., but also in Korea in the twelfth century; many were still in use in Hong Kong in the 1970s!

Chinese pottery travels far and wide because it follows Chinese processes and routes of immigration and trade. Since China and the West established direct and extensive pottery trade routes from the 17th centuries on, foreign traders came to China and took pots home to sell. Next came Chinese traders who took over the exporting of pots. Then the ideas and technologies behind the pots began to travel. Potters in formerly importing countries learned to adapt designs and technologies from China.

One revealing example of such an international distribution of Chinese pottery is the water-droppers, which have long been popular Chinese desk accessories (Fig. 16). Water-droppers were used to transport water needed to liquefy dried ink sticks into ink; thus water-droppers formed an integral part of an ancient writing method that only became obsolete in the late 20th century, when prepared liquid ink and fountain pens became readily available. Koreans practiced calligraphy like Chinese did, and thus they made and used water-droppers. (Figs. 17 and 18). Filipinos did not use dried ink or write with brushes, and yet Chinese water-droppers turned up in fourteenth century archaeological sites in the nation (Fig. 19). Why were they there? What could have Filipinos done with them? It seems that the water-dropper design crossed cultural and political boundaries, and was adjusted for different functions other than writing in the Philippines.



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Fig. 22



SMALL BROWN MEDICINE BOTTLE FROM THE C.D. HOY STORE UPSTAIRS APARTMENT. THE HOY'S ARE BELIEVED TO HAVE BROUGHT IT TO QUEEN'S PARK



Fig. 20

## Chinese folk pottery in North America

Utilitarian Chinese ceramics go wherever Chinese go. Indeed, they came to North America with the first wave of Chinese gold seekers in the 1850s, who settled in great numbers in several Chinese-North American sites, which now anchor chapters in the U.S. immigration story. However, no public museum on either side of the U.S. and Canadian borders has a significant collection of such folk wares. Considering that the study of Chinese immigration history only started in the 1960s, it is understandable that collecting ordinary immigrants' pottery has not been a high priority among elite museums.





Fig. 24

Even the museums run by ethnic Chinese in America and Canada have also made little effort in collecting immigrant pottery. Why? I offer my speculations here. First, to study these pots, one needs to review a painful past that Chinese immigrants suffered. Many do not want to revisit that past. Second, some may feel sensitive about the fact that certain types of Chinese pottery are connected with vices, namely alcohol and drugs. A revealing example is the storage jar in Figure 20, which was used to store alcohol. Some specimens of these large storage jars bear the names of breweries, making it possible to tell the type of liquor originally shipped to America (Fig. 21). Another common pottery type is a vase-like wine bottle (Fig. 22). They were used for retail sales of strong liquors.

A third group of immigrants' pottery, namely opium pipe bowls, appear at almost all early Chinese American sites (Fig. 23). Their specific shape was used for one purpose only – to smoke opium. Most are earlier than 1909, when opium became illegal in the U. S. Such pipe bowls represent a vice that caused not only problems for Chinese immigrants but also Americans. Opium smoking, unlike addiction to alcohol and the over-the-counter opiates sold in pharmacies, was regarded as decadent and reprehensible by white Americans (Fig. 24). Chinese smoking of opium was used as a key argument to justify racist laws to keep them out of the U.S.

These three points may explain why Chinese American or Chinese Canadian museums were not interested in Chinese folk pottery. However, Chinese folk ceramic wares are bona fide artistic collectibles and historical relics, and they should be appreciated more. Fortunately they are increasingly attracting attention from artists, collectors, and scholars, who will travel far and spend a great amount of time and energy to collect and learn about Chinese folk pottery. To start learning and collecting Chinese folk ceramic wares, nevertheless, one only needs to look around. Some might still be sitting on shelves of our own kitchens. ■



Fig. 25



Fig. 26



Fig. 27

## Reference Lists

Items followed by a letter and number code indicate that they are exhibits of the Chinese Folk Pottery Exhibition shown at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, January – June, 2013. Other photographs are the author's own, unless stated otherwise.

- Fig. 1 A blue and white plate with painted double-fish painted design. Zibo, Shandong. MW-E03.
- Fig. 2 Life-size terra-cotta soldier. Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi Tomb, Xian, 3rd Century B.C. From website, <http://7junipers.com/log/tag/first-emperor>
- Fig. 3 Two containers – a large ceramic jar in a basket and a pewter wine jug on the floor. Shixing, Guangdong, 1989.
- Fig. 4 Pottery kettle with upright handle. Jinghong Dai village 景洪, Yunnan. MW-A02. Front cover.
- Fig. 5 Potter Cao Longkun in front of his studio, holding samples of his black pottery. Jiangxi. Photograph by Susan Stephenson.
- Fig. 6 A block print showing an upright-handled kettle in use in a domestic setting. Taken from exhibition catalogue, *Western Styles in Chinese Block Prints 中国洋风展*. Machida City Museum of Graphic Arts, 1995, p.139.
- Fig. 7 A black pottery teapot with inlaid porcelain, for yak butter tea. Tangdui 汤堆, Yunnan. MW-A04.
- Fig. 8 A large red pottery container for making yak butter. Nayu 那雨村, Tibet. SS-B06.
- Fig. 9 Several clay tiles forming a farm house in relief. Beijing. MW-C10.
- Fig. 10 A pair of roof ridge decorations in the form of mythical animals. Manlang Dai village 慢郎傣族乡, Yunnan. SS-E05.
- Fig. 11 A pottery kettle with a side handle. Pinghe, Fujian. MW-B05.
- Fig. 12 A vendor with a side-handled pot for serving herbal tea. Gaoyao, Guangdong, 1989.
- Fig. 13 A brown glazed jar with a double rim. Jianshui, Yunnan. MW-B11.
- Fig. 14 Two brown glazed jars with a double rim in a kitchenware store. Vancouver, 2013.
- Fig. 15 A glazed rectangular pillow with painted floral design. Yuzhou, Henan. MW-B12.
- Fig. 16 Three porcelain water-droppers in the form of vegetables and fruit. Jingdezhen, Jiangxi. MW-B07, 08, 09.
- Fig. 17 A porcelain water-dropper in the shape of a fish, with underglaze blue-and-white painting. Korea, 19th century. University of Michigan Museum of Art collection & photograph.
- Fig. 18 A porcelain water-dropper in the shape of a peach, with iron brown underglaze painting on white glaze. Korea, 19th century. University of Michigan Museum of Art collection & photograph.



Fig. 28



Fig. 29

Fig. 19 Three porcelain water-droppers in the form of boy riding buffalo, with iron brown on white glaze. China, 14th century. From *The William's Collection of Far Eastern Ceramics* by Kamar Aga-Oglu, 1972.

Fig. 20 Master Potter Jiansheng Li lecturing in front of a large brown glazed jar. Xishuangbanna, Yunnan. MW-D01.

Fig. 21 A large black glazed wine jar. The sign reads, "Jiujiang, Yizhen 九江忆珍." Yizhen is a brewery in Jiujiang, west of Guangzhou city. The jar has been in the Choy family since before 1930, used first for storing soy sauce and now as a vase. Phillip Choy Private Collection, San Francisco.

Fig. 22 A black glazed wine pot. The labels read "mui kwai tonic," a popular strong alcohol with a beautiful name – dew of roses. Quesnel & District Museum and Archives collection, Quesnel, B.C.

Fig. 23 Two red pottery opium pipe bowls. Burnished red clay surface stamped with three signs that read: "Shun Xiang; Pan; Shun Xiang." "Shun Xiang" might be a reference to a quality of opium, its fragrance, or the brand of a bowl. "Pan" is likely to be the name of the potter or a potter's studio. The Chung Collection, University Library Special Collections, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.

Fig. 24 A white lady smoking opium in Chinese style. *Illustrated London News*, March 13, 1909, p.385.

Fig. 25 Close-up view of Figure 2.

Fig. 26 The seal impression reads, "Da Jiang" (大匠, "Chief Craftsman") for an official potter, 3rd Century B.C. Taken from *Qindai taowen* (秦代陶文, Characters on Pottery of the Qin), Xinhua Shudian, Shaanxi, 1987, p.284.

Fig. 27 A gray pottery milk jug for yak butter tea. Tangdui, Yunnan. SS-A01.

Fig. 28 Market in Nayu, Tibet. Photograph by Suzanne Stephenson.

Fig. 29 Restaurant party. Shixing 始兴, Guangdong, 1989.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. HO CHUIMEI was born in Hong Kong. She received her Ph.D. from the University of London in 1984, studying historical ceramics based on her fieldwork in Thailand, Fujian, and Guangdong. She is the founder of the Asian Ceramic Research Organization newsletter (ACRO Update) in Chicago and organizer of several international ceramic conferences. Currently she focuses on the history of Chinese in North America for the Chinese in North America Research Committee, of which she is an editor.



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