

The Monk's Cap Ewer

By Wang Li-Ching

Chinese New Year is so full of movement, sounds, smells and colours! During the bustling festive season red is the most enchanting colour – red lanterns, red couplets, red packets – giving the special occasion a joyful and auspicious spirit.

However, red wasn't always the colour of choice for Chinese New Year. Marco Polo describes a great White Feast at the beginning of the year when the Mongol Emperor Khubilai Khan (founder of the Yuan dynasty, 1271-1368) and his subjects would dress themselves in white robes and exchange white gifts because they believed the colour would bring them good fortune and happiness throughout the year.

With keen admiration for white, it must have been such a great delight for Khubilai Khan to discover the beauty of white ceramics produced in Jingdezhen (Jiangxi Province) to the extent that he established imperial kilns there. This transformed Jingdezhen -- it not only fired refined porcelain for Chinese courts and the elite in the following centuries but also provided millions of pieces of export porcelain (mostly blue and white) which later fuelled the craze for chinoiserie around the world.

To appreciate the exquisiteness of Jingdezhen's early production of white porcelain, we can visit the Ceramics gallery at the Asia Civilisations Museum and view the Monk's Cap Ewer. It has a globular body with a dramatic stepped top. Its name derives from the rim, which resembles a type of headdress worn by Tibetan monks. This unusual shape first appeared in the Yuan dynasty in part because the Mongol court practised a form of Tibetan Buddhism. The shape suggests its religious function: it was used for pouring liquid for cleansing and purification during Buddhist rituals.

The gentle and subdued glassy reflection of the ewer comes from a glaze called *tianbai* (sweet white) because it looks like melted sugar. Under its smooth glaze, the object is decorated with various motifs. When it is brought to light, graceful designs such as lotus scrolls, roundels and *ruyi* (fungus or sceptre, with the auspicious meaning of 'according to your wish') appear. Don't get frustrated if you can't see them because they are meant to be subtle and discreet. This type of decoration is called *anhua* (secret or hidden decorations) by ceramic connoisseurs. Designs are



White porcelain ewer made in Jingdezhen, early 15th century

delicately carved into the surface, then covered with a layer of transparent glaze. Both *tianbai* and *anhua* are thought to have developed during the reign of Emperor Yongle (meaning Perpetual Happiness, r 1403-1424, Ming dynasty).

A devout Buddhist, in 1407 Yongle held a grand 49-day Rite for Universal Salvation in honour of his late parents. For this occasion, he invited Halima, a famous Buddhist priest, from Tibet to officiate the services and commissioned a wide variety of white ceramic vessels such as monk's cap ewers, from Jingdezhen. In China, white is traditionally associated

with mourning and filial piety. This requiem ceremony demonstrated Yongle's filial affection towards his father (the late Emperor Hongwu, founder of the Ming dynasty), his adherence to orthodox Confucian values and his reverence for Tibetan Buddhism. Tibet was an independent and powerful kingdom at that time. A cordial relationship with Tibet was crucial for peace and prosperity for China's southwest borders. The rite was morally and diplomatically as well as religiously appropriate.

Yongle advocated Confucian teachings and practised Daoism and a mix of Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism. He adopted a policy of religious tolerance. In fact, many Muslims such as Admiral Zheng He who first set sail in 1405, played influential roles in Yongle's court. Zheng He's legendary 'treasure fleet' travelled through Southeast Asia, South Asia and reached as far as the east coast of Africa. The voyages marked the era 'when China ruled the seas' and greatly stimulated cultural and commercial exchanges between China and Southeast Asia.

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Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum