

The Westward Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Reconsidering the Appropriative Process

Dr Stacey Pierson
SOAS, University of London, UK

Traditional histories of Chinese ceramics made for export (or exported) usually feature several common assumptions that have come to be accepted as 'facts': firstly, that the appropriation of Chinese ceramics in cultures beyond China was inevitable, once the material of porcelain was encountered; secondly that this would, also inevitably, lead to a taste for Chinese designs (as seen through ceramics); and thirdly that Chinese ceramics actively influence passively recipient foreign consumers. A classic example of this type of history is the somewhat idealized narrative of *Chinoiserie* in Europe.

The satisfyingly linear history of Chinese export ceramics that sees the material move outward from China to locations which appreciated and imitated its material qualities and design (but not necessarily its national origins) also assumes that this process followed a similar pattern in all locations where Chinese ceramics were appropriated. In Europe and the Middle East, for example, we learn first that there was a new taste for white porcelain, then for Chinese-style designs, then a 'decadent' over-popularity of Chinese styles and finally the inevitable abandonment of the category when such styles fell out of favour. While there is some truth to aspects of this history, it is clear that such a history is the result of being derived primarily from the objects – the individual ceramics surviving today - and then being applied to a single, globalised 'foreign' consumer perspective.

However, if this appropriative process were to be reconsidered from a more conceptual and localised perspective, then it would be clear that the history of the appropriation of Chinese ceramics is far from linear and not in any way inevitable. In order to demonstrate the validity of such an approach, this paper will examine the appropriative process in two locations in the 17th century: England and Persia. In each of these locations Chinese ceramics were appropriated and consumed in different ways: sometimes as a material, at other times as a design source and still others as expensive foreign object for display, an important form of appropriation that is often misinterpreted. This paper will illustrate not only different conceptions of Chinese ceramics in the 17th century but also the different forms of reception of Chinese ceramics within foreign cultures, with a view to presenting a history which moves beyond self-limiting, object-based narratives.

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