

HANSPACE

Chinese Ceramics & Porcelain

30 Stories of Clay, Fire and Craft



A HanSpace Digital Collection

Introduction

Across China, clay, mineral, glaze and fire have shaped vessels of daily use, imperial taste and global exchange. This volume presents thirty concise cultural stories about ceramic forms, kiln traditions, materials, craftsmanship and changing aesthetics.

Contents

01	Sky After Rain: The Divine Azure of Ru Ware
02	Glaze of the Silk Road: Tang Dynasty Tri-Color Earthenware
03	Like Polished Jade: Longquan Celadon Tea Aesthetics
04	The Cobalt Craze: Ming Blue & White Export Porcelain
05	Dance of the Clay: The Ancient Art of Throwing on the Wheel
06	Born of Fire: The Magical Transformation of Jun Ware
07	Resilient Beauty: The Philosophy of Kintsugi & Gold Repair
08	Cracks of Elegance: Song Ge Ware Iron & Gold Crackle
09	Painted Elegance: Qing Imperial Famille Rose Porcelain
10	Cosmos in a Tea Bowl: Song Dynasty Jian Ware Tenmoku
11	Harmonious Contenders: Chenghua Doucai Chicken Cups
12	Blanc de Chine: Dehua Ivory White Porcelain
13	Trace of Flame: The Primitive Beauty of Wood Firing
14	Endless Vines: The Philosophy of Lotus Motifs in Ceramics
15	Sacred Crimson: The Legendary Sacrificial Red Glaze
16	Kraak Ware: The Global Journey of Ming Blue and White
17	Longquan Celadon: Jade-like Elegance of Song Dynasty Tea Bowls
18	Underglaze Red: The Fire-Forged Crimson Miracle of the Ming Dynasty
19	Kintsugi and Lacquer Gold Repair: Embracing Imperfection in Chinese Porcelain
20	Wheel Trimming: The Micro-Precision of Chinese Clay Shaping
21	Tang Splashed Ware: The Galaxy-like Black Glaze of Lushan Kiln
22	Imperial Dragon Motifs: The Power and Precision of Qing Blue and White
23	Ge Kiln Crackle Glaze: The Art of Iron Wire and Gold Threads
24	Blanc de Chine: The Ivory Elegance of Ming Dehua White Porcelain
25	Canton Enamel: The Vibrant Fusion of Chinese and European Art
26	Glazing Craft: Dipping and Blow-Glaze Techniques of Jingdezhen
27	Jun Ware Flambé: The Crimson and Purple Sunset Glaze of Song
28	The Lotus Leaf Jar: Natural Harmony in Yuan Celadon
29	Wanli Wucai: The Bold Five-Color Masterpieces of Ming Imperial Kilns
30	Modern Zen Ceramics: The Contemporary Evolution of Ancient Clay

Sky After Rain: The Divine Azure of Ru Ware



Over nine centuries ago, Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty dreamed of the sky right after a gentle rainfall. He ordered master potters to capture that precise moment in porcelain. Thus, Ru ware was born. Renowned for its subtle sky-blue shade and delicate sesame-nail spur marks, Ru porcelain embodies the pinnacle of Song Dynasty minimalism. The glaze contains pulverized agate, creating a soft, jade-like luster with microscopic bubbles that scatter light softly. Fewer than one hundred complete pieces survive today worldwide. Ru ware remains not merely high ceramic craft, but a physical manifestation of Eastern philosophy: finding profound tranquility in pure, unadorned simplicity.

Glaze of the Silk Road: Tang Dynasty Tri-Color Earthenware



In the 8th century, Chang'an was the cosmopolitan center of the world. Here, Tang Sancai, or Tang Tri-Color pottery, captured the extravagant spirit of a golden era. Crafted primarily for elite burials, these earthenware pieces utilized lead glazes tinted with mineral oxides of copper, iron, and cobalt. During high-temperature firing, yellow, green, and white glazes melted and flowed across the clay surfaces, creating unpredictable, fluid patterns. From spirited Sogdian merchants riding camels to elegant court ladies and muscular horses, Tang Sancai served as a vivid visual record of cross-cultural exchange along the Silk Road, celebrating a golden age of cosmopolitan confidence.

Like Polished Jade: Longquan Celadon Tea Aesthetics



In ancient China, jade was revered as the supreme symbol of virtue and purity. Song Dynasty potters at the Longquan kilns achieved what seemed impossible: creating ceramics that rivaled natural jade. Through multiple coats of thick lime-barium glaze and precise reduction firing, Longquan celadon developed its iconic 'plum green' and 'soft green' shades. The glaze is thick yet translucent, tactile and soothing to touch. Song scholars cherished Longquan celadon tea bowls because the cool green glaze magnified the vibrant tone of whisked tea. Longquan celadon remains the world's only ceramic tradition inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The Cobalt Craze: Ming Blue & White Export Porcelain



Long before digital trade networks, Chinese Blue and White porcelain became the world's first truly global luxury item. During the Ming Dynasty, potters in Jingdezhen refined the art of painting with Persian imported cobalt ore under a clear porcelain glaze. When Dutch merchant ships captured a Portuguese galleon named the San Yago in 1602, its cargo of Chinese porcelain—known as Kraak ware—was auctioned off in Amsterdam, captivating European royalty. Kraak porcelain featured paneled borders filled with auspicious Chinese symbols like sunflowers and scrolls. These blue-and-white masterpieces decorated royal palaces, altered global dining customs, and inspired ceramic industries from Delft to Iznik.

Dance of the Clay: The Ancient Art of Throwing on the Wheel



Before glaze meets fire, a vessel's soul is shaped on the wheel. In Jingdezhen, master throwers train for decades to master 'Lapi'—the art of throwing clay. Raw kaolin clay is centered on the fast-spinning pottery wheel, requiring steady muscle memory and delicate pressure. With just water and fingertips, a lump of earth transforms into an elegant vase within seconds. Once dried to a leather-hard state, the vessel undergoes 'Xiupi'—precision trimming with iron blades to achieve uniform wall thickness as thin as a millimeter. This interplay between force and delicacy ensures the vessel survives extreme kiln temperatures without warping, laying the foundation for legendary Chinese porcelain.

Born of Fire: The Magical Transformation of Jun Ware



In Chinese ceramic lore, there is a famous saying: 'Entered the kiln in one single color, emerged in ten thousand hues.' This describes Jun ware, one of the Five Great Kilns of the Song Dynasty. Unlike traditional monochromatic glazes, Jun ware potters introduced small amounts of copper ore into thick iron glazes. Inside the reduction flame above 1200 degrees Celsius, copper and iron ions interact in complex physical phase separations. The result is pure alchemy: splashes of bright rose-purple, crimson, and lavender bloom across a sky-blue base glaze like sunset clouds or cosmic nebulae. Because glaze flow depends on kiln atmosphere and fire, no two Jun ware pieces are ever identical.

Resilient Beauty: The Philosophy of Kintsugi & Gold Repair



When a cherished ceramic vessel breaks, its story does not end; it transforms. Through 'Jin Shan'—the traditional art of repairing ceramics with natural lacquer and powdered gold—imperfection is turned into a highlight. Originating from ancient lacquer restoration techniques, this process uses tree sap lacquer to join shattered pieces back together, followed by meticulous polishing and dusting with 24-karat gold powder. Rather than disguising the fracture, Kintsugi highlights the scars as an integral chapter of the object's history. This reflects profound Eastern philosophy: true resilience lies in accepting impermanence, honoring history, and finding radiant beauty in life's broken places.

Cracks of Elegance: Song Ge Ware Iron & Gold Crackle



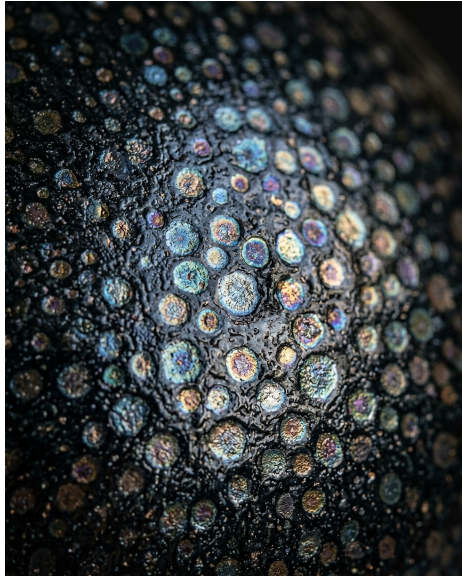
In standard ceramic manufacturing, glaze cracking is considered a flaw. However, potters at the Song Dynasty Ge kiln turned glaze fracturing into an acclaimed art form. Known for 'Jin Si Tie Xian' or 'Golden Threads and Iron Wires,' Ge ware features a distinct dual-layer crackle pattern across its ash-grey glaze. As the vessel cools upon exiting the kiln, differences in thermal expansion between the clay body and the glaze cause the glaze to crack naturally. Potters then rub dark carbon pigment into the larger primary cracks, forming 'iron wires,' and tea stains into smaller secondary cracks, creating 'golden threads.' This accidental tension creates a timeless, spiderweb-like aesthetic.

Painted Elegance: Qing Imperial Famille Rose Porcelain



During the Kangxi and Yongzheng reign of the Qing Dynasty, Chinese porcelain art reached unprecedented technical precision with the invention of 'Fencai,' or Famille Rose enamel. By incorporating arsenic-bearing white powder pigment into glazes, artisans created an opaque foundation that allowed colors to be blended into soft pastel gradients for the first time. Inspired by Gongbi court painting traditions, court artists painted lifelike butterflies, blooming peonies, and auspicious peaches on porcelain as if painting on fine silk. Fired at lower enamel temperatures, Famille Rose achieved subtle shadows and realistic dimensional depth, representing the grand peak of Qing Dynasty imperial ceramic craftsmanship.

Cosmos in a Tea Bowl: Song Dynasty Jian Ware Tenmoku



During the Song Dynasty, the ritual of 'Dian Cha'—whisking powdered tea into white froth—reached its zenith. To contrast with bright white tea foam, Song tea masters favored dark Jian ware tea bowls crafted in Fujian. Made from heavy, iron-rich local clay, Jian bowls feature thick black glazes that retain heat exceptionally well. Inside extreme 1300-degree kilns, iron oxides precipitate out of liquid glazes to form mesmerizing patterns: silvery 'hare's fur' streaks, oil spots, or rare shimmering iridescence known as Tenmoku. Looking down into a Jian bowl filled with tea foam feels like gazing into a starry cosmos—a physical embodiment of Zen meditation and natural harmony.

Harmonious Contenders: Chenghua Doucai Chicken Cups



In the world of ceramic collecting, few objects hold as legendary a status as the Chenghua Doucai 'Chicken Cup.' Created during the Ming Dynasty for Emperor Chenghua, 'Doucai' literally translates to 'contending colors.' The technique uniquely combines underglaze blue outlines with vibrant overglaze enamel colors. Artisans first painted cobalt outlines onto raw clay, applied clear glaze, and fired the piece at high temperatures. Next, red, yellow, and green enamels were filled inside the blue outlines before a second low-temperature firing. Tiny, delicate, and immensely rare, these palm-sized cups depict roosters, hens, and chicks in a garden, capturing imperial intimacy and supreme craftsmanship.

Blanc de Chine: Dehua Ivory White Porcelain



When 17th-century French traders first encountered white porcelain figures from Dehua in Fujian Province, they coined a special term: 'Blanc de Chine'—the White of China. Unlike porcelain from Jingdezhen, Dehua white clay contains low iron oxide and high potassium oxide, giving it a warm, ivory-like tone with a translucent, lard-like luster when fired. Master sculptors like He Chaozong created iconic figure sculptures of Guanyin and Bodhidharma, carving clay drapery so fluid it appeared to float like silk in the wind. Dehua white porcelain transcends ceramic functionality, elevating monochrome simplicity into a sublime expression of spiritual serenity.

Trace of Flame: The Primitive Beauty of Wood Firing



Before modern electric and gas kilns existed, all ancient Chinese ceramics were fired with wood fuel. Traditional 'Chai Shao,' or wood firing, is an unpredictable battle between earth, wind, and fire lasting several days and nights. As pine wood burns at temperatures exceeding 1200 degrees, flying wood ash drifts through the kiln chamber and settles onto raw clay vessels. High heat melts wood ash minerals—silica, calcium, and potassium—into a spontaneous glaze called 'natural fly-ash glaze.' Fire licks leave unique flame markings across stoneware bodies. Wood firing embraces unpredictability, where elemental wildness creates unrepeatable, tactile beauty.

Endless Vines: The Philosophy of Lotus Motifs in Ceramics



Look closely at Chinese porcelain across centuries, and you will encounter an endlessly looping floral motif: 'Chan Zhi Lian,' or interlinked lotus scrolls. In Eastern symbolism, the lotus grows out of muddy waters to bloom in pristine purity, representing spiritual awakening and incorruptible virtue. When painted as continuous, interweaving vines without beginning or end, the pattern carries a deeper philosophy: 'Sheng Sheng Bu Xi'—the concept of endless regeneration, eternal life, and uninterrupted harmony. From Song dynasty carvings to Ming blue and white masterpieces, interlinked lotus patterns transformed ceramic surfaces into quiet visual meditations on the cyclic nature of time.

Sacred Crimson: The Legendary Sacrificial Red Glaze



Of all monochrome ceramic glazes, copper red is notoriously the most difficult to master. During the Ming Dynasty under Emperor Yongle and Xuande, imperial potters developed 'Ji Hong'—Sacrificial Red glaze—used exclusively for ritual altars. Copper oxide is volatile; if kiln temperatures deviate by even a few degrees or kiln atmosphere shifts, the glaze turns muddy grey or clear. When successfully fired at 1300 degrees, Ji Hong achieves a deep, solemn ruby-red hue likened to fresh blood, complemented by a signature white border at the rim known as '灯口' (lamp-wick mouth). Highly prized and extraordinarily rare, Sacrificial Red stands as a monument to Ming ceramic engineering.

Kraak Ware: The Global Journey of Ming Blue and White



For centuries, Chinese porcelain sailed across vast oceans, transforming global trade and artistic taste. Known in Europe as Kraak porcelain, these Ming Dynasty blue-and-white dishes featured distinctive paneled borders filled with auspicious oriental symbols. Crafted in Jingdezhen specifically for international merchants navigating the Maritime Silk Road, they captivated European nobility. The vibrant cobalt blue, imported from Persia and refined by Chinese artisans, painted vivid stories of nature onto smooth white clay. These treasured vessels were displayed in royal cabinets across Europe as symbols of supreme wealth and culture. Kraak ware stands as a magnificent testament to ancient China's global artistic influence.

Longquan Celadon: Jade-like Elegance of Song Dynasty Tea Bowls



In Song Dynasty China, tea culture reached its highest artistic peak, and no vessel embodied this refinement better than Longquan celadon. Fired in Southern China, Longquan ceramics achieved a thick, luscious glaze reminiscent of polished jade. Artisans carefully controlled kiln atmospheres to produce iconic shades like plum green and soft lime green. The unpretentious design allowed tea drinkers to appreciate the natural color of whisked green tea against the tranquil green surface. Beyond mere utility, these bowls reflected the Zen philosophy of harmony with nature. Holding a Longquan celadon bowl offered a tactile connection to the quiet beauty of ancient scholar lifestyle.

Underglaze Red: The Fire-Forged Crimson Miracle of the Ming Dynasty



Achieving vibrant crimson on porcelain before the 14th century was considered nearly impossible. Underglaze red, perfected during the early Ming Dynasty, relied on delicate copper oxide painted directly onto raw clay before firing at over thirteen hundred degrees Celsius. Copper is extremely volatile inside the kiln—a tiny shift in temperature or reduction atmosphere could turn the brilliant red into dull gray or transparent clear. Because of this extreme difficulty, pristine early Ming underglaze red pieces were incredibly rare and reserved exclusively for the royal court. These fire-forged masterworks represent the pinnacle of ancient Chinese chemical and ceramic mastery.

Kintsugi and Lacquer Gold Repair: Embracing Imperfection in Chinese Porcelain



When a precious ceramic vessel breaks, East Asian philosophy does not see its life as ended, but transformed. Through the ancient art of gold repair using natural tree lacquer and pure gold powder, shattered porcelain is given new life. Rather than disguising fracture lines, this restoration technique highlights them with luminous gold. Rooted in Taoist and Zen philosophies, it teaches us to honor the history and imperfections of an object. The golden seams transform scars into features of unique beauty. A repaired vessel becomes even more valuable than before, reminding us that resilience and history create true elegance.

Wheel Trimming: The Micro-Precision of Chinese Clay Shaping



Before glaze and fire give porcelain its brilliant surface, master artisans must perfect its form through wheel trimming. After raw clay is thrown on the potter's wheel, it dries to a leather-hard state. The craftsman then mounts the vessel upside down on the wheel, using razor-sharp bamboo or iron knives to shave away excess weight. This delicate operation requires years of muscle memory; carved too thin, the pot collapses in the kiln, carved too thick, it loses grace. In Jingdezhen, master trimmers can shave walls down to paper-thin translucency. Trimming is where raw clay truly achieves its refined architectural soul.

Tang Splashed Ware: The Galaxy-like Black Glaze of Lushan Kiln



Long before modern abstract expressionism emerged, Tang Dynasty artisans in Henan were creating expressive ceramic art with splashed glazes. Known as Lushan Splashed Ware, craftsmen applied a jet-black or dark brown base glaze, then spontaneously splashed liquid light-blue or phosphatic white glazes over the unfired surface. Inside the high-temperature kiln, the liquid glazes melted and flowed naturally, creating clouds, milky ways, and cosmic patterns across the dark dark body. No two pieces were ever identical. Loved by Tang nobility and poets alike, these dramatic splashed vessels bridged ceramic technique with the free-spirited energy of Chinese ink painting.

Imperial Dragon Motifs: The Power and Precision of Qing Blue and White



During the Qianlong reign of the Qing Dynasty, Chinese imperial blue-and-white porcelain reached unparalleled structural precision. The five-clawed dragon, soaring through swirling cobalt clouds above crashing waves, was a supreme symbol reserved strictly for the Emperor. Painters in the imperial kilns of Jingdezhen used varied densities of cobalt oxide to create up to five distinct shade gradations in a single brushstroke. The dragon's fierce expression, sharp claws, and dynamic motion reflected imperial authority and cosmic harmony. Every line was executed under meticulous royal oversight, creating a perfect balance between technical perfection and majestic symbolism.

Ge Kiln Crackle Glaze: The Art of Iron Wire and Gold Threads



What began as a glaze defect became one of the most celebrated aesthetics in Chinese ceramic history. Ge Ware, one of the famous Five Great Kilns of the Song Dynasty, is legendary for its intentional crackle pattern known as Gold Threads and Iron Wire. As the vessel cools upon exiting the kiln, differences in contraction between clay and glaze cause the glaze to crack with delicate chiming sounds. Artisans then rubbed black ink into the major cracks and tea stain or botanical dye into the smaller secondary cracks. This created a dual-colored network of lines that turned accidental cracks into deliberate poetry.

Blanc de Chine: The Ivory Elegance of Ming Dehua White Porcelain



In Fujian province during the Ming Dynasty, potters at Dehua kilns created white porcelain so pure and lustrous that French collectors termed it Blanc de Chine. Unlike Northern white ceramics, Dehua porcelain was made from local clay rich in silica and low in iron. When fired, the glaze merged completely with the ceramic body, producing a warm ivory tone with a glassy, lard-like translucency. Master sculptors like He Chaozong used this material to create iconic Buddhist statues. The flowing robes and serene expressions carved from pure white clay gave these figures a transcendent spiritual beauty that captured hearts worldwide.

Canton Enamel: The Vibrant Fusion of Chinese and European Art



In 18th century Guangzhou, a distinct ceramic style emerged to meet explosive demand from European markets: Canton Enamel, or Guangcai. White porcelain blanks from Jingdezhen were transported down south to Guangzhou, where local master enamellers decorated them with rich gold scrollwork, vibrant flora, and narrative scenes. Blending Chinese gongbi brushwork with European Rococo aesthetics and perspective techniques, Guangcai pieces were often custom-ordered by Western nobility featuring family crests and mythological motifs. Known as 'woven gold and painted jade', Canton porcelain represented one of the most successful cultural and artistic encounters between East and West in global history.

Glazing Craft: Dipping and Blow-Glaze Techniques of Jingdezhen



The magical transformation of porcelain in the kiln relies heavily on the precise application of glaze. Chinese potters developed sophisticated techniques like glaze dipping and blow-glaze application. Dipping requires swift, fluid movements to submerge the vessel into liquid glaze for mere seconds, creating an even coat. For delicate shapes or gradient effects, artisans invented the blow-glaze method: blowing liquid glaze through a hollow bamboo tube covered with fine gauze. By varying breath pressure and distance, potters could deposit microscopic mists of glaze, creating subtle color transitions like robin's egg glaze. This mastery of glaze thickness determined whether fire would yield glass-like perfection or catastrophic flaws.

Jun Ware Flambé: The Crimson and Purple Sunset Glaze of Song



Among China's famous Song Dynasty ceramics, Jun ware is celebrated for an famous saying: 'Entered the kiln in one single color, emerged with ten thousand colors.' Originating in Yuzhou, Henan, Jun potters mastered copper oxide reduction firing to break away from traditional single-color glazes. Through a phenomenon known as liquid-liquid phase separation, microscopic glass droplets inside the thick glaze split light, creating an opalescent sky-blue background. When copper was added, brilliant splashes of rose purple, crimson, and magenta bloomed across the vessel like evening clouds or cosmic nebulae. Because kiln flames reacted unpredictably, every Jun ware masterpiece was a unique, unrepeatable gift of fire.

The Lotus Leaf Jar: Natural Harmony in Yuan Celadon



In Chinese ceramic tradition, nature is not merely painted onto porcelain—it actively shapes the vessel's form. The iconic lotus-leaf shaped jar, created in Yuan Dynasty Longquan kilns, is a sublime example of organic design. Potters sculpted the vessel lid into an undulating lotus leaf with delicate rib veins carved into the clay, allowing the rich olive-green celadon glaze to flow like water over leaves. Used primarily to store fine wine or tea leaves, this vessel captured the serenity of a summer lotus pond. The seamless synthesis of utility and natural poetic form reflected the Daoist philosophy of living in effortless harmony with nature.

Wanli Wucai: The Bold Five-Color Masterpieces of Ming Imperial Kilns



During the Wanli reign of the late Ming Dynasty, imperial ceramic art embraced bold color and energetic design through Wucai, or Five-Color porcelain. Creating Wucai required a double-firing process. Artisans first painted cobalt blue motifs onto raw clay and fired it at high temperatures. Next, overglaze enamels—including vibrant iron red, leaf green, warm yellow, and aubergine—were painted over the white glaze before a second, lower-temperature firing. The vivid contrast between deep underglaze blue and brilliant overglaze enamels created extraordinary visual energy. Wanli Wucai pieces depicted lively dragons, flowers, and waterfowl, capturing the opulent spirit of late Ming imperial courts.

Modern Zen Ceramics: The Contemporary Evolution of Ancient Clay



China's ceramic narrative did not end with the imperial dynasties—it continues to evolve in the hands of contemporary masters. Today's ceramic artists draw deep inspiration from Song Dynasty minimalism and ancient Taoist philosophies of simplicity, while exploring bold modern sculptural forms. By stripping away elaborate ornamentation, artists focus on raw tactile textures, natural clay tones, and unglazed surfaces that celebrate elemental mud and fire. These modern Zen ceramics bridge thousands of years of heritage with global contemporary aesthetics. They prove that the dialogue between human hands, natural earth, and fiery kilns remains a timeless medium for spiritual expression.

Glossary

Celadon - high-fired ware known for translucent green glazes.

Kaolin - a pale clay central to many porcelain bodies.

Underglaze - decoration applied before the final transparent glaze firing.

Overglaze enamel - colored decoration fired onto an already glazed surface.

Reduction firing - kiln firing with limited oxygen, influencing glaze color and chemistry.

Kiln - a high-temperature furnace used to fire ceramics.

About HanSpace

HanSpace is a digital publishing platform for discovering Chinese culture through stories, film, sound, art and thoughtfully curated collections.

Personal Use Notice

This publication is licensed for personal use only. Copyright is not transferred. Redistribution, resale, public upload and commercial reuse are not permitted.

Publication Information

Published by HanSpace | Version 1.0.0 | myhanspace.com