

# What was the Status of Chinese Porcelain in Japan in the Momoyama and Edo Periods?

Hao Cao

Hubei Fine Arts Publishing House, Hubei, China

## Abstract

The essay discusses the importation and states of Chinese ceramics in Japan from the Momoyama period to the Edo period (from 1585 to 1868), considering diverse consumers and contextualising relevant objects. It should be mentioned that the states of Chinese ceramics are divided into two phases in this essay. (1) 1585-1640, referring to the Momoyama period and the beginning of the Edo period. (2) 1640-1868, from the start of the Tokugawa system or the end of Ming dynasty to the end of Edo period.

## Keywords

Japan; Chinese Porcelain; Ceramic; Momoyama; Edo.

## 1. Introduction

The consumption of imported Chinese ceramics in Japan from early times to the Edo period fluctuated according to certain historic events, thus its status responded in kind. In the Kamakura and Muromachi periods (1185-1568), as the Tea Ceremony rose in popularity and prosperity, Chinese ceramics such as *tenmoku* or *guan* ware were gradually appreciated by Japanese gentry, and also were regarded as a way to distinguish high ranking people from common people. [1] Since Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) terminated the Warring States period in 1585, an unparalleled amount of Chinese wares were constantly imported into many metropolitan towns and commercial cities in Japan. [2] However, this situation changed with the complete collapse of the Ming dynasty in the year 1644. In this essay, I will discuss the importation and states of Chinese ceramics in Japan from the Momoyama period to the Edo period (from 1585 to 1868), considering diverse consumers and contextualising relevant objects. It should be mentioned that the states of Chinese ceramics are divided into two phases in this essay. (1) 1585-1640, referring to the Momoyama period and the beginning of the Edo period. I will discuss four different types of Chinese export ceramics, including the characteristics, functions, consumers and influences of them. (2) 1640-1868, from the start of the Tokugawa system or the end of Ming dynasty to the end of Edo period. [3] I will analyse the different situations of Chinese porcelain in the Japanese market into three chronological phases.

## 2. Chinese Ceramics in the Momoyama and the Early Edo Period (1585-1640)

Certainly, Chinese porcelain was enormously popular and played a decisive role in Japan from the year 1585 to 1640. There are abundant records and pieces of excavated Chinese porcelain from Nagoya Castle to Hirado Island, and from Kagoshima to Edo, which were found in three types of sites: houses of townspeople, samurais' households and temple places. [4] These were diverse types of objects such as Kraak (*fuyo*) style, Zhangzhou (Swatow) style, *Kosometsuke* (Tianqi) ware and Shonzui-style ware, which are discussed below.[5]

## 2.1. Kraak Ware

Kraak-style porcelains (*fuyode* in Japanese) from the Jingdezhen in Wanli reign (1573-1620) were usually considered as Chinese export products primarily for European and Middle Eastern markets. In fact, much evidence suggested Kraak porcelains were highly admired in Japan in the seventeenth century as well. [6] For example, in the death inventory of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616), Kraak-style porcelains were noticeable on many listings. [7] In the Osaka Castle, a set of five underglaze cobalt-blue Kraak dishes were excavated that could be dated from the 1600s to 1630s. According to these discoveries, it could be said that Kraak ware was popular among Japanese governing elites. However, certain excavated pieces from the Hakata merchant sites also showed that the consumption of Chinese Kraak-style porcelain was present in *machiya* or wealthy townspeople's lives. [6] For the production of Japanese porcelain, the importance of Chinese Kraak-style porcelain was revealed, as the Dutch merchants turned to imitation Kraak ware from Arita Kilns in the 1640s. Some Hizen porcelain applied the designs and techniques of Chinese Kraak porcelain, combining underglaze cobalt-blue and overvalue polychrome enamels to develop the original Chinese style. The decorations of landscape and Taoist motifs could be noted on a respectable number of objects (Fig.1). [8] This meant the aesthetic of Chinese Kraak-style ware likely appealed to Japanese consumers even though it was unavailable in China since the fall of the Ming dynasty.

## 2.2. Zhangzhou Ware

Dishes representing "Split Pagoda" overglaze enamels on the centre part with abstract-style natures, enclosing several red seal scripts and sketched landscape roundels were well-known in Japan (Fig.2 and Fig.3). [9] Great quantities of archeological pieces found in this style, called Zhangzhou or Swatow ware, were concentrated in Edo, Kyoto and Osaka, as well as in commercial areas such as Nagasaki, Hirado and Sakai. [10] This was confirmation that these large porcelain dishes from kilns in Fujian and Guangdong in China were widely appreciated in Japan during the Momoyama and early Edo periods, even though there is a perceptible difference, both in aesthetics and in materials, from the ceramics made in Jingdezhen. [11] Another confirmation was that almost all terminologies related to the aesthetics of Swatow ware were created in Japan rather than in China, such as *ko-aka-e*, which means "old red decorated ware", a term used by Japanese tea masters. [12] Interestingly, the dietary habit in Japan during this period was similar to that of China: eating rice with individual small bowls. It seemed unnecessary to use such large-style tableware for traditional Japanese mealtimes. However, Zhangzhou porcelains were widely used in the tea ceremony or *chanoyu*, especially in Sakai. The tea masters were regarded as a great authority of fashion in early modern Japan, and one representative figure is Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591), who used to be a merchant in Sakai and was engaged by the extravagant and "coarse" appeal of Swatow ware. [13] Therefore it can be concluded that a number of these Chinese ceramics participated in authentic Japanese events in this phase.

## 2.3. Tianqi Ware

Tianqi porcelain or *Kosometsuke* in Japanese made in Jingdezhen during the Tianqi era (1621-1627) could be regarded as a typical example of Chinese ceramics produced specifically to Japanese tastes. The characteristics of Tianqi ware in Japanese market was different from its equivalent in the Chinese domestic market. [14] The human figure shaped Tianqi porcelain with underglaze cobalt blue oxide in Fig.4 demonstrates that the tailored Chinese ware had become available for wealthy townspeople and merchants since the disappearance of imperial kilns at Jingdezhen in 1620s. Another example is an object in the collection of the Victoria and Albert museum in Fig.5, with an immortal named Cao guojiu of the Eight Taoist Immortals. The Chinese characters read 'Guest from the Immortals' Garden in the Three Penglai Islands' for Japanese clients to get a deep insight into the meaning, even though they would have been

familiar with Taoist conceptions. [15] In addition, many specially ordered examples have been excavated from merchant households in Nagasaki and Edo, as well as evidence of passed down heirlooms, which is further confirmation of the wide range of consumers and functions of Tianqi porcelain. The function of certain objects, for example a set of small cups used in the Tea Ceremony, would have been formal entertaining or religious purposes in temples (Fig.6), while bowls and dishes were likely to have decorated the inside of houses (Fig.7).

## 2.4. Shonzui Ware

Shonzui ware, like Tianqi ware, was another typical Chinese export porcelain designed to meet the needs of Japanese sensibilities in the 1630s to the 1640s. This distinguishing type of porcelain was so popular that it became the prototype of a common style in Japanese porcelain until the end of period, although the production of it came to an end in 1640s. Certain examples have been found in Japan both as archaeological excavations and family heirlooms. Also, small numbers of pieces have been excavated in Ningbo where was a main trade port in China. [16] The unique visual features of Shonzui ware are an amalgamation of some of the features other popular porcelains previously discussed. For example, the *mizusashi* (water jar) with lid in Fig.8 is a delicate underglaze cobalt-blue decorated Shonzui porcelain, the roundel patterns on interior of the lid were obviously designed from Zhangzhou ware (Fig.9); the landscape scenery decorations were probably based on the elements of Kraak style porcelains. Another visual example is a dish made for Japanese tea masters covered with Kraak-style floral patterns (Fig.10). These classic objects represent the very epitome of the history of tailored Chinese porcelain appreciated by Japanese consumers in early seventeenth century. Furthermore, the admiration of Shonzui-style designs has influenced other Japanese craft media, such as Mino and Oribe ceramics. [16]

Admittedly, the status of Chinese porcelain in Japan from 1584 to 1640 was significant, as evidenced by (1) the considerable amount of its consumption; (2) its wide range of consumers regardless their social stations, from low-ranking samurai to daimyo, as well as from merchant to Japanese tea masters; (3) its various functions: home decoration, utensils for daily life and religious articles; and (4) its diverse influences: for Japanese domestic ceramics, Chinese ceramics provided a pre-production prototype that enriched their techniques, designs and motifs. In terms of Japanese culture, Chinese porcelains produced potential effects on their regular habits and aesthetic values. However, a matter that challenges attention, the status of Chinese porcelain in the Momoyama and the early Edo period was largely determined by Japan itself rather than China. Namely, the prosperity of the consumption of Chinese ceramics was a result of the rapid development in Japanese urbanity, the expanse of merchant networks, and the rise of new social customs.[17] Initially, the luxury porcelains had become the necessary articles between the Japanese gentry, therefore the growing number of merchant and samurai classes meant more Chinese ceramics were required. Besides, the market mechanisms were in place to ensure these Chinese goods entered into everyday Japanese life even though the inflexible trade policy was created with Chinese traders. [18] Furthermore, the Japanese consumer was a decisive factor of the evolution of these porcelains' styles and not inferior to the Chinese producer. [19]

## 3. Chinese Ceramics in the Edo Period (1640-1868)

Generally, the consumption of Chinese ceramics in Japan from the year 1640 to 1868 showed a significant decrease compared with its consumption from 1585 to 1640. According to the sources from ōhashi Kōji, the importation of Chinese ceramics in the Japanese market during this period could be divided into three phases. In the first phase (1640-1680), the fall of the Ming dynasty spelled doom for most of Chinese pottery in 1644, thus there was a considerable reduction in the number of imported Chinese ceramics and the Japanese domestic porcelains

gradually superseded them. During the second phase (1680-1780s), the Chinese ceramics probably returned to the Japanese market, evidenced by some archeological finds, but they displayed inferior qualities in most cases; the styles as well as designs were a notably distinct between Chinese ceramics exported to Japan and those exported to Europe at the same time. An appreciable quantity of comparatively modest-level Chinese porcelains have been recovered from Kyūshū sites from the third phase (1780s-1850). The vast majority of them are small, low quality porcelain bowls; otherwise, fragments of good-quality overglaze shards have been excavated, but they were not common enough to really garner a mention. [20] Overall, the status of Chinese porcelains during this period suffered a serious disturbance. Meanwhile the Japanese domestic porcelains achieved a great status, but nevertheless, the appeal of Chinese ceramics still existed in many examples made in Japan, and its clear that Chinese merchants brought over the techniques that were then used in Japanese kilns. [21] This means China's influence on Japanese ceramics continued in the Edo period.



**Fig 1.** Porcelain dish with underglaze cobalt-blue and overglaze polychrome enamels (Picture from [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=775340&partId=1&searchText=Franks.+1092&museumno=Franks.1092&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=775340&partId=1&searchText=Franks.+1092&museumno=Franks.1092&page=1))

Arita Ware, Edo Period, 1640s-1650s

Diameter: 20.2 cm

British Museum: Franks. 1092



**Fig 2.** Porcelain dish painted in overglaze enamels (Picture from <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O115549/dish-unknown/>)

Zhangzhou ware, Ming Dynasty, late 16<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> century

Diameter: 38.3cm

V&A: C.14-1958



**Fig 3.** Porcelain dish painted in overglaze enamels (Picture from [https:// www. princessehof. nl /img/uploads/Zhangzhou\\_Research\\_0.pdf](https://www.princessehof.nl/img/uploads/Zhangzhou_Research_0.pdf))  
Zhangzhou ware, Ming Dynasty, late 16<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> century  
Diameter: 40cm  
Princessehof Museum collection



**Fig 4.** Porcelain dish with underglaze blue (Picture from [http://www. britishmuseum. org/ research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=3488565&partId=1&searchText=Tianqi+japan&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3488565&partId=1&searchText=Tianqi+japan&page=1))  
Tianqi ware, Ming Dynasty, 1621-1627  
Diameter: 18.1cm  
British Museum: 2012,3071.1





**Fig 5.** Porcelain dish painted in underglaze blue and overglaze enamels (Picture from Rose Kerr and Luisa E. Mengoni, *Chinese Export Ceramics*, p.104)

Tianqi ware, Ming Dynasty, 1621-1627

Diameter: 16.3cm

V&A: C.179-1926



**Fig 6.** Set of five porcelain cups with underglaze cobalt-blue characters (Picture from [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=3180183&partId=1&searchText=Tianqi+japan&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3180183&partId=1&searchText=Tianqi+japan&page=1))

Tianqi ware, Ming Dynasty, 1621-1627

Diameter: 59mm

British Museum: PDF.630



**Fig 7.** Porcelain dish with underglaze blue decoration (Picture from [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=264097&partId=1&searchText=Tianqi+japan&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=264097&partId=1&searchText=Tianqi+japan&page=1))

Tianqi ware, Ming Dynasty, 1621-1628

Diameter: 28.5cm

British Museum: Franks.280. +



**Fig 8.** Porcelain water Jar and lid with underglaze cobalt-blue (Picture from [http:// www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=774256&partId=1&searchText=mizusashi&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=774256&partId=1&searchText=mizusashi&page=1))  
Shonzui ware, Ming Dynasty, 1630s-1640s  
Height: 25.1cm  
Diameter: 34.4cm  
British Museum: Franks.1382. +



**Fig 9.** Porcelain water Jar and lid with underglaze cobalt-blue (Picture from [http:// www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=774256&partId=1&searchText=mizusashi&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=774256&partId=1&searchText=mizusashi&page=1))  
Shonzui ware, Ming Dynasty, 1630s-1640s  
Height: 25.1cm  
Diameter: 34.4cm  
British Museum: Franks.1382. +



**Fig 10.** Porcelain dish with underglaze blue (Picture from <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O34033/dish-unknown/>)  
Shonzui ware, Ming Dynasty, 1620-1640  
Diameter: 22.5cm  
V&A: 323-1877

#### 4. Conclusion

It is somewhat complicated to define the status of Chinese ceramics in Japan from the Momoyama to Edo periods, given the intricate history of its consumption and development, regarding the end of Ming dynasty as a divide. The situation presented a dual character. On the one hand, Chinese ceramics definitely dominated the Japanese market between from 1585 to the 1640s, henceforth these porcelains have blent into aspects of Japanese life, and also contributed to the development of Japanese domestic ceramics until the end of Edo period. On the other hand, the arbiter of the position of Chinese porcelains were various Japanese consumers; they in turn affected these porcelains in terms of production, consumption and evolution. More importantly, when Japanese potteries started to imitate Chinese ceramics in order to gain their own market position, they appeared to transform Chinese ceramics selectively instead of copying them roughly. Consequently the spirit and motif were distinguished in the Japanese domestic ceramics in these periods. Ultimately, both China and Japan brought Chinese ceramics an important status and exchanged their unique cultures through this special consumption during the Momoyama and Edo periods.

#### References

- [1] Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere, *Vessels of Influence: Chinese Ceramics Imported into Japan and the formation of the Porcelain Industry*, Ann Arbor, 1998, p.26 and p.100.
- [2] Rousmaniere 1998, abstract.
- [3] Rousmaniere 1998, p.56.
- [4] Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere, *Vessels of Influence: China and the Birth of Porcelain in Medieval and Early Modern Japan*, London, 2012, p96.
- [5] Rousmaniere 1998, p.19-20.
- [6] Rousmaniere 1998, p.59.



- [7] Stacey Pierson, *From the Object to Conception: Global Consumption and the Transformation of Ming Porcelain*, Hong Kong, 2013, p.34.
- [8] Rousmaniere 1998, p60.
- [9] Rose Kerr and Luisa E. Mengoni, *Chinese Export Ceramics*, London, 2011, p.125 and Eva Strober, *The collection of Zhangzhou Ware at the Princessehof Museum*, Leeuwarden, Netherlands, pp.30-32.
- [10] Eva Strober, p.48.
- [11] Pierson 2013, p.35.
- [12] Eva Strober, p.50.
- [13] Eva Strober, pp.51-52.
- [14] Rousmaniere 1998, pp.60-61.
- [15] Rose Kerr and Luisa E. Mengoni 2011, p.105.
- [16] Rousmaniere 1998, pp.62-63.
- [17] Pierson 2013, p.34.
- [18] Details of these policies see Rousmaniere 1998, pp.54-56.
- [19] Rousmanier 1998, pp.57.
- [20] Rousmaniere 1998, pp.19-21 and Rousmaniere 2012, pp.98-100.
- [21] Rousmaniere 1998, pp.81-82.
- [22] Rousmaniere 1998, p.76.
- [23] Rose Kerr, ed., *Ceramic Technology*, Vol. 5, part 12, of *Science and Civilisation in China*, Cambridge, 2004, p.723.
- [24] Eva Strober, *The collection of Zhangzhou Ware at the Princessehof Museum*, Leeuwarden, Netherlands. Available at: [https://www.princessehof.nl/img/uploads/Zhangzhou\\_Research\\_0.pdf](https://www.princessehof.nl/img/uploads/Zhangzhou_Research_0.pdf) (Accessed: 23 March, 2018).