

1 | The Shard Market of Jingdezhen

Most Monday mornings, an antiques market takes place in the southern Chinese city of Jingdezhen. There are antiques of all kinds for sale here, but pieces of ceramics are in the vast majority. Hundreds of sellers in this shard market display their goods on cloths and bags on the ground, and buyers lower themselves on their haunches to handle the pieces and negotiate a good price. On this seller's cloth (Figure 1.1), let's call him Mr Jia, one finds a green-glazed ceramic box decorated with a scaly dragon, a stack of blue and white tea bowls, small vases, stem cups, necklaces of glazed ceramic beads, snuff bottles, unglazed statuettes, and so on.

A first impression might suggest Mr Jia's goods are not particularly valuable: many of them are roughly made, dirty or damaged. Little effort has been made to display the objects individually, although similar items are broadly grouped together, such as the upside-down blue and white stem cups in the top right corner of the picture, and the small ornamental objects in the top left corner. If the goods offered for sale by Mr Jia and his colleagues in this antiques market do not immediately look appealing or valuable, why do visitors to the market get up at the crack of dawn to buy such items in this local market? The answer has to do with the price of Chinese ceramics in the global art market and with the pressures of time and money that obstruct extensive archaeological excavation, so that antiquities of mixed provenance can be sold off without any perceptible local or central governmental interference. This book examines the emergence of Jingdezhen as the early modern world's pre-eminent site of ceramics production, to connect the contemporary shard market to the past, the local to the global, and to show how this city of blue and white played a part in the mobility of things, people and ideas in the early modern world.

For many centuries, the ceramics produced in the Chinese empire were considered highly desirable, both within the empire's boundaries and far beyond. As early as the ninth century, Arab traders sailed through the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, past the Bay of Bengal and through the Strait of Malacca, and into the South China Sea, to fill their dhows with goods from China: gold and silver wares, bronze mirrors, silver ingots, textiles, but above all ceramics. The shipwreck of an Arab dhow, discovered



Figure 1.1 Objects for sale at the shard market. Jingdezhen, May 2013. Photograph by the author.

in 1998 by fishermen at Belitung, between what are now the islands of Sumatra and Borneo, had 70,000 pieces of ceramics on board.¹ That ninth-century shipwreck not only testifies specifically to the vibrant trade between Bagdad in the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258) and Tang-dynasty China (618–907), but also more generally to the enormous desire for ceramics made in China from consumers many thousands of miles away. Amongst those 70,000 pieces on the Belitung shipwreck were only a handful of white plates with blue designs.² It would take another 500 years or so before white vessels with blue designs were made in vast quantities in China, but from the early fourteenth century, demand for Chinese blue and white ceramics came from almost every corner of the earth, thereby significantly shaping the ceramics production in China until well into the nineteenth century. The pieces on Mr Jia's cloth, then, could easily have been intended for consumers in places well beyond the reach of this market.

Their manufacture, however, was probably local. Although we cannot be sure of the provenance of every object on Mr Jia's cloth, it is likely that

many of these objects were made in Jingdezhen, the town known historically as the porcelain capital of China, and the place where this weekly shard market is held.

Located in the northeast of Jiangxi, a land-locked province in the southeast of China, the town is situated along the riverbed of the Chang (Map 1.1). To the north, east and south, mountains surround Jingdezhen; to the west are the marshy floodplains of Lake Poyang. The Chang provides important connections in all directions: upriver towards the mountains that in the past yielded clay, firewood and ferns for making glazes. In the same direction, across the provincial boundary, the Chang leads to the wealthy towns of the area known in the past as Huizhou now in Anhui province. Downstream, the Chang flows into Lake Poyang, connecting Jingdezhen to several small market towns situated on the banks of the lake, including Wuchengzhen. To the north, Lake Poyang provides access to the Yangzi, China's main east-west arterial river, connecting Jingdezhen to the main urban centres of eastern China and the ports on the East China Sea. In the past, the entrance of the Grand Canal, located further downstream on the Yangzi, facilitated access to the imperial capital in the north. Lake Poyang also connected Jingdezhen to the southern provinces by way of the Gan, the main north-south artery of southern China. Via the Gan, merchants could travel southwards to Guangdong province, reaching the merchant ships that gathered in the port of Guangzhou (Canton) from all over the world.

When exactly these goods were made is more difficult to say. Amongst Mr Jia's goods (Figure 1.1), we find a motley selection of objects in a variety of decorative patterns and styles, probably made during quite different periods. One or two of the upside-down stem cups with dark blue-grey decorations on a greyish background might well date back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; the cream-coloured larger bowl may even be older. The upside-down bowl to the left, with the red square on the base and green and red flower decorations, more likely dates to the nineteenth century. Some of the small decorative bottles and vases probably date from the twentieth century, and the figurine of a reclining baby with beads around its head could even date from the twenty-first century. The state of the pile of blue and white bowls, quite dirty, damaged and simply decorated, suggests that these may have been buried and retrieved from a grave, but we will never know how exactly these objects found their way to this market; they are objects of unknown provenance. Even if we do not know the distances and routes along which these objects travelled from their place of manufacture to their arrival at the shard market, we do know that potters working



Map 1.1 Jiangxi Province. Map based on China Historical Geographic Information System (CHGIS), version 6.

over the centuries in the Jingdezhen area had the technology to produce all these: creamy-white monochromes during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, blue and white dishes in all shapes and sizes from the fourteenth century onwards, and brightly coloured pieces with enamel decorations from the eighteenth century. Jingdezhen's production of the finest porcelains lasted for many centuries.³

The pieces on the cloth represent only a small sample of the goods made in Jingdezhen, for consumers both within the Chinese empire and far beyond its boundaries. When the production of fine white wares started in the tenth century, Jingdezhen's ceramics appealed to local and regional consumers. Their reputation spread more widely in the eleventh century, when Zhenzong (r. 997–1022), the third emperor of the Song dynasty (960–1279), declared that he wanted porcelain from these kilns for his imperial court. Jingdezhen's ceramics circulated widely from then onwards, in part due to this association with the imperial court, and in part because of the translucent quality of Jingdezhen's white wares. From the late thirteenth, early fourteenth centuries onwards, when the potters in Jingdezhen started using cobalt blue systematically for the decorations of their white porcelains, Jingdezhen ceramics began to spread even more widely, well beyond the boundaries of the Chinese empire.⁴ The world-wide appeal of this so-called 'blue and white' porcelain meant that the kilns of Jingdezhen grew to become the biggest and most significant site of ceramics production in the world. This exceptional position turned Jingdezhen into what we might call a 'global' ceramics production site: the potters based in Jingdezhen made porcelains that were desired and consumed everywhere. Until the early eighteenth century, Jingdezhen's combination of high-quality natural resources, accumulated technologies and the extensive manpower necessary for making porcelain was not matched anywhere else in the world.⁵ Over the course of the eighteenth century, however, many other places in the world also discovered the required materials and technologies, and Jingdezhen gradually lost, first its unique position and eventually its ability to compete. Production in Jingdezhen continues until this day, but it no longer captures the desire of global consumers.

The goods for sale in this Jingdezhen market today are the traces of those centuries of porcelain production.⁶ Those traces are worth selling today because of the site's long and illustrious history, and today's customers will buy the broken shards, fakes and reproductions for sale in the shard market because of the exorbitant prices that Jingdezhen's finest pieces fetch in today's global art market. For many of us who are out-priced in that market, owning a fragmentary piece of porcelain is as close as we will ever get to

such pieces. But those same traces also point to deeper questions about the history of Jingdezhen. Jingdezhen emerged as the empire's premier site of ceramics production, but we do not yet fully understand what factors contributed to this and how it maintained this position over the course of at least seven centuries.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, Jingdezhen's production has attracted centuries of scholarly attention.⁷ Art historians have focused on the porcelains themselves, their aesthetics, and evolving forms, styles and techniques; museum curators work with individual pieces as well as whole collections of porcelains, their taxonomies and identifications; archaeologists study porcelain finds in the ground and on the seabed.⁸ Historians have tended to focus on Jingdezhen's wares as traded commodities, and examine their trade all over the world; anthropologists have focused on those who populated the city and worked in its kilns, while area specialists studied Jingdezhen within the context of the history of the Chinese empire.⁹ Each of these scholars and scholarly traditions have contributed to this growing body of scholarship, asked questions that emerge from their own contexts, and sought to find answers on the basis of their own perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds. This study is no different, in that it draws heavily on earlier research, and that its questions are shaped by its current academic environment. Where it does forge a new path, however, is in its combination of approaches. In presenting a chronological overview of the porcelain production in Jingdezhen, this study draws on the work of art historians, curators and porcelain specialists, but offers a history of the town rather than of its products. It draws on the work of China specialists and examines Chinese primary sources but presents a work of global history rather than of sinology. It draws on the work of economic historians and considers the trade in porcelain that reached consumers all over the world, but it offers a cultural history of the meanings and representations that shaped the history of this extraordinary city. Most of all, this study situates Jingdezhen in a context that crosses cultural, linguistic and disciplinary boundaries.

Arguments

This study asks how and why Jingdezhen became the premier site of ceramics production in the world, and how it maintained this position from the eleventh to the late seventeenth centuries. To refer to this long timespan as early modern perhaps seems unusual. The term commonly, especially in the European or even British context, refers to the period 1500 to 1750,

when certain characteristics marked the transition from the medieval to the modern world, including efflorescent economic growth, urbanization, conspicuous consumption, social mobility, overseas explorations and the emergence of challenges to orthodoxy and authority. In the context of this book, with its focus on both China and the wider world, these developments are not limited to the period 1500 to 1750; these characteristics are detectable in various forms throughout the period from the eleventh to the late seventeenth century, hence the use of the term 'early modern' to describe the period.

One way to answer questions about Jingdezhen's emergence and longevity in this early modern period is by considering global perspectives. Historians apply the term 'global' to a sheer endless range of phenomena, but I use it here to refer to factors that go beyond the boundaries of a single empire or nation state. For me, global history concerns the study of mobilities and the interactions that connect distinct parts of the world.¹⁰ Global factors that had a bearing on Jingdezhen's development include, for example, the growth of consumer demand for Jingdezhen's porcelain in Japan and Korea, Central, South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Europe and the Americas. They also include the presence of Chinese junks that sailed to ports throughout Asia and into the Indian Ocean. Throughout the centuries under discussion here, the official policies about Chinese merchants participating in overseas trade veered between active encouragement and outright prohibition, but as the evidence from maritime shipwrecks shows, Chinese junks carrying ceramics continued to sail overseas throughout the period. Global factors also include the emergence of trading companies such as the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) of the Dutch Republic and the English East India Company, whose merchants loaded vast quantities of porcelain into their ships' holds to supply consumers in Europe. Throughout the period, Jingdezhen was the only site of porcelain manufacture that produced goods to meet global consumer demand in terms of quality, quantity and diversity to suit the variety of tastes. Global factors, alone, however, cannot explain how Jingdezhen's potters accommodated these merchants' demands, and integrated them into their systems of production.

Another approach to the question of Jingdezhen's rise to a large-scale manufacturing site is the consideration of local factors. If we understand the term 'local' in its common-sense meaning, as having to do with the place itself and its immediate environs, then local factors include, amongst others, the natural environment of Jingdezhen. In principle, clay, water and fire are all that is required to produce bricks and earthenware implements, and most inhabited places in the world had access to such resources.¹¹

Some places, however, especially places scattered throughout Asia, were able to produce far better ceramics than most other places, mainly because of the quality of the available natural ingredients: the local clay and stone, the water, and the vegetation on the surrounding hills. In the case of Jingdezhen, the natural resources, especially the superb quality of the clay, form a key local factor for explaining the prominence of Jingdezhen's ceramics throughout the early modern world. The site of the town, near not only high-quality resources but also efficient transportation routes in all directions, is another key local factor. Jingdezhen's location facilitated its growth as a site of production and sustained its gradual transformation from a series of scattered individual kilns to a complex and large-scale production site that exploited all the available resources in the region to manufacture millions of pieces of porcelain for consumers all over the world. Local factors undoubtedly played a part in Jingdezhen's historical trajectory, but like global factors, they alone cannot answer questions about who consumed Jingdezhen's ceramics, and how the goods reached their far-flung consumers.

I propose that the answer to such questions has to be found by considering the mobility of things, people and ideas. I argue that Jingdezhen became the early modern world's foremost site of ceramics production because of mobility, circulation and interaction. Circulation and mobility were key to Jingdezhen's development throughout the centuries between the eleventh and the early eighteenth centuries. Rather than separating local and global factors, I suggest that it is the interaction between local and global factors that explains Jingdezhen's growth. Rather than understanding the global as meaning 'encircling the globe as a whole', and the local as 'bounded space', I understand global and local as part of a spectrum of constructed spaces. In chronicling the historical path of development over more than seven centuries across that spectrum, I seek to demonstrate the significance of mobility, circulation and interaction between things, people and their ideas.

Using the idea of circulation and interaction in seeking to understand Jingdezhen's development over this long period poses somewhat of a challenge to current approaches in a number of fields, especially to fields where boundaries and differentiation are key. In many studies within the field of history, for example, boundaries have been drawn between those that take a global approach, seeking to answer questions about change over time by looking across cultural and political boundaries, and those that explore historical change from within the boundaries of a certain spatial or cultural context. The former suggests that in the past, as today, (almost)

all parts of the world are connected in one way or another.¹² The latter suggests that separate units can be studied more or less in isolation. These might not always be positioned as ‘local histories’, after all, studies that confine themselves to (parts of) the Chinese empire remain within spatial and/or cultural boundaries, but often cover far too much geographical ground to be considered ‘local’. The point is, however, that scholars who see themselves as working globally often pay little attention to the specifics of an individual place and focus on the perspectives that connect individual places with each other, while local historians tend to work on the assumption that spaces can be bounded and understood from the perspective of that place alone.

In terms of methodology, I argue that global and local history need to be integrated and should be seen as forming part of the same continuum. Such an argument is, of course, heavily indebted to the insight that all space, which includes scales such as the global and the local, is constructed rather than predetermined. The connections between the Chinese empire and the wider world are so numerous and intricate that we cannot but write the history of the Chinese empire *as* global history. To understand the history of the Chinese empire fully, we cannot merely look at patterns of change that occurred within its cultural and political boundaries.¹³ Throughout this period Chinese ceramics manufactures used materials and designs that came from beyond the Chinese realm and produced goods that were desired by consumers all over the world. Only when we zoom out from the picture of China alone to view the wider picture, do we see the intricate patterns of connections and interactions that shape the early modern world, and China’s place in it. By tracing the technological trajectories of ceramics production, the official policies and informal practices that governed the ceramics trade and domestic and global patterns of consumption, I aim to show not only these global connections, but also the ways in which the whole range of actors involved in ceramics production participated in these global processes. Jingdezhen’s success can only be explained by understanding how global and local became part of the same network of interactions.

The manufacture of porcelain involved diverse groups of actors, from emperors and high officials at the capital to locally posted administrators, skilled potters and merchants. Their involvement changed over time, but ultimately, it was their choices and decisions that helped make China’s ceramics global products, not just the demands of consumers in far-flung locations. Economic historians, similarly, used to focus mostly on Europe and discuss the global flows of Spanish-American silver into China as the

direct outcome of a European desire for Asian consumer goods. This argument relegates Chinese production and the Chinese population to a passive role in the global flows of goods and currencies; Europeans desired Asian goods, the argument goes, and the fact that silver flowed into China was a mere side-effect, rather than a primary cause for global economic flows.¹⁴ Scholars like Dennis Flynn, Arturo Giráldez and André Gunder Frank have shown the global impact of China's demand for silver, and have 're-oriented' the focus of economic history to Asia, and in particular to China.¹⁵ My argument here follows along similar lines; to understand the global flows of porcelain, we need to focus on the active role the Chinese porcelain administrators, workers and merchants played in this. We need to see China's role in the global history of China. I argue that the administrators in charge of the production in Jingdezhen, appointees from the central state responsible for the selection of the finest porcelains for the use of the emperor, struggled to keep control over the production processes. Many of the sources they left behind, including the administrative records for sixteenth-century Jingdezhen, reveal the anxieties of these administrators over the flows of natural and human resources. Unfortunately, we will never know exactly what individual potters thought about the goods that went through their hands in pre-modern Jingdezhen, nor can we ever know the names of the many merchants who were involved in the transmission of Jingdezhen's goods to their consumers. The documentary records simply do not exist. But the agency of potters and merchants can be gleaned in other ways, and reading the sources, including not only texts but also the visual and material record for traces of their agency is one of the aims of this book.

Boundaries and differentiation are also key within the field of ceramics studies. Any first serious encounter with historical ceramics involves their identification: pieces of ceramics fit into a complex taxonomy that differentiates between production sites (or wares), types of decoration, shapes and functions. Crucial as such taxonomies are for the classification of pieces and the assignment of value and meaning, they also create boundaries and separations between technologies and designs that were closely connected. For the historian, the interactions between the different sites may be of more interest than their separation in distinct wares. This book highlights in particular the interactions between northern and southern kiln sites, and between different sites of production located around Jingdezhen, showing the crucial importance of those interactions for the development of Jingdezhen's manufactures.

Finally, this book considers ceramics as part of a wider cultural complex, instead of seeing ceramics as telling a separate and unique story