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Firing up the next generation

Potters in the ancient heartlands of the ceramics industry are carrying forward the craft of celadon



Tea cups produced by a Longquan celadon artisan. JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY



BY DENG ZHANGYU and MA ZHENHUAN

On an early August morning Zhang Xi drives quickly through the twists and turns of a mountain road in Longquan, Zhejiang province, hoping to quickly reach a century-old kiln where hundreds of pieces of pottery that have been given their final celadon glaze await him.

The 51-year-old craftsman has used the old kiln, nestled on a mountain near Xitou village, for many years. Every time he removes his creations from the kiln, seeing them in their finished celadon color remains as exciting and nerve jangling as ever.

"It's like opening a lucky dip. The same formula of glaze applied to different vases can look totally different on each one."

Their colors usually fall in the spectrum between lavender gray and plum green. However, they sometimes turn out brown or yellow. All these colors depend on temperature changes during the two-day firing, a process local artisans describe as "a song of clay and fire".

The traditional firing techniques of Longquan celadon pottery, which dates back more than 1,600 years, was included on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity List in 2009.

Zhang began learning how to make celadon-glazed pottery in a wood-fired kiln from his grandfather when he was 18. The craft has been passed down through his family since the 18th century.

Many families in the village, like Zhang's, made their living from the traditional craft for centuries, but with the introduction of gas kilns in 2000, a technology that allows and ensures exact tempera-



Potters work at a kiln in Xitou village in Longquan, Zhejiang province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

ture control to produce porcelain with a high-quality glaze, use of traditional wood-burning kilns began to disappear.

"Gas or electrical kilns can ensure the quality of the celadon glaze," Zhang says, walking alongside the kiln, which is made of brick and clay and is more than 65 feet long.

"Artisans can predict what they get from modern kilns, as long as they set the right temperature. However, traditional kilns can offer surprises, which enamors makers and lovers of the craft."

He checks the temperature of the cooling kiln by touching the bricks and can judge when the time is right to remove the porcelain treasures inside.

The long kiln, shaped like a snake, can house dozens of vases or hundreds of tea cups. It takes 11,000 pounds of wood and 12 potters to keep it firing for two days, at high cost in both time and energy.

"Every brick kiln has its own

personality," Zhang says. "This one is very mild and tender, and the color of green it produces is light."

He points to another one standing in front of the village, which he describes as fierce, and its products are heavy in gloss. A good firing needs six months' preparation.

After many firings an artisan knows the kiln inside out and learns how to control the temperature by watching the color of the flame, or by using a piece of clay as a measure. The heat can reach as high as 1,310 C (2,390 F).

No matter whether it is a brick kiln or a modern one, the artisan's aim is to pursue a glaze of exquisite beauty, with their own unique input.

"Just like a chef, we have our own formulas to produce different shades of green, a color similar to jade."

Artisans can expertly identify the various shades of green by eye, he says.

Since porcelain was produced in Longquan during the Three Kingdoms period (220-280) it has been widely used, becoming a household staple across the country and has been revered by royal families in China and beyond.

In the city of Longquan archaeologists discovered more than 500 sites that used to be kiln clusters, a testimony to the prosperity of Longquan's celadon-glazed pottery industry.

The production of Longquan celadon reached its peak during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). Many thousands of porcelain items bearing the famous green glaze were shipped to Southeast Asia, Europe and East Africa.

The word celadon is derived from a French novel, *L'Astree*. The story's protagonist is a shepherd named Celadon, who wears a green cloak. His look became chic in 17th century Paris. At the time Longquan porcelain, whose color was similar to that of the fictional hero's cloak, was popular among the upper class in France.

"The simple shape and jade-like color of the porcelain is a vivid demonstration of Chinese culture and aesthetics," says Liu Ying, director of the Celadon Museum in Longquan.

Because of celadon's color and glossy finish it is also called artificial jade, reflecting people's love of the precious stone, which bears the virtues that Chinese people pursue and cherish still, Liu says.

"Celadon is also a color from nature. In traditional culture, Chinese people always promote a harmonious way to coexist with nature."



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Made-in-China with a long pedigree

BY DENG ZHANGYU and MA ZHENHUAN

How would a celadon craftsman in Longquan, Zhejiang province, have spent his day hundreds of years ago when the jade-green porcelain produced there was the center of a global frenzy?

He probably would have had to keep working day and night to produce as many pieces as possible to meet orders from Persia, Japan and India. In fact he probably would have had to ask relatives to help with the heavy workload.

Ceramics recovered from shipwrecks in ancient ports worldwide are testament to the mass of celadon exported to other parts of Asia, Europe and East Africa, says Liu Ying, director of the Celadon Museum in Longquan.

The export of Longquan celadon peaked during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). According to historical records, about 80% of the ceramics exported from China at the time were the green-colored pottery made in Longquan.

An exhibition at the Longquan Celadon Museum recently featured porcelain relics found at the al-Mataf site, an ancient port ruin in Ras al-Khaimah in the United Arab Emirates. The finds from the harbor, where ships stopped after entering the Gulf, were compared to 30 similar pieces housed in the Palace Museum in Beijing.

A scientific analysis of the finds from the al-Mataf site shows their similarity to those produced in China at the same time, including Longquan celadon. The analysis was conducted by a Chinese archaeological team led by Wang Guangyao, a porcelain expert at the Palace Museum, in 2018.

After three years of excavation and study at al-Mataf, which was along one of the world's busiest maritime trade routes a millennium ago, Wang says, their work proves that Longquan celadon

and blue-and-white ceramics were the two main types of porcelain exported centuries ago.

"Together with silk and tea, ceramics were one of the three major goods supporting ancient China's export trade," says Wang.

In the Tang Dynasty (618-907), ceramics produced in China began to appear in overseas markets. A wide range of ceramic products, including bowls, dishes, pots and vases, were transported across the world overland, and via the ancient Maritime Silk Road.

They were named after their country of origin, to illustrate their uniqueness and that they could only be bought from China.

"The history of the export of ceramics is also a history of cultural and technological exchanges between China and the world," Wang says.

Before the 14th century China controlled the production of high-quality porcelain and was a seller-oriented market. Finds unearthed in Taicang, an ancient port in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, show that celadon from Longquan was transported without being taken out of its firing boxes.

During the process of firing, celadon pieces were placed in pottery boxes that protected them from the ashes. Usually only half the products were usable, the rest breaking or being otherwise defective.

"Whether they were good or bad, merchants took them all," Liu says. "This reflects how much in demand they were."

From the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the export of blue-and-white porcelain sparked a global fascination with these precious treasures from the East. Chinese porcelain makers began to produce pieces tailored to tastes in various countries.

"China has a 3,000-year history of ceramic making," Wang says. "Our porcelain has absorbed influences from other cultures to enhance itself over generations."



From top: A statue of a Buddhist deity dating to the Yuan Dynasty. A vase with tiger design from the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). A Southern Song Dynasty vase with dragon design. PHOTOS BY JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY

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