

From cobalt ores to Mongolian legends: the journey of your china dinner plate

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As we visit restaurants and cafes and look down eagerly at our food laden platters, invariably encompassed by a certain ravenousness, we rarely take the time to contemplate how the platter itself came to be. Yet, as mealtimes shape our lives, the evolution of the blue-and-white plates before us is more significant and relevant to our shared collective history and the modern experience than we may imagine. Just as we could not come to be without our ancestors before us, ceramics and pottery could not be what they are today without the potters of old. Be it our language, our arts, our customs, our communities, even our thought processes, are derived and defined by those who go before us. Projects that explore our historical routes help us to hear from the voices in our local and wider community and reconcile where we come from with our place in the community today.



Lead Glazed Figure of a Horse, (728 AD), 85cm, Image of Sancai horse with glaze firing imperfections on the body that have led to colour running
[Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum]

Emblematic Chinese blue-and-white porcelain has penetrated cultures throughout the world, leaving indelible imprints on communities all the way from China to Lewisham. In existence for more than one thousand years, the aesthetic charm and uniqueness of blue-and-white porcelain endures as an extraordinary emblem of Chinese visual arts, yet the journey of how it came to be a staple in our homes still eludes many of us.

Our first foray into blue-and-white porcelain leads us naturally to its namesake – China. Whilst in the West, Jesus and Mary are often depicted in blue in biblical artwork¹ and blue is

historically and poetically associated with the sky and therefore the heavens, purity and truth, in China, it was the emperor who was 'the Son of Heaven' and thus, it was yellow – the colour associated with Tang dynasty emperors – that had sacred and royal connotations. The colour blue was not even represented by its own character 《藍》 (Lán) as it is today, but rather the character 《青》 (Qīng), which expressed green, but also blue and even black. Take a glimpse of any authentic Chinese New Year celebrations and you will most certainly have a sighting of items adorned in festive shades of scarlet or crimson - surely the auspicious red or the royal yellow would have been more suitable candidates to popularize the nation's platters?

We must glance back at China's early ceramic history to better understand this curious choice of colour palette. Chinese potters have been perfecting their craft for more than 10,000 years, as far back as the stone age. Yet it was during the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD) that ceramic production was able to see astounding advancements and that the colour blue would begin to win favour with ceramists across China. The Tang era was a time of cultural prosperity thanks in part to Tang emperors who ordered construction of temples, supported trade of wares like ceramics and silk and helped to establish the Silk Road, which ignited intercultural exchanges and learning between China and neighbouring kingdoms.²

Indeed, the earliest known porcelain can be traced back to the Tang dynasty porcelain of the Gongxian Kilns located in Gongyi, Henan



Dutch Tulip Vase
Italian Maiolica

British Willow Pattern platter

Jamaican pitcher
Portuguese Azulejos

Middle Eastern ceramics

Chinese ginger jar
Japanese plate

Talavera pottery

Brazilian porcelain plate

Nigerian beaded ornament

South African blue baluster vase

Persian pilgrim flask

The Spread of the Blue and White

Tai Chi is for
medication



The Tai Chi Fan is our weapon
of wellness
and joy



In Tai Chi every movement is in a curve or circle that has no ending or beginning

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province in central China's Yellow River Valley. An area rich in natural resources, Chinese potters were able to produce porcelain using a white clay *kaolin* 《高岭土》(Gāolǐngtǔ) mixed with a stone, *baidunzi* 《白墩子》(Bái dūnzi).^{3 4} Situated just outside the ancient capital of Luoyang (home of the Longmen Grottoes), and just 9km south of the Gongyi Grottoes, this was an area of explosive spiritual, cultural and artistic creativity.

Thus, not only was the Yellow River the 'birthplace of the Chinese civilization', many millennia later it would also become the birthplace of one of China's most far-reaching, culturally symbolic and representative artistic creations – Chinese porcelain.

Sancai earthenware 《唐三彩》(Tángsāncǎi), meaning tri-coloured Tang, was a ceramic technique that would become a stepping-stone paving the way for the invention of Chinese porcelain. Sancai ceramic processes were similar to those later used in porcelain production; ceramists started to experiment with a double rather than single firing process and would fire earthenware at a much higher temperature than for Sancai and so, Chinese porcelain was born.⁵ The ceramic body of porcelain was a green shade the first time it was placed in the kiln, before being painted, overglazed and returned to the kiln. Oxidation in the kiln would give the original green body its white colouring. Thus, you could say that the blue-and-white porcelain of old was not only blue-and-white, but in essence, blue, white and green.⁶

Sancai colours were achieved by materials like copper, however, these materials were volatile. Copper tended to run and could change colour after glazing, turning unexpected shades of red, brown or green in the kiln.

Thus, what enabled blue-and-white pottery to rise in stature among Chinese ceramicists was in fact not merely the colour itself, but the flexibility of painting designs and ceramic techniques that were enabled by the colour. The natural mineral cobalt is one of the few materials that could be under-glazed. Cobalt was less prone to the unexpected post-firing transformations of existing materials like copper and intricate hand painted designs remained largely unperturbed by the high-firing temperatures required for porcelain production – an attractive trait indeed to ceramic painters across the country.

The blue pigmentation of blue-and-white porcelain was achieved by transforming cobalt into a fine powder and exposing it to heat. When iron-rich cobalt was exposed to high temperatures, a bright blue shade appeared and when iron-deficient cobalt was used, a paler blue-grey or even slightly black shade appeared.⁷

And so, the journey of our plates pulls us further down the Silk Road towards the ancient Iranian empire of Persia, where iron-rich cobalt ores were located. Sources suggest that the Tang dynasty ceramicists first began their cobalt-based motifs using cobalt imported from the Middle East having been influenced by

artisanal Islamic cobalt blue earthenware there. Indeed, cobalt blue glazed stoneware had been used in the Middle East as far back as the 6th century BC, with evidence of glazed cobalt identified on the walls of the Ishtar Gate to the ancient city of Babylon (modern-day Iraq)⁸. Egyptian artists had also used cobalt mixed with local gemstones and minerals to create the Egyptian-blue turquoise colour seen on Egyptian temple facades, glassware and ceramics.

As such, the cobalt blue of early blue-and-white ceramics was probably first seen in Persian ceramics, or even further back in time to the stoneware of the ancient Egyptian and even Babylonian civilizations. It has also been suggested that cobalt had been historically known to China (such as during the Warring States era 475 – 221 BC)⁹. Whatever the case, Chinese artisans were doubtless the first to use it on porcelain. Blue-and-white Chinese porcelain emitted an aesthetically alluring translucent effect that would both fascinate and inspire artisans along the Silk Road for centuries to come¹⁰.

Yet just as political stability and international cultural exchanges acted as a propeller in ceramic advancement during the Tang dynasty, the violence and unrest of a divided China – with the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms era (907-960 AD) – that followed, affected China's ceramic industry. Even with a reunified China during the culturally prosperous Song dynasty (960-1279), when landscape painting, calligraphy and poetry blossomed, blue-

and-white porcelain production remained comparatively low. The ebbs and flows of blue-and-white porcelain production have followed the artistic tastes of the rulers in place and Song dynasty emperors preferred single-tone ceramics to the two-tone blue-and-white porcelain^{11 12}.

However, in 1279 as the Mongolian army edged closer, a seven-year-old Emperor Bing was allegedly drowned in a murder-suicide by a Song dynasty chancellor; the Song era came to an end and the Yuan dynasty was declared with Ghengis Khan's grandson, Kablai Khan – now Emperor Shizu – at its helm. Blue-and-white was to reach new highs as the shades were cherished royal and sacred colours in Mongolian culture as the Khan lineage was said to have been descended from the union of a blue wolf (masculinity, descended from the heavens) and a white fallow deer (femininity)¹³. With the Mongolian empire stretching across the Middle East and Eastern Europe, porcelain could more easily reach a wider audience. Thus, it was during the Yuan (1279–1368) and later Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties that the art of blue-and-white porcelain production would be revived and truly reach its zenith¹⁴. Recent shipwreck discoveries indicate early thriving international relations between China and nearby kingdoms and that porcelain was already a valued import in the Middle East during the Tang dynasty. Cross-culturalism has been key in advancing Chinese porcelain production and many pieces were designed as exports showing influences of Islamic

ceramics and culture. Equally artisans in Persia and nearby countries were greatly inspired by the diverse range of blue-and-white ceramics to appear from Chinese shores and Chinese porcelain not only helped to cement diplomatic relations, but revolutionised local culinary and ornamental traditions and local potters began to make imitation porcelain known as fritware (made from glass and quartz) as early as the 7th century.



Brass Ewer, 700-900, Brass, 29.5cm x 17cm Persia (Iran),



Porcelain Ewer with Peony Scroll, Jingdezhen, China, Porcelain with cobalt blue design, 29.2cm x 24.10cm, 1403-1424 (Ming dynasty)

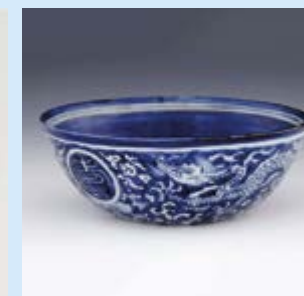
[Photos: © The Trustees of the British Museum]

Chinese porcelain shapes were influenced by Islamic metalwork, such as this pear-shaped porcelain ewer, which may have been intended for exportation to an Islamic country. The peonies on the body of the porcelain ewer appear frequently in Chinese art and literature as they symbolise wealth and love. Peonies are so highly regarded in Chinese culture that they were even planted in the palace gardens.¹⁵

Porcelain techniques were gradually refined in kilns across China, and it was in Jingdezhen, in the cradle of the Yangtze River and near Gaoling Mountain (a natural source of kaolin), where the Imperial Kilns were established and able to produce some of the finest quality porcelain for the imperial courts. Jingdezhen kilns developed large-scale moulding processes and an astoundingly efficient and advanced early mass production system able to supply porcelain to the whole of China and later meet rocketing international demand. Cobalt blue porcelain painting techniques (such as the 'heap and pile effect') and ceramic printing techniques would also progress, and Jingdezhen would become a world centre for ceramic production and 'the first global brand' from as early as the 14th century.¹⁶



Dish with a dragon and flaming pearl, Jingdezhen, China, 1300-1399 (Yuan dynasty)



Five-clawed Dragon and Scaly Dragon Bowl, 12.5cm x 4.5cm, Jingdezhen, China, 1522-1566 (Ming dynasty)

[Photos: © The Trustees of the British Museum]

The dragon is one of the most widely seen and enduring motifs of Chinese iconography. It is an auspicious mythical figure that is also a symbol of the emperor due to its power and strength. The number of claws of the dragon indicate the purpose of the vessel – originally

appearing with only three claws, four-clawed dragons were intended for Chinese nobility whilst five-clawed dragons were only to be used by the emperor. The use of five-clawed dragon motifs by members of the public was said to have been punishable by death.¹⁷ The dragon often appears chasing a flaming pearl, a multivalent symbol often interpreted as the sun or moon or wisdom and spiritual energy. The single-tone blue background of the plate (left) is unusual and hints at the transition from the single-tone ceramicware of the Song dynasty to the blue-and-white porcelain of the Yuan dynasty.¹⁸



Flower shaped dish with lotus, 16.1cm x 20cm, Jingdezhen, China, 1320-1350 [Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum]¹⁹

Yuan dynasty dish made from imported iron-rich cobalt, which produces a post-firing unevenness called the 'heap and pile' effect where certain areas are light blue and others darker shades. The dish shows lotus flowers and is made with eight sides, which is an auspicious number in Chinese culture. Lotus flowers were often used by ceramic painters after Buddhism gained popularity in China and represent harmony; the number eight is also significant in Buddhism, which values the Eightfold path.



Hexagonal Cup and Saucer, China, 1662-1722 (Qing dynasty) [Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum]

The plate depicts a white crane, which is a traditional symbol of longevity in Chinese art. The hexagonal form of the objects represents the harmony or wholeness of the universe 《六合》(Liùhé) as viewed in traditional Chinese culture as hexagons reflect the six directions of North, West, East, South, Heaven and Earth.²⁰

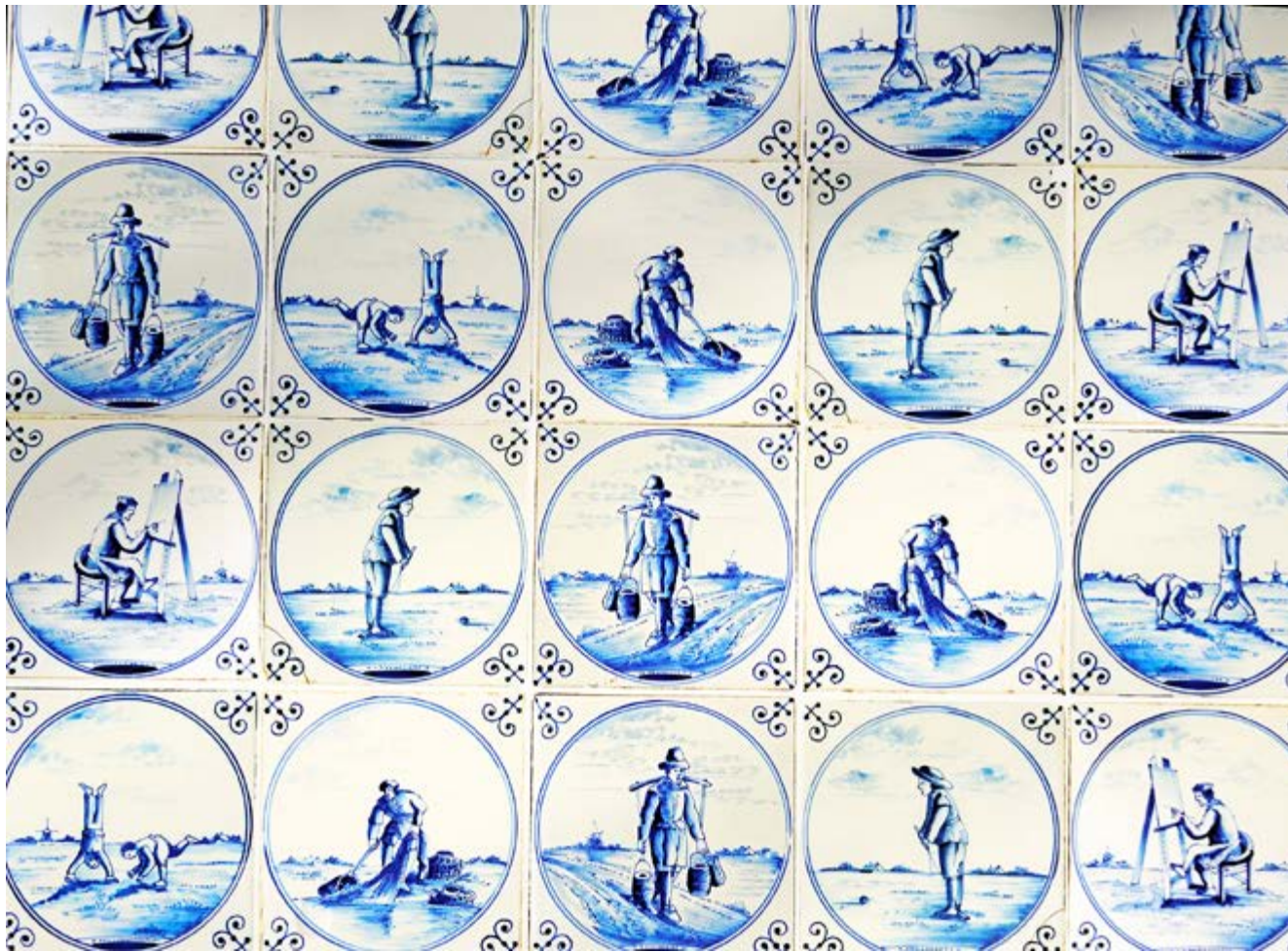
The arrival of Portuguese merchants in Guangzhou (Southern China) during the Ming dynasty (14th century) roused an early penchant for blue-and-white porcelain in Medieval Europe. The Portuguese forced control of Southern trading ports in Macao, which were located close to China's famed biannual silk fairs that saw the distribution of porcelain to international markets and Ming porcelain exported to Portugal influenced what would later become one of Portugal's most defining cultural customs – striking glazed blue-and-white ceramic tiles known as azulejos portugueses that now decorate building façades and stations throughout the streets of Portuguese cities.²¹



Blue-and-white Clark Porcelain Bowl, Porcelain, Jingdezhen China, 1600-1624 (Ming Dynasty) [Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum]

This bowl was designed for the Portuguese market and shows a European coat-of-arms and Latin inscriptions combined with traditional Chinese lotus flowers and Buddhist instruments. The porcelain type is lower quality than the porcelain reserved for the Chinese courts and was produced in bulk in Jingdezhen kilns.

The establishment of maritime relations with other large European merchant trading companies, such as the British East India Company and the Dutch East India Company in the 15th century, meant that tea and low-cost blue-and-white porcelain from Jingdezhen were shipped in large quantities to Europe and overseas European colonies where they would mesmerize and amaze, completely transforming local dining etiquettes.²² Periods of reduced trade links between China and Europe in later centuries lead to the production of imitation blue-and-white porcelain known as bone china in England (made from cattle bones) and Delftware (made from clay and quartz) in the city of Delft in the Netherlands. European ceramists would incorporate local iconography into their designs, such as windmills and yachts, and blue-and-white ceramics would eventually evolve into an art form that no longer



Delftware Tiles, Netherlands [Photo: istockphoto]

represented something uniquely Chinese but expressed the distinct cultural customs and values of differing societies beyond Chinese borders.

Blue-and-white Chinese porcelain has endured as a lasting muse, particularly for textile designers and tailors within China and across the globe. Clear influences of blue-and-white porcelain design can be identified all the way

from early tapestries, rugs, silks and upholstery fabrics to the cushions, curtains and dresses we see today. Its distinctive colour scheme has changed the face of global interior design and fashion and continues to affect the evolution of modern textile industries.

Haberdashery aside, Chinese blue-and-white porcelain has proven such a powerful inspiration to designers across a plethora of cultures that influences can be seen in almost

all aspects of public and domestic interior furnishings and ornamentation, including still life paintings, ornamental ceramic displays, mirrors, tiles, furniture and interior accessories, such as door handles and coat hooks. The influence of blue-and-white porcelain on structures as a whole is also evident in the architecture of Southeast Asian, Islamic and European societies and even in the tombs and burial sites of Swahili communities in Kenya and Tanzania.

So how did your blue-and-white dinner plate reach you here in Lewisham in the 21st century? Its journey began more than 1,000 years ago near the waters of the Yellow River in China where a precise methodology for porcelain production was born. Blue-and-white porcelain traditions and techniques were handed down through generations and dynasties and spread across continents, transforming and evolving cultures wherever they went.

From the Tang dynasty right through to the modern day, a myriad of exquisite, intricately designed cobalt blue porcelain goods and design techniques have emerged from China and bound themselves into a cultural heritage that still transforms our world today, from social dining, decorative arts, interior design, architecture and fashion to cultural identity and family tradition, blue-and-white porcelain has permeated many folds of our society and proven to be an extraordinary anthropological phenomenon that has forever changed the shape of world arts, culture and history.



My grandmother Maria emigrated from Italy to Uruguay when she was 13 years old. Her family was sent there and she was very poor and she was sent there alone to work in her uncles' zapaterias (shoe shop). She traveled on a ship from Venice to Montevideo with a 3rd class ticket.

THE SKY IS BLUE
MY HOME IS WHERE

Blue and white is more like a symbol for sea and wave. That echo of water drives me somewhere faraway.

Blue and white is more like a symbol for sea and wave. That echo of water drives me somewhere faraway.

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Rachel Kanev

Ceramics are silent bystanders to our everyday routines and shared culinary festivities, they are often displayed in communal spaces in the home and handed down from generation to generation – in an unassuming way, they mould our family experiences.

My grandmother loved blue-and-white porcelain and had many items on display in a large dresser. Later after she died, I acquired one of her vases and I often think of her when I look at it. She used to have a full set of it in her home that we would use at mealtimes; it is in a pattern called Zwiebelmuster, which means 'onion patterned' and is a typical design of the East German Republic (GDR).

My mother also has many blue-and-white items just as my grandmother did. She has a very modern English ceramic jug on display by her kitchen sink; the resemblance of the jug to Tang dynasty ceramics is remarkable and shows just how pioneering and influential ancient Chinese ceramic art was – elements of ancient Chinese culture form part of our lives without us even realising it.

One of my mother's vases is inscribed with the words Man Tang Fu Ji 《满堂福记》 (Mǎntáng fú jì) and depicts the Chinese legend of Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea 《八仙过海》 (Bāxiānguòhǎi). She knew it was Chinese when she bought it but had no idea about the Chinese mythology behind it until now.



Blue-and-white porcelain on my mother's sitting room. The first vase to the left is Qing dynasty style and shows images of the Taoist legend of Eight Immortals.

Chenjin Ying

I used not to appreciate blue-and-white porcelain, but now as I get older, I find I have come to value it more. When I was younger, I thought that it was too traditional and unfashionable, but after I turned 30 and especially after I began drinking Chinese tea more often, I found that blue-and-white porcelain had a quiet beauty – simple and unassuming. Moreover, I am proud that blue-and-white porcelain is a representative work of ancient Chinese porcelain art. My favourite piece of blue-and-white porcelain is a blue-and-white teacup from the Trimentea Gold Series. On weekend afternoons, I will often have tea and read a book, indulging in the peacefulness of a quiet and leisurely time. Chinese people drink tea without sugar or milk, so they have higher requirements for tea and water. We use different tea sets according to different teas. Green tea is usually drunk from a glass as you can appreciate the shape of the tea leaves in the water whilst drinking the tea. Black tea and Pu-erh tea are generally used with a porcelain tea set. During the Spring Festival, I always go back to my hometown to reunite with my family, share a reunion dinner together and give red envelopes to elderly members of my family and children. During Qingming Festival and Spring Festival, my family and I sweep the ancestors' graves and worship the ancestors. Family is important in our lives and these events bring our family together and increase our bond.



Photo of a tea set we have in our family home in Beijing

When I was six or seven years old, I used to go to my grandmother's house in the countryside of Zhejiang province. The bowls, plates, teapots and cups were all made of blue-and-white porcelain, which were cheap and very popular at that time. My grandmother had four blue-and-white porcelain plates that she had inherited from her parents and seemed to be valuable. She usually used them to entertain guests or worship ancestors on important occasions. For me, blue-and-white porcelain is one of the representative elements of Chinese art and our cultural heritage. I like it a lot and hope other people like it too.

