

# Porcelain with a Local and Global Story

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People sometimes ask me if I, myself collect the Chinese porcelain that I write about. The question itself suggests they are not collectors themselves. Anyone who collects porcelain knows that it is extremely unlikely that a university professor who began being interested in porcelain about ten years ago could afford to buy collectable pieces of Chinese porcelain. The prices individual pieces of porcelain fetch range from thousands of dollars for quite ordinary pieces to hundreds of thousands of dollars and even millions of dollars for some of the finest pieces that were once part of the collection of the emperor. Of course, with the market so buoyant, imitations and fakes circulate as widely as the genuine pieces and distinguishing between them is the major challenge that faces museum curators and collectors alike. It is, however, possible to buy broken pieces of porcelain known as sherds in small antique shops and markets in China. Over the years, I have collected some of these sherds, including the piece in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Sherd in the collection of the author.

One of the classes I teach is on China's global history, from 1500 to 1800, which asks how the history of China is connected to the histories of other parts of the world. Porcelain, also referred to as china, is an excellent primary source for understanding the exchange of knowledge and ideas between Asia and Europe. When I arrive in class with some broken pieces of porcelain in a cardboard box, the students usually stare at me somewhat blankly. I place the pieces on a cloth in the middle of the table and ask them to select one of the pieces. My next question is simply: 'What can you tell me about what you have in front of you?' I encourage them to look closely, and describe everything they see, including the smallest details they can see and feel as they turn the pieces in their hands.

More often than not, the person who ends with the object in Figure 1 feels a little hard done by. 'It's ugly', I have heard more than once, or, 'What on earth happened to this?' They would have preferred to pick a shiny fragment of white porcelain with a decoration in blue that depicts something they think they can identify.

Once they settle down to look closely, however, they realise there is a lot to comment on. However squashed the shape is now, it is not impossible to see that it was once intended to be a cup; some even see the little bit sticking out on the right hand side and see it might once have been a handle. Whatever the crumbly material that is now stuck to the surface may be, it is clear that underneath that is a bright white surface with blue decorations, even recognisable as a multi-story building with a tree to the left of the building. 'It reminds me of some of the blue and white plates you see in bed-and-breakfast places', one student exclaimed once. Few observe the metallic colour that covers the thin rim of the cup. It is hard to guess what exactly happened to it; some think it must have been damaged in transport; only someone who knows a little bit about the effects of high heat inside the kiln on the kaolin-clay combination that makes up a porcelain body can identify that whatever happened to it already happened inside the kiln when it was fired.

I only fill in the details after the students' thoughts have completely come to a halt. I explain that it was probably made during the late eighteenth century in the kilns of Jingdezhen in southern China, where most of the millions of pieces of porcelain made for export to Europe were produced. We discuss the decorative pattern, sometimes referred to as 'willow pattern', featuring a pavilion in a garden next to a lake, often with a little boat and doves flying above. The pattern is in fact a late eighteenth-century English creation, with a popular story about two lovers who elope and transform into birds to match, based on the Chinese landscapes that arrived in Britain on pieces of porcelain. The Chinese copied the British willow pattern, which was itself a copy of Chinese designs. The cup on the left shows what the shape and the design might have been intended to look like.



Figure 2. Tea cup and sherd, both in the collection of the author.

The circulation of designs, ideas, materials and people is also visible in the shape. This cup was made for the consumption of tea or coffee; chocolate cups usually had a slightly different shape. All these hot beverages came into the food and drinking cultures of Europe and North America from other parts of the world and all were consumed with the sugar that was grown on colonial plantations and produced through the labour of enslaved peoples. One single cup allows for the telling of many different global stories, that connect both to the past and to the present.

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