Porcelain as Made in Its Native Land

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The home of the Mongolian race has given its name to fine tableware the world over. The word porcelain is synonymous with chinaware. As it was with gunpowder, silk, and tea, the ancient Chinese enjoyed the use of porcelain long before the nations of the West dreamed of it. As early as the first, or perhaps the second century before Christ, the process of making it was invented. The unknown potter who produced porcelain should have a niche in the Hall of Fame together with Robert Fulton, Eli Whitney and George Stephenson. The first kilns were in the heart of the great Yangtse Valley, somewhere about the middle of the Honan province.

It is less than two hundred years since the art of making porcelain was introduced from China into Europe, at Sèvres, France, in the year 1722. It is a striking but typical comment upon Chinese civilization, that in two centuries the products of Western kilns very far surpass their oriental forebears, although the original producers have had ten times the number of years for improvement. With the spread of the Confucian doctrine of the necessary superiority of the ancients and its logical sequence, ancestral worship, the icy hand of death gripped the throat of progress in China, and the whole nation has not produced any new thing of note during two thousand years. The doctrine that it is not only impossible but positively unfilial to improve upon their ancestors’ achievements has been the opiate that has put to sleep for twenty centuries the Chinese, who at first manifested powers that bade fair to make them the world’s leaders in the industrial arts.

The primitive and stationary character of porcelain manufacture, in China, its original home, was illustrated in a recent visit which I made to Deh-hua, a small mountain city in the Fuhkien province of South China. Approaching the town from the south, about two miles out, we passed the mills where the white feldspar rock, quarried from the neighboring hills, is pounded into a fine powder. Nothing could be more crude than these mills. A tile roof about fifteen feet square, upon wooden posts; a water wheel a foot or more wide, and ten feet in diameter, with a small over-shot stream
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for power; two wooden cogs in the wooden shaft of the wheel, alternately raising up two wooden hammers with iron facings, that drop upon the rock in the stone mortars. That is all. I saw a dozen such shanties, but not one single attendant. Someone must come and change the grist occasionally, but it is evident that it may be done in a most leisurely manner, and time is no special object.

Dr. S. Wells Williams tells us, in his “Middle Kingdom,” that there are two kinds of material in all porcelain. The feldspar is strong, opaque, and endures great heat. The silex or quartz is easily fusible. When the two are mixed, the silex, in burning, imparts its transparency to the powdered feldspar or clay. The Chinese aptly call the latter the bones, and the silex the flesh of the ware. Both kinds of the stone must be pounded to dust by hammers.

By the side of each little mill are three shallow stone vats in which the finely powdered rock is soaked and washed, being transferred from one to the other. Here also the two kinds of clay are mixed together by tramping. The well ground, mixed and washed clay is then carried by men to the pottery, by means of the universal bamboo stick borne upon the shoulders.

Jeremiah’s potter could not have had a more primitive wheel. It is nothing but a clay disc two feet in diameter, fixed upon a pivot, swinging five or six inches from the floor. There is not a pedal even. Cogs are put in the edge of the wheel, or a hole is made near the surface by sinking a small unfired tea-cup into the clay near the circumference of the wheel. With fingers in this cup, the operator gives this wheel a jerk. It runs long enough for him to finish a cup or small bowl. More elaborate work requires many pulls at his wheel, with a proportionate loss of time. The small boy who was turning out little tea-cups as I watched him, did not mind the time consumed. He earns only seven or eight cents a day and why should he trouble himself about improving methods to save time which is so valueless?

The freshly molded pieces are dried in a shed open upon all sides. Then the glazing, made of silex mixed with carbonate of lime and the ashes of burnt ferns, is applied by dipping the small pieces into
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The mixture. The large jars are glazed by applying the same mixture with a brush. Then comes the furnace, with three days or more of careful burning. In Deh-hua no color except blue is put on before the glazing and first burning. This is black before baking, but the fire changes it to blue.

I was much disappointed in the artistic part of the manufacture. I had pictured the “cunning workman” of poetry, who toils for months, even for years, upon one “clear porcelain vase, an Emperor’s gift.” What I saw were slovenly women, and little children, a few as young as eight years of age, deftly daubing teapots and cups after a fixed pattern, and blending colors according to oriental ideas of taste. After the colors are put on, the ware is burned again, and the work is done. I bought a set of ten hand-painted bowls for less than six cents.

A careful examination of the output of these kilns shows that the material is of very superior grade. A specimen of the clay recently sent to an expert in Japan was pronounced to be of the first quality. More than three centuries ago, under the famous Ming dynasty, this pottery held a high reputation. Specimens of that old ware now bring fabulous prices among connoisseurs. But the workmanship has degenerated during these ten generations. What could one expect when the labor is all performed by utterly illiterate people, who have no ambition above supplying their present bodily wants? Such labor is bound to deteriorate. There seems to be no place in the whole process from quarry to sale-room where cultivated mind is used. It is merely the skill of the automaton mechanically going through the appointed task. This is characteristic of nearly all labor in China, because here the educated man never works with his hands, and the laborer is never educated. This fact makes the industrial regeneration of China difficult, if not indeed impossible.

I would not give the impression that all the Chinese porcelain manufacturing centers are so degenerate as Deh-hua. In Kiang-si province at Kingteh and other places, the work is said to be done very well; but the Japanese ware is driving out the Chinese in foreign markets, for reasons too obvious to need further emphasis.