

Robert Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art, Cultures of Porcelain in World History*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California press, 2010, 416 pp.

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The subject of Chinese porcelain is one that appears to be inevitably linked to royalty. It is therefore fitting that this book should open by referring to the more than 3,000 pieces of this kind of ceramic owned in the 1590s by Philip II of Spain. An illustration of a pilgrim flask similar to those once in the King's collection appears on the book cover. Apart from Philip, there was Manuel I of Portugal (who in the early 16th century actually started what came to be later known as the "porcelain disease"), August II of Saxony in the 18th century and many more monarchs. Refined porcelains had, of course, been originally created for the delectation of Chinese emperors since the Song Dynasty in the 10th century.

The author, who is a professor at the Department of History of the University of Arkansas, U.S.A., has divided his book into eight chapters, plus introduction and epilogue. There are 24 rather elegant colour illustrations appearing in the middle of the book, with two captionless maps showing Europe and Asia placed at the beginning. The subject of Chinese porcelain is entertainingly discussed under different aspects, often in relation to the West.

The mentioned book cover symbolically conveys the author's aims: the pilgrim flask illustrating it represents the international industrial and artistic currents that this lustrous blue-and-white jar reflects and embodies. The book is therefore not an addition to the innumerable publications on the art or history of Chinese ceramics. Its different perspective is explained in the Introduction, where it is stated that "[it] explores the cultural role of Chinese porcelain in world history". The author also adds that it is not chinaware as such that concerns him. In world trade chinaware was only of secondary importance to silk, spices and tea. Chinese porcelain on the other hand, "played an exceptional role in cultural exchange between China and the distant reaches of Eurasia".

Although the enthusiasm of the author for his main subject pulls us in, sentences such as the one declaring that the book is "more concerned with the wilderness than with the jar", arouses misgivings. Is this going to be another partial assessment of Chinese civilization, like those inspired by Joseph Needham? It does at times seem as if, just around the next page, Robert Findlay is about to describe Admiral Zheng He's porcelain laden armada (dealt with on pp. 217-22), triumphantly landing in the Americas.

Fortunately this never happens and the author shows sufficient restraint to make reasonable arguments based on research rather than fiction. In fact, the text provides readers with a fascinating account of the cultural impact of Chinese porcelain on the world stage, mainly, from 1500 to 1800.

The text is rich in historical facts and anecdotes, of which only a few can be mentioned here. For instance, in the Introduction we learn that already at the time of Manuel I, Portuguese *naus* were delivering as many as 60,000 pieces of these precious wares in one shipment, an amount that more than tripled after the Portuguese established proper trade relations with China and founded Macao. After the East India Companies of other Western nations emerged in the 18th century cargoes of porcelain sailing for Europe reached 300 million pieces in three centuries. The 3 million pieces exported every year to Asian countries should also be added to this enormous volume of trade. The first chapter, entitled “The Porcelain City”, is chiefly devoted to an account of 18th century Jingdezhen, the colourful river town where the finest porcelain was produced. The French Jesuit from Lyon, François-Xavier Dentrecolle (1664-1741), emerging as the star of this chapter, first gave, “the first accurate and comprehensive account of the manufacture of Chinese porcelain ever sent to the West”. His groundbreaking reports appeared in the *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses de Chine*, the famous letters sent by the Jesuits from the China mission to their confreres in France. Dentrecolle, who as a missionary acquired what could be described as insider information on the porcelain business, reported not only on the way the glazed pieces were manufactured, but also on techniques of production that had remained professional secrets for centuries. He also gave a fascinating description of Jingdezhen itself and of the Ming and Qing royal kilns situated there, although, as explained in chapter four dealing with the creation of Jingdezhen porcelain, the town had already gained imperial recognition as early as the Northern Song.

Dentrecolle sent other quaint and curious impressions of the place, such as the fact that in China Jingdezhen was considered a market town and not a city because it had no walls, or the town’s infamous “pit to infinity”, where the corpses of the poor were cast in a mass grave below the burial grounds of the rich. The descriptions of another Jesuit active in the China mission, the Italian missionary Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), also help build the book’s arguments on the nature and social uses of porcelain. *The Pilgrim Art* is thus packed with historical information on the creation and commerce of Chinese porcelain. As such it can only enlarge the historical horizons of its readers.