



**Southeast Asian  
Ceramic Society**

**Special Lecture: Canton Export Wares  
by Prof. Feng Su Ge, Director of the Provincial Guangzhou Museum  
7pm, Saturday 9 June 2012  
at 82 Cairnhill Road, Singapore 229684**

The following is a translation by Council Member (2012) Lim Yah Chiew

### **Introduction**

Guangdong export wares refer to the “weaving gold” or gilded polychrome wares produced in Guangzhou. They are famous for brilliant and luxuriant colours with the gold gilded patterns. They were much sought after by the Westerners and had been one of the most important export commodities for over 300 years since the mid of Kangxi reign in 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Based on our study on the development of export trade, we can establish that Guangdong wares were first produced in the mid or late Kangxi period (1661-1722AD), and became fashionable for a time in Yongzheng period (1722-1735AD) and well developed in the Qianlong period (1736-1795AD).

### **The Origin of Guangdong Wares**

Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong, is located in the south of China close to the sea and at the mouth of Pearl River. In the early Qing dynasty, Guangzhou was one of the important centres of foreign trade. In 1684, the 23<sup>rd</sup> year of the Kangxi reign, Guangzhou was made one of the open export trade ports after the lifting of the sea ban by the Manchurian government. In 1757, the 22<sup>nd</sup> year of the Qianlong period, the Qing Government ruled that all export trade was to be carried in Guangzhou, which was even extended till 1840, the 20<sup>th</sup> year of Daoguang period. As Chinese ceramic was one of the most important commodities in demand by the Europeans, the porcelain merchants set up ceramic workshops and kilns on the south bank of the Pearl River to produce the porcelain wares for supply to the Western customers. Blank porcelain pieces fired in the shapes of vase, bowls, plates and various forms were purchased from Jingdezhen in Jiangxi Province and delivered to Guangzhou workshops for painting and firing before exporting to the foreign countries. In fact the potters and kiln workers were also employed from Jingdezhen applying the same potting techniques practiced in Jingdezhen, using the same colour pigments as well in the production. As such, the Guangdong wares fired in the early Qing period look exactly the same as those from Jingdezhen. During this

period, the Guangdong wares produced include decoration of enamel over the glaze, and the enamel pigments comprised mainly *famille verte* and *famille rose* colours.

### **Creation and Development**

The Guangdong wares produced in the middle and late Kangxi and early Yongzheng periods should be seen to be the early stage of its production. The potting materials were mainly imported from Jingdezhen and painted with Jingdezhen designs.

It was only during the Qianlong and Jiaqing eras that the Guangdong wares began to exhibit the characteristics that people would associate with the Guangdong styles. One was that all such wares were painted with the designs to suit the taste and favours of the westerners. Another was the use of new colours such as the “west red” and eggplant purple which were colourful, luxuriant and distinctive from that of the Jingdezhen pieces. Besides traditional painting methods, the Guangdong painters used techniques from the West and acquired the skill of three-dimensional perspective in the drawing of foreign landscapes and human figures.

### **Maturity**

By the Daoguang and Guangxu periods, the development of Guangdong glazed porcelain was complete, embracing not only traditional techniques but also the essence of European styles. With this combination, the wares display their own unique appearance showing a splendid clear picture in their designs.

In the late Qing period and later the Republican period, the designs on Guangdong wares were all traditional and exported. However, after the Communist Government took over the ruling of the country in 1949, there was a tremendous change to the production of the wares. Some of the designs show famous scenic locations in China. Breaking the limitations of traditional watercolour pigments, artists began to paint with a combination of watercolour and oils. Peonies, the clothes of figures, clouds and fogs were painted in oil and outlined with watercolour, while utilizing the advantages of watercolour to draw bold, soft and simple mountains, stones, springs and trees. The Lingnan painting styles was adopted at this time in some of the well painted pieces by the renowned artists.

### **Painting of Guangdong wares in various overglazed enamel**

The enamel painted over the glaze on porcelain of Guangdong wares comprises basically the *famille verte* (hard colour or five colours) and *famille rose* (soft colour or powdery colour). After colour is painted, the Guangdong porcelain were all fired a second time at a lower temperature of about 800 degree Celsius. The temperature must be controlled according to the structure of the kilns or burners and only the most accurate temperature can fire the pieces to the best standard. However, Guangdong wares also developed a kind of polychrome colour which is

different from the two traditional colours used in Jingdezhen.

In *famille verte* paintings, the method applied is by way of spreading colour in the space demarcated by single outlines, and in that of *famille rose* paintings, the boneless technique was used, meaning no sketches or outlines were drawn for the colour spread before the painting.

However, in the case of Guangdong polychrome, the pigments had been diluted with water, while in Jingdezhen oil was used instead. Therefore, the “west red” colour in Guangdong porcelains is thin and smooth, unlike the rouge colour of Jingdezhen’s *famille rose*, which is thick. In Guangdong wares, the liver red is similar to but lighter and brighter than the overglaze red of Jingdezhen, and the emerald green, which looks like the colour of crane or duck eggs, is deeper than the one of Jiangxi, but a little bit yellowish bright. A jute (a kind of plant like the sage) colour, which is brownish yellow and a little bit dark, was very popular in the West and often appears in the Guangdong polychrome.

### **Designs and motifs in Guangdong Wares**

The Guangdong ware workers adopted western artistic styles in order to produce export wares that pleased the foreigners. They used western painting techniques and the subject matter of the porcelain design or motif is very extensive: flowers, birds, insects, legends, landscapes and the painters even imitated the western drawings and made to order the required motif by the European customers. For different shapes of vessels, the Guangdong artists painted difference designs and motifs in conforming to the western requirements. This production destined for the European market endeavoured to enhance the iridescence of the glaze through the overlay of the decoration by combining gilded backgrounds with composite motifs, increased the use of reserved panels and medallions, and invented processes to achieve monochrome backgrounds finely engraved, stippled, perforated or lightly embossed. Particularly, with the emergence of the India Companies from the various European countries, the coats of arms designs were rather popular in the Guangdong porcelains as such motifs were a symbol of authority then.

### **Guangdong Wares are export wares**

The trading links established since the 16<sup>th</sup> century between China and the West strengthened the important role that Guangzhou played as the centre of trade in its coastal position as a port. The demand by the western market for such products as tea, silk and porcelain generated the fantasy of a far-off, enchanted China, and soon issued the cult of things Chinese in all artistic sectors. The chinoiserie craze attained its peak in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and its effects were felt as far away as China itself, where it brought about the manufacture of special porcelain for the West. They were special both in their forms which responded to western desires, and above all in their decoration which conformed either with their make-believe image of China or for production known as *chine de commande*, with European taste of the time.

From the 16<sup>th</sup> century, porcelain became a valuable commodity in Europe and in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, no Dutch ship of the Indian Companies would return from China without a considerable load of porcelain, stacked underneath the more important cargo of tea and silk.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese cups and saucers, and pots and dishes were a common sight in Europe and later in America as well. Most were used not merely for serving food and drinks, but for decoration. The chinoiserie craze pervaded all homes from the great collections in royal families, decorating cabinets, walls and shelves, to the modest cupboards and fire places of middle-class households.

The Western traders gathered in Guangzhou started ordering their own preferred shapes and designs such as whole dinner-sets, with mythological, biblical, erotic or armorial motifs. A new commodity was thus born, *chine de commande*, orchestrated in Europe and performed in China. Towards the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the manufacturing centre of export porcelain shifted from China's splendid "Porcelain City" at Jingdezhen (where at the time one million people were employed) to Guangzhou in the south because it was here that the European companies had to operate and to take their goods aboard.

With the disappearance of the Indian Companies and the end of the porcelain trade in 19<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese export porcelain now has become an antique curiosity and because of its large quantities—the Dutch alone sometimes imported more than a million pieces a year—a readily available item for collectors worldwide.



Photo courtesy of Prof. Feng Su Ge, Provincial Guangzhou Museum