

'Large dishes from Jingdezhen and Longquan around the World'

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In the great historical collections of Chinese porcelain in the Middle East, at the Ardebil Shrine in Persia and the collection of the Ottoman rulers at the Topkapi Serail, Istanbul, the majority of pieces consists of large blue and white dishes made in Jingdezhen and large celadon dishes, produced in the kilns of Longquan. They were used in the Islamic countries not for display, but for use at the big banquets, because they suited to the Middle East table manners. It was customary for several people to eat from a single vessel, different from China and other Far East cultures, where small bowls were preferred. Large dishes were not part of the ceramic repertoire for domestic use. Besides the countries of the Middle East, a great number of large dishes was found or excavated in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, where they were used in a number of rituals. The talk will focus on trade structures and the use of large dishes on a globalized (?) market before the European East India companies monopolized trade.

1. The Muslim market

Chinese porcelain found its way to the Middle East countries from the Yuan dynasty (1279 – 1368) onward by a trade - net of Muslim, mostly Persian, merchants. Muslim communities in China created a domestic demand for ceramic production to their taste, and Muslim merchants provided trade connections with the Islamic lands of Persia, Syria, Egypt, the Ottoman empire and the Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. The trade was conducted on the land routes, but mostly on sea routes. There were no “commissions” or special orders from Jingdezhen and the kilns of Longquan, as it was the case with the exports for the Portuguese market in the 16th and the Dutch in the 17th century. The potentially biggest customers, the Islamic courts of the Middle East, played a “passive” role on the market. How did the trade system work? And how the collections were formed?

2. The Southeast Asian market

A big market for large dishes from Jingdezhen, the celadons from Longquan and large dishes made in smaller kilns in Southern China was Southeast Asia. They were appreciated as heirlooms and until far into the 20th century played an important role as “magic” objects used in rituals. The trade from China to the countries of SE Asia before the arrival of the Western East India companies was conducted as a pluralistic peddling trade, in the hands of a variety of merchants, on land and on sea. The structure of the trade differed from the Muslim trade network as well as from the coordinated structures of the European companies. How did the system work?