

Muslim Blue, Chinese White: Islamic Calligraphy on Ming Blue-and-white Porcelain

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Nearing the end of the second decade of the 21st century, the world is witnessing a global pivot toward Asia in international affairs. Meanwhile, China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative is predicated upon the global importance of mutually beneficial relations between China and its westward neighbours, a vast proportion of whom are Muslims. The success of the initiative, with its economic and political aspirations, depends on bringing together people of diverse cultures, evoking the history of ancient commercial overland and maritime trade networks, romantically imagined as the 'Silk Roads'. Beyond the trade of precious commodities, these networks served as a nexus for an inter-civilizational exchange of ideas: technological, cultural, philosophical, religious and artistic. Within this metanarrative we find one of the legacies of this exchange—works of art produced in imperial China for Islamic taste, made for both domestic Muslim patronage and export to the Islamic world.

Chinese imperial blue-and-white (Ch. *qinghua*) porcelains with Arabic and Persian inscriptions represent a uniquely recognizable material manifestation of a Sino-Muslim culture that has evolved since the introduction of Islam to China in the Tang dynasty (618–907) (Figs 1 and 2). Products for the consumption of Muslim elites evince the centuries-old commerce between the Chinese and Islamic civilizations, and are thus a significant part of the world's cultural and artistic heritage. This relatively unknown genre of art has many stories to tell, and many mysteries yet to be solved.

Extant examples of this category of porcelains are relatively rare, and are widely dispersed around the world, making it difficult to determine how much material is in existence today. Many objects were exported from China to the Islamic world centuries



Fig. 1 Square vase with Persian inscriptions
China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Zhengde period (1506–21)
Porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, height 11.4 cm
James D. Frankel Collection



Fig. 2 Inkstone with Persian inscriptions
China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644),
Zhengde period (1506–21)
Porcelain with underglaze cobalt-
blue decoration, length 23.5 cm
James D. Frankel Collection

ago, as gifts to the Turkish Ottoman (1299–1922) or Persian Safavid (1501–1736) dynasties, or for consumption by other Muslim elites. Among those that were produced for the Chinese domestic market, presumably many have not survived the turbulence of China's transition to modernity. Some objects were also removed from China and eventually became part of Western collections, while others have been preserved in Asian museums.

The oldest and largest collections of Chinese ceramics in the Islamic world are in the Topkapı Palace Museum in Istanbul, Turkey and the Sheikh Safī al-Dīn Khānegāh and Shrine in Ardabil, Iran (much of this collection is now housed in the National Museum in Tehran). Chinese collections possessing notable examples of ceramics with Islamic inscriptions include the National Palace Museum in Taipei and the Palace Museum in Beijing. Some pieces are held in Chinese mosques, but these are rare since so many sites were desecrated during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Western collections include The British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Musée Guimet in Paris, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, The David Collection in Copenhagen and the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto.

So how did these objects come to exist? Where did they originate? For whom were they made, and why? What is so special about them? To some of these questions, there are relatively simple answers. Others require significant delving into a complex history. Yet others remain open to speculation.

Cobalt blue was first used to decorate ceramics in China during the Tang dynasty (618–907), either under or in the glaze; stoneware ceramics with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, being shipped

from China to the Middle East, were among the cargo recovered from the Belitung shipwreck of *circa* 830. The cobalt used on these early pieces was imported from the Middle East and Central Asia, and was later known in Chinese as *huihuiqing*, or 'Muslim blue' (Kessler, 2012, pp. 520–22). During the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), China and Persia were both part of the Mongol Empire, facilitating trade between them. White porcelain with underglaze blue decoration, made from Persian cobalt, began to be produced at the imperial Chinese kilns of Jingdezhen in Jiangxi province from the early 14th century.

After the overthrow of the Yuan dynasty, the nascent Han Chinese Ming (1368–1644) imperium maintained some institutions of their Mongol predecessors, including the Jingdezhen kilns, whose output multiplied exponentially. The Ming imperial workshops produced wares on an industrial scale for the court's use, for consumption by elites within China and as luxury exports abroad. From the early Ming period, reign marks began to appear on imperial porcelains. The shapes and decorative motifs of Yuan porcelain had been significantly influenced by Islamic designs and tastes, including forms based on metal vessels from the Middle East, and abstract geometric and 'arabesque' floral and foliate decoration, in both underglaze blue and red. The Ming kilns retained most of these elements, while innovating new forms and progressively improving upon the technique and artistry of the underglaze painted white wares.

The development of blue-and-white porcelain during the Ming period occurred against the historical background of the dynasty's evolving relationship with Islam and Muslims. First introduced into China during the Tang dynasty by foreign merchants, Islam began to be naturalized during the Song

(960–1279). A great influx of Muslims then occurred in the Yuan period, when the Mongols brought many foreigners to China from their western domains to serve as administrators. When the Hongwu emperor (r. 1368–98) of the Ming overthrew the Yuan, he expelled the Mongol elite beyond the Great Wall but did not displace the Muslims who had served them. Hongwu had numerous Muslim generals in his army, and prominent Muslim advisers at court. His son, the Yongle emperor (r. 1403–24), commissioned the famed 'Treasure Fleet' to establish commercial and diplomatic relations overseas. These missions were overseen by a Chinese Muslim admiral, the eunuch Zheng He (1371–1433). Among the fleet's precious cargo were blue-and-white porcelains that were traded or given as gifts to Muslim rulers in Southeast Asia, and in the Middle East and Africa further to the west.

Subsequent to Yongle's reign, most Ming emperors pursued an isolationist foreign policy, closing China off to the majority of foreign contact. One effect of this was a dramatic curtailment of Muslim immigration, which had helped maintain Islamic traditions in China under previous dynasties. The Ming government also compelled Muslims within the empire to assimilate into Chinese culture. Over time, therefore, Chinese Muslims became increasingly Sinophone, and gradually lost the use of Persian and Arabic, which were retained only in religious rituals. Many Muslim families encouraged their children to pursue a classical Chinese education so that they could take the civil or military service examinations and advance socially. As Muslims became increasingly Sinicized, the degree of traditional Islamic knowledge within their communities gradually declined.

Perhaps one of the last generations of Chinese Muslims to retain significant use of Persian and Arabic lived during the reign of the Zhengde emperor (1506–21). Zhengde was reputedly a reprobate ruler, more interested in pursuing personal pleasures than conducting affairs of state. It is true that he had idiosyncratic predilections, such as keeping a menagerie of exotic animals, indulging in sexual promiscuity and experimentation, and engaging in costume play; yet he was also a capable military leader who staved off another Mongol invasion. His dislike of court politics earned him the contempt of many Confucian officials, who could not easily control him. In their place, he surrounded himself with eunuchs and other advisers, many of them Muslims.

From ancient times, in many world empires, eunuchs were permitted intimate access to the otherwise forbidden inner world of the palace because their emasculation prevented them from having illicit sexual relations with royal women; furthermore, their inability to sire heirs disabled them from posing any threat of establishing a rival dynasty. Ironically, self-castration is explicitly forbidden in Islam, yet it became a way for Muslims to gain political power and wealth in the Zhengde court.

When considering the great proliferation of imperial blue-and-white porcelains bearing inscriptions in Arabic and Persian during the Zhengde reign, scholars have concluded that most of these were commissioned by the powerful Muslim eunuchs serving at court (Garner, 1964, pp. 29–30). Some were also exported as imperial gifts to the Ottoman and Safavid courts. We may further speculate about other possible patrons for such imperial wares. For example, assuming some of the Muslim eunuchs and officials were religiously devout, they may have donated certain pieces to mosques within China, many of which were built or renovated under imperial aegis during the Ming period. It is even possible that Zhengde kept some of these wares himself, as he is known to have had a particular interest in exotica Islamica, such as dressing in Arab-style costumes and preferring Muslim concubines; there is even conjecture that he may have covertly converted to Islam (Chiang, 2007, p. 1).

It may not be possible to know with certainty for whom these objects were made, but because they bear inscriptions, we can read them and glean what they may have to say about their audience. In examining features of a selection from my personal collection, a few observable patterns come to light. First, it should be noted that the inscriptions are not always easy to decipher. It is very likely that the artisans who painted the underglaze blue script were Chinese, illiterate in Arabic or Persian, and merely copied handwritten inscriptions that were commissioned (similar problems of scribal error occurred in renditions of Roman alphabetical inscriptions on later export wares for the European market).

As mentioned, some inscriptions are in Arabic and some in Persian, showing that both languages retained some currency among Chinese Muslims at the time. In general, Arabic, as the language of the Qur'ān, the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad



Fig. 3 Writing box with Persian and Arabic inscriptions
China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Zhengde period (1506–21)
Porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue
decoration, dimensions unknown
Musée Guimet
(Photograph: World Imaging/Wikimedia Commons)

(Hadīth) and Islamic liturgy, was used for devotional inscriptions. Persian, as the language of high culture among literary Muslims, was commonly used for inscriptions conveying emotional or aesthetic remarks, as well as descriptive comments about the objects. The Persian inscriptions are often evocative or derivative of Sufi poetry, and so carry some spiritual significance, but generally speaking, the Arabic tends to be more 'religious' and the Persian more 'secular' in meaning.

The first example is a square vase with a six-character Zhengde reign mark on its base (see Fig. 1). It has Persian inscriptions on two sides, which together translate as: 'Do not saddle yourself [with problems]. Come, do not go against fortune'. This somewhat lamenting yet inspirational couplet has fatalistic connotations, but is noticeably secular in tone. The second example, an inkstone with underglaze blue decoration on the four outer walls and four roundels and four diamonds each containing Persian words, was clearly made for scholarly use (see Fig. 2). Appropriately, its inscriptions speak of knowledge and beauty: 'Knowledge is a beautiful pearl'; 'the valuable'; 'Beauty is an intense pain'; 'the remedy'. A nearly identical object in the Musée Guimet has the addition of a base (with a six-character Zhengde mark) and cover, making a

complete writing box (Fig. 3). Interestingly, the cover has an Arabic inscription, also related to the literary arts: 'You must have good penmanship, for it is one of the keys to livelihood'. While outwardly secular, and related to the function of the object, the mention of 'livelihood' (Ar. *rizq*) in the inscription connotes divine providence, and so this proverb has sometimes (falsely) been attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. Another example bearing Persian inscriptions is a footed censer with gilt rim; the words on four sides together read: 'Hold onto faith if we are in danger', a secular exhortation with obvious religious overtones (Fig. 4).

The more overtly religious content of Arabic inscriptions is observable in the next three examples, all with Zhengde reign marks. A globular vase has words on four sides that read: 'Associate with the



Fig. 4 Footed censer with Persian inscriptions
China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Zhengde period (1506–21)
Porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue
decoration, height 10.8 cm
James D. Frankel Collection



Fig. 5 Globular vase with Arabic inscriptions
China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Zhengde period (1506–21)
Porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, height 11.4 cm
James D. Frankel Collection



Fig. 6 Vase with Arabic inscriptions
China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Zhengde period (1506–21)
Porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, height 11.4 cm
James D. Frankel Collection

good so you may ward off evil' (Fig. 5); a vase with gilt rim bears a half-phrase on either side: 'And the hereafter [is determined] by deeds', invoking the religious doctrine of the Final Judgment (Fig. 6); and the writing on a covered jar with words on four sides reads: 'There is no overturning of His ruling, and nothing pursuant to His judgment', evoking the theological language of the Qur'an (Fig. 7). Such deeply religious inscriptions recall the devotional function of the invocation and remembrance of Allah (Ar. *dhikr*), "an aesthetic phenomenology of remembrance", an extension in the ceramic materiality of the effect of visual *dhikr*' (Gonzalez, 2016, p. 10), suggesting the piety of the patron.

Finally, we observe a censer of a slightly later Ming date, without an imperial reign mark, in contrast to the examples above (Fig. 8). This enigmatic piece both challenges and confirms some of our previous observations in that it bears a combination of Arabic and Persian inscriptions and a mix of religious and secular meanings. The upper band, in Persian, reads: 'The arch of a Muslim is when he bends his back (in prayer) / By the throne, give the heads water and wash hands / Tell every heart not to be warmed by sorrow's censer'. The lower band, in Arabic, reads: 'The mercy of God descends upon the keeper of the censer, and He (God) is the Beloved of forgiveness. Placing the censer is the beautification of the sitting place; the charcoal ember is the beautifier of the Qur'an. The beauty of the good is the blessing of the Merciful (God)'. The final line on the lower band, in Persian, reads: 'How do lovers behave? They seek non-existence'. The Persian lines invoke verses from a *qasida* by the Persian Sufi poet Khāqāni Shirvānī (1120–90). The ceramic body of the object is somewhat gritty, and its underglaze painting and calligraphy are less refined than the imperial wares, suggesting that the censer may come from an unofficial kiln in Jingdezhen. Perhaps it was made for export to Muslim markets abroad, or for non-imperial patronage within China. Contrasting this example with the imperial ones reveals just how special the latter are.

We can understand why there was such proliferation of imperial works with Islamic inscriptions during the Zhengde period, with its alignment of historical factors: a sovereign sympathetic to Muslims; the rise of certain Muslims to political prominence; the apogee of blue-and-white porcelain manufacture. We can also see why this flash of brilliance in the production of imperial

Chinese Islamic art was so brief, as Confucian officials reasserted their dominance and Muslim influence at court declined after the Zhengde reign. Isolationist foreign policy in the latter Ming period also brought a drop in the quality of blue-and-white porcelain, as imported Persian cobalt became scarce. Lastly, the isolation of China's Muslims from their co-religionists abroad caused a decline in Islamic knowledge, and especially in the use of Arabic and Persian; this would have had the concomitant effect of inspiring the development of a uniquely Sinophone Islamic culture in late imperial China. As such, tracing the evolution of Chinese Islamic art objects bears witness also to the Sinicization of China's Muslims, and the ebb and flow of Islamic influence beginning in the Ming.

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Fig. 8 Three-legged censer with Arabic and Persian inscriptions
China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), probably mid- to late 16th century
Porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, height 17.2 cm
James D. Frankel Collection



Fig. 7 Covered jar with Arabic inscriptions
China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Zhengde period (1506–21)
Porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, height 10.2 cm
James D. Frankel Collection

Selected examples from the author's collection of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain with Arabic and Persian inscriptions will be on view in the exhibition 'The Blue Road: Mastercrafts from Persia' at the Liang Yi Museum, Hong Kong from 20 March to 24 June 2018.

The author would like to thank Ladan Hamedani, James Rumford and Iván Szántó for help with the Persian translations, and Mohammed Al-Sudairi for help with the Arabic.

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