CHINESE CERAMICS reached a new milestone in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) after the imperial factory was first established by the court early in the reign of Emperor Hongwu (1368–1398). The establishment of an official kiln dedicated to producing ceramic wares for the imperial court was a milestone in the development of ceramics not only for the court and official use, but it also stimulated ceramic development in Ming society.

Officials were sent from the central and local bureaux to supervise the production of imperial porcelain. Under strict quality control, blue and white porcelain, when compared to the monochrome and polychrome glazed styles, especially those produced during the reigns of Yongle (1403–1424) and Xuande (1426–1433), reached its climax during the Ming dynasty. This development is generally considered to be a transformational event in the history of ceramics in China; works of this period are highly sought after by collectors not only because of their great rarity and exorbitant prices fetched in auction markets, but also their supremacy in artistic and technical achievement.

However, this was only a starting point en route to the evolution of other porcelain styles afterwards, which exhibited a larger variation in shape, glaze and decorative pattern. Examples of these can be found in the delicate doucai (contrasting colours) wares of the reign of Chenghua (1465–1487) and the under (five-coloured) porcelain prevailing in the Jiajing (1522–1566) and Wanli (1573–1620) reign periods. All these were achieved on the back of the advancements in blue and white porcelain in early Ming.

An exhibition of late Ming ceramics, held in the University Museum and Art Gallery of The University of Hong Kong (October 14th, 2009 to May 23rd, 2010), features over 120 pieces of porcelain chosen from the collection of the University Museum and local private collectors. The exhibition may be the first of its kind to introduce Chinese porcelain of the reigns of Jiajing and Wanli. The examples in the exhibition include not only blue and white and polychrome ceramic wares that can be found in many other museum collections, but also monochrome pieces which are rare with some that are unique.

As put forward in numerous studies, Emperor Jiajing’s fascination for Taoism used to be the main focus for studying the décor on porcelain wares (1, 2, 3) produced in this period. Yet, in contrast to the early Ming period, the exhibition which gives an overview of the production of Chinese porcelain during the Jiajing and Wanli periods raised the question, that no matter what kind of shape, motif and quantity of pieces were produced from both official kilns and private kilns, the differences in hierarchy between them became less and less distinctive. Meanwhile, in contrast to the solemn elegance of the early Ming period, products of the Jiajing and Wanli periods were much more exuberant in style.

The focus of this article are the reasons for the changes of style of décor on late Ming porcelain. Investigated are why and how the simple decorative style of early Ming gave way to highly decorative patterns of the late Ming period, liberating the artisans from the restrictions imposed by the hierarchy of social classes in the use of motifs on porcelain; and how it gained historical significance under the changing social and economic conditions in the region of the South Yangzí River.

This transformation of porcelain style after the founding of the Ming dynasty is closely related to the social change and its effects on the lives of people, activated by social stability and the strict control of Confucian rites. After the mid-Ming period, people’s lives and values experienced a degree of change, which was related to their shifting attitude towards Confucian rites and rituals compared to the early Ming period. The impact on Confucianism came from the wave of mercantilism which swept through the region of the South Yangzi River, challenging the traditional orthodox Confucian values and their control on social life. This wave of mercantilism infiltrated all aspects of social life. The ordinary people, adapting to the new social environment, began to introspect and develop a new understanding of Confucianism. This change in attitude clearly impacted people’s lives and behaviour, and their pursuit of art. These so-called rites are no more than the everyday
requirements of people, i.e., food, clothing, accommodation, and transportation.

In Ming society, people’s desire for porcelain wares was part of their craving for luxury items. While these utensils satisfied the materialistic needs of people, more importantly they fulfilled their spiritual needs. Therefore the social values of people of any given period shaped the approach to the production of porcelain.

As in every other period in Chinese history, Confucianism dictated the basic social order, class distinction and social position, as proclaimed in the Ming Ji (Collection of Rites of the Ming) and Minglu (The Law of Ming) in early Ming. These defined the basic principles of Ming rule. This rigid social stratification of the early Ming period also imposed limits on the forms and shapes of porcelain wares available to the members of different social classes.

Similarly, porcelain wares had to be put into the same category of rites: i.e., rigid rules were imposed on the utensils that could be owned by members of different social classes. There were strict rules for the shape and design motif for porcelain production so as to regulate people of various social classes. The result in the distinction of social classes can be clearly shown in the shapes and patterns of porcelain wares of the period and porcelain itself became a reflection of social stratification. The imperial court sat on the top of the social pyramid and imposed a strict system of control to protect its unique prerogative in the use of utensils. In spite of this, the emperor’s aesthetic taste was shaped by his attitude towards Confucian core values and thinking. This also inevitably determined the prevailing style of porcelain ware, i.e., its shape, colour and design motif. The formation of style is undoubtedly a reflection of the everyday lives of people of the period.

The porcelain of Jingdezhen was at first manufactured in official kilns and not opened to the public. There were stringent measures to segregate porcelain destined for the imperial court and those for private consumption. However, by the reign of Emperor Jiajing, under the policy of “manufacturing in private kilns for official kilns”, the blue and white porcelain manufactured by private kilns began to be accepted by official kilns. Furthermore, in order to cater to the emperor’s Taoist inclination, officials as well as ordinary people presented porcelain produced by private kilns to the imperial court. As a result of the competition between the official and private kilns, there was no longer a strict stratification regime for the porcelain of Jingdezhen. The shapes of porcelain utensils become more varied; also popular decorations and motifs began to appear on the porcelain. Hence the shapes, colours and decorative motifs of the porcelain of the late Ming period exhibited a flamboyant style not seen before.

Xu Zhiheng (1877–1935) said, “Those artists who were good at painting dragons were numerous in the Ming dynasty. According to Chinese ancient tradition, the image of dragon was commonly recognised as the most noble and revered of all symbols. For the sake of showing the authority and dignity of imperial power, the dragon and phoenix have long been used as the decorative motifs on costumes, carriages, architecture and porcelain wares of the imperial family to symbolise imperial power and prestige. The Ming court also followed this practice. The imperial verdict of 1393 (the twenty-sixth year of the reign of Emperor Hongwu) banned the use of the dragon and phoenix motif designs by ordinary people.”

However, since the early Ming period, there had been forces outside of the imperial court that sought to undermine this symbol of imperial authority. During the reign of Jiajing, government control of “manufacturing in private kilns for official kilns” resulted in the relaxing of control of the production of imperial porcelain in Jingdezhen. It was also recorded that, “Tributes to the imperial capital distinguished by the dragon and phoenix motifs are manufactured according to the format prescribed by the imperial court. Nevertheless, imperial blue and white porcelain began to find its way into society and officials are powerless to stem this flow. Consequently, the hierarchical system of the use of insignia on porcelain can no longer be maintained.” Since then, the abuse of imperial decorative motifs became more and more serious. Even Emperor Wanli admitted this and said, “People have no respect for law and institution. Violation of social order can be clearly seen in the rituals of people’s marriage, funerals, banquets, and in their costume, architecture and use of daily utensils. The upper and the lower classes can no longer be distinguished.”

The breaking down of the hierarchical system reflects the weakness of the central government; this was followed by mass exploitation of imperial motifs to satisfy people’s desire for wealth, power and social status. From the time Emperor Jiajing ascended the throne until he indulged himself in Daoist superstition as a result of the Great Rites Controversy (1521–1524), there was an interregnum of twenty-seven years which witnessed the breaking down of the rigid control on society by Confucian rites and rituals. Linking this to the use of imperial motifs, whether the motifs of dragon and phoenix were as vigorous and animated as in previous courts, was no longer the government’s chief concern. The application of the dragon motif degenerated from a sign of imperial power into a symbol of greed and the lust for power. The masterful strokes in the paintings depicting a vigorous and lively dragon (4) were replaced by arbitrary and impotent drawings (5, 6).

One sees not only a continual weakening of authority, but even more important, is
symbolised the common pursuit of official rank and greed for wealth and power. Except those dragon and phoenix motifs commonly found on porcelain, the artistic achievements of blue and white porcelain in the Ming dynasty was closely related to the artistic tendency of the period.

According to *Tzulin-chih shuo-chi* (Chats on Ceramics in the Studio of Yinliu), “During the full splendour of the Ming dynasty, production of imperial porcelain gradually became mature, the décor of embellishment with the taste of simplicity was then applied to the porcelain industry. The motifs of dragon and phoenix were used from the earliest times and followed the institution of the Song dynasty. Animals, then human figures, were painted on porcelain for the purpose of increasing its delicacy and beauty. Studying the style of the time, an atmosphere of archaic simplicity of the works can be traced.”

Also, as recorded in *Tao-shu* (Description of Pottery and Ceramics), “During the reign of Emperor Jiajing, there were more than three hundred potters employed by the court. However, in view of the difficulty of painting, painters were specially recruited from elsewhere.” The task of painting decoration on the blue and white porcelain in official kilns was controlled and managed in a serious manner and ordinary potters were barred from participating in the task of painting. Painting was not done by those who were recruited as a labour, but by professionals employed from elsewhere. In Wang Shixing's *Guang-zhi-yi* (Expansive Records), he mentioned that the decorative patterns on the surface of *wucai* porcelain produced in the Xuande and Chenghua kilns were first done by the court painters of the Palace Painting Academy. Their works, used as samples, were then sent to the kilns for reference. Taking the blue and white bowl (7) and Miao Fu’s active in the 15th century) paintings of *Fish and Waterweeds* (8) as examples, although it is difficult to find a literary record showing that the painters had been employed for painting on porcelain, but judging from the painting styles, it is clear that they are similar. Miao Fu’s paintings epitomise the styles of Ming court painting, inherited from the court painting styles of the Song dynasty, with its fine lines, and lifelikeness and vivdness in the depiction of birds and flowers. However, limitations of the porcelain material and glaze colour of the porcelain, the patterns on porcelain were often the result of “patternisation” of court paintings (9, 10).

Leniency of the imperial court created favourable conditions for the generation of ideas and actions. When political control was relaxed, the economy naturally prospered. Tolerance of the imperial court facilitated the freedom of speech at the time, and mercantilism infiltrated the publishing sector. This resulted in the rapid development of woodblock print publications during the Jiajing and Wanli periods. In the Ming, novels with a warning message for society became popular, especially novels with illustrations. Their popularity encouraged the rapid growth of woodblock prints. Improvements in printing technology also
7 Blue and White Bowl Decorated with Lotus Pond, Fish and Seaweed
   Jiajing period, Ming dynasty
   Height 7 cm, width 13.5 cm, foot rim 5 cm
   Collection of Kwong Yee Che Tong

8 Fish and Waterweeds
   Miao Fu (15th century), Ming dynasty, hanging scroll, colour on silk
   Height 171.3 cm, length 99.1 cm
   Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing

9 Blue and White Octagonal Box and Cover Decorated with Flowers and Birds
   Jiajing period, Ming dynasty
   Height 10 cm, width 14 cm, foot rim 10 cm
   Collection of Songde Tang

10 Peacocks
   Lin Liang (1436–1487), Ming dynasty, hanging scroll, colour on silk
   Height 155.3 cm, length 78 cm
   Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing
11 Chengshi moyuan (Cheng’s Garden of Ink Cakes)

12 A Pair of Blue and White Bell-Shape Cups Decorated with Three Rams and the Sun
Jiajing period, Ming dynasty
Height 10.5 cm, width 16.4 cm, foot rim 5.3 cm
Collection of University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong

13 Lingmaopu (The Book of Birds)

14 Gushi huapu (Manual of Paintings of Gu Bing)

The gradual improvement of printing technology created opportunities for learning for artisans. Examples include the three volumes of the Gaosong huapu (Manual of the Paintings of Gaosong), namely, Zhibu (The Book of Bamboo), Jupu (The Book of Chrysanthemum) and Lingmaopu (The Book of Birds) (13); and Gushi huapu (Manual of Paintings of Gu Bing, 1630) (14) in which the author, Gu Bing, copied 106 famous paintings from the Jin (266–420) to the Ming dynasties. After the Wanli period, a large quantity of books with illustrations was published in various places, such as Jianyang, Jinling, Huizhou, Wulin and Suzhou. This development promoted artistic education which made use of pictorial book publication as the main media. Novels with woodblock print illustrations have had a profound impact on the pictorial designs and patterns on late Ming porcelains. Thus, these patterns on porcelain during the Wanli period became popularised.
The influence of woodblock prints on drawings on porcelain can clearly be felt. Examples are the first appearance of Daoist immortals on Jiajing wares (15, 16, 17, 18), decorations like birds, flowers (19, 20), figures (21, 22) or children at play (23, 24, 25, 26, 27) in porcelain of the post-Jiajing period to Wanli period. The themes of pictures and patterns on blue and white porcelain are more closely related to the pleasures and enjoyment of everyday life. This contrasts with the simple and unpretentious styles of the floral-scroll pattern and Arabic patterns found on porcelain before the Jiajing and Wanli periods.
21  *Jindiaoji* (Romance of a Golden Marten Coat)

22  *Meiping* Decorated with the Moon Goddess Chang’e and Rabbit

  Wanli period, Ming dynasty
  Height 27 cm, width 14.5 cm, foot rim 9.4 cm
  Collection of Dr Daniel Lee

23, 24  *Chengshi moyuan*
Facing the impact of mercantilism in the late Ming period, the search for lofty objects of the spirit degenerated into the pursuit for mere material enjoyment. The increase of wealth gave birth to indulgence in luxury and a tendency to compete in lavishness. This general mood of extravagance infiltrated into every aspect of people’s daily lives; it also influenced the decorative patterns on the wucai porcelain (28, 29). In Zhu Yan’s Taozhuo, he stated that “Coloured decorations on ceramics prospered in the Ming dynasty; the pictures adopted were mostly from textiles.”

Also, “There are more than fifty kilns producing blue and white porcelain in the Jiajing period. Decorations on the porcelain are of such extraordinary magnificence that it is almost impossible to find similar pieces to compare them with.”

The greed, pretension, the tendency to flaunt and worldly inclination of people were expressed in the arbitrary and stiff lines drawn in an exorbitant and complex manner on the wucai porcelain wares.

In contrast to the gorgeous and opulent wucai wares, monochrome porcelain wares (30) of the Jiajing period were not a mainstream product. The monochrome wares symbolising inward benignity have always resonated with the aesthetic view of simplicity of the early Ming era. This is related to the Taoist idea of “Tao takes conformity to nature as its principle.” Their plain colours impart the feeling that they were free from frivolity and flattery. Hence they were
mainly used for rituals by the imperial court. Since monochrome wares were exclusively fabricated for the court, collections are found mainly in the imperial palace and rarely found outside. The *wucai* glaze became popular during the *Jiajing* period, but the development of monochrome porcelain during this period received little attention. Nevertheless, monochrome wares were still produced in the *Jiajing* period.

In comparison with the previous periods, artisans seemed to have taken production of the turquoise glazed and purple-gold glazed wares to a new level of technical perfection. The turquoise glazed bowl (31) with the four-character mark of *Jiajing* in the exhibition demonstrates that turquoise glaze of the blue green colour similar to that of peacock feathers could be successfully produced; and for purple-golden glazed (32), stembowl with a sheen resembling metallic gloss, to this day it appears that both examples are the only specimen known to exist. However, comparing the *Jiajing* monochrome wares produced under the strict control of the court with the increasingly luxurious and extravagant *wucai* porcelain of the subsequent period, plus the fact that the subsequent number of *wucai* porcelain wares produced outnumber that of monochrome wares, clearly reflects the decline of imperial power bound by the restrictions of traditional rites towards the end of the *Ming* dynasty.

The decoration on *Jingdezhen* porcelain mirrored the patterns of social life of the age of *Jiajing-Wanli*. They not only provide a revealing perspective of the changing society of this period, but also show the relaxation of the control on societal norms by *Confucian*, in a more technical angle, porcelain of the later *Ming* period was inferior compared with those prior to the middle of the dynasty. However, from a historical perspective, the rapid economic development of the *Jiangnan* area of the late

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**Notes**


4. It should be noted that the period of late *Ming* in this article is taken to include the reigns of *Jiajing* to *Chongzhen*.

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28. *Wucai* Jar Decorated with Dragons Striding among Lotus

- **Jiajing** period, Ming dynasty
- Height 12 cm, width 13 cm, foot rim 8 cm
- Collection of Songde *Tang*

29. *Wucai* Garlic Mouth Vase with Lotus Decoration

- *Wanli* period, Ming dynasty
- Height 40 cm, width 20.5 cm, foot rim 13.3 cm
- Collection of Songde *Tang*

30. Yellow Glazed Bowl with Everted Rim

- *Jiajing* period, Ming dynasty
- Height 8.5 cm, width 19.5 cm, foot rim 8 cm
- Collection of Mr and Mrs George Lee

31. Turquoise Glazed Bowl

- *Jiajing* period, Ming dynasty
- Height 4.3 cm, width 13.2 cm, foot rim 5.2 cm
- Collection of Mr Benjamin W. Yim

32. Purple-Golden Glazed Stembowl Decorated with Incised Lotus Petal Pattern

- *Jiajing* period, Ming dynasty
- Height 12.1 cm, width 14.3 cm, foot rim 4.7 cm
- Collection of Mr Benjamin W. Yim

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- **Jiajing** period, Ming dynasty
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34. For the discussion of people’s shifting attitude towards *Confucianism*, cf. *Chen Baoliang*, pp. 647–658.

35. On average, aside from porcelain, the utensils of rich families for food and drink were mostly made of gold, silver, copper and tin. Those for poor families were only made of wood and bamboo, cf. also *Chen Baoliang*, p. 306.

36. Regarding the rules regulating the forms of the utensils that should be used by people of different social strata as assigned by the court, see Zhang Tingyu et al., *Mingshi* (History of the *Ming*), Shanghai: Hanyu didian chubanshe (2004), jun 68.


38. Xu Zhiheng, *Fenliao chaohui* (Chats on Ceramics in the Studio of Yinlu), Vol. 2, Shanghai: Shanghai chaoji shuzhuan yixing, p. 34.

39. According to *Mingshi*, in “the second year of the reign of Emperor Xuande, the interior official Zhang Shanyin was an officer supervising the production of utensils for the imperial court. He distributed some of those to other officials. He was exiled and executed; his body was displayed in public as a warning to others.”


44. Jan Stuart has given a few examples, see Jan Stuart, “Unified Style in Chinese Painting and Porcelain in the 18th Century”, *Oriental Art*, no. 41 (Summer (1995)), pp. 32–46.


47. Gu Bing, alias Anran, a painter of the *Jiajing* and *Wanli* periods, well known for his exquisite paintings, was selected as a court painter in the Inner Court of the Imperial Palace during the *Wanli* period. For *Gu Bing*’s works, see Bu Bing, *Lidai mingzong huajia* (Manual of paintings by Famous Masters of Successive Periods), Guilin: Guangxi shifian dauxe chubanshe (2001).

48. See Zhu Yan, jun 1.

49. See ibid., jun 2.