NEW SOURCES OF EVIDENCE FOR THE CLASSIFICATION AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE SIR MICHAEL BUTLER COLLECTION OF 17TH-CENTURY CHINESE PORCELAIN

Lecture given by Teresa Canepa and Katharine Butler on Monday 8 November 2021

The Annual Sir Michael Butler Memorial Lecture

Sir Michael Butler's ambitions were modest when he made his first purchase of Chinese porcelain in the salesrooms of Sotheby's, London in February 1961; he was looking for beautiful objects to fill the empty shelves in his new house. However, one piece in the lot of three that he acquired for £14 piqued his curiosity because no one seemed sure how to date it.¹ Inspired to learn more, over the next fifty years, Sir Michael amassed over 850 pieces of Chinese porcelain, he arranged and co-wrote the catalogues for six exhibitions, he gave numerous lectures and published nine articles. During his lifetime, he welcomed anyone interested to view the collection in his specially built museum and to date, his pieces have been illustrated in almost sixty academic journals and exhibition catalogues.² With such a well-known, studied and published collection, it is fair to question the need for further research. There are at least three good reasons to do so. Firstly, more than half of Sir Michael's acquisitions had in fact never been published, secondly, by assembling so many objects and their associated research together in one publication, a truly comprehensive understanding of the period can be achieved and finally, following the seminal 2005-06 exhibition in the Shanghai Museum, ³ there has been a great surge of interest in the 17th century, generating a huge number of new studies and important archaeological discoveries.

Subtitled *Beauty's Enchantment*, the exhibition in Shanghai was the apogee of Sir Michael's collecting career. Sixty-six pieces from his collection were exhibited together with the same number from the Shanghai Museum, many of which had never before been displayed in public. Not only was it the first ever joint exhibition in China between a British collector and a state museum, it was the first exhibition of 17thcentury Chinese porcelain in both China and the UK, when an abbreviated version came to the V&A Museum in the spring of 2006. The exhibition had come about thanks to an extraordinary friendship between Professor Wang Qingzheng (1931–2005), deputy director of the Shanghai Museum, and Sir Michael forged in 1988 when the latter had been allowed to visit the museum's storerooms. Despite a language barrier, the pair had made a deep connection. The professor had visited Sir Michael's house in Dorset in 1990 and told him that he wished to open the eyes of his countrymen to the beauty, quality and importance of 17th-century porcelain. This aim was accomplished. Almost a quarter of a million people visited the three-month exhibition, while scores of Chinese and international experts attended a threeday symposium where over forty papers were given. The period could never again be described as neglected. The accompanying catalogue not only summarised the present state of knowledge but also called for further studies and identified areas where new research was needed.4

In order to better classify and understand the porcelain, we have sought evidence from five types of sources:

- ¹ Sotheby & Co, London, 21st February, 1961, lot 187, £14, Lot of 3 including "a green glazed bamboo cylindrical Teapot and Cover, 5 in., *Kang Hsi*". This wine or tea pot is illustrated in Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 8, fig. I.1.1, p. 515, fig. III.5.35, and p. 549, fig. IV.8.
- ² For a full list see Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 51–53.
- ³ Scott 2021, pp 43–51.
- ⁴ Butler & Wang 2005.

- 1. Archaeological material: land (kiln sites, tombs and excavations around the world) and marine (shipwrecks).
- 2. Textual sources: gazetteers, inventories, journals or through identification of donors.
- 3. Visual sources: woodblock prints, paintings and textiles which may have been sources of inspiration for the decoration.
- 4. Recent scientific studies into the glazes and the clay, which have thrown new light on this period and will no doubt continue to do so.
- Simply studying the porcelains themselves and comparing them to other pieces in the collection or elsewhere, particularly those with dated inscriptions.

The List of Dated Porcelains

We undertook a not-so-modestly ambitious project to find and document every piece of Chinese porcelain in the world inscribed with a date between 1550 and 1722. For this we started with the list of 189 pieces that Sir Michael had compiled for the catalogue of the 1990–92 exhibition⁵ of the Butler Collection which travelled to twelve museums in the United States. Scouring auction catalogues and museum databases, getting tips from collectors and dealers and relying on more recent publications and dissertations, our research so far has found over 430 dated porcelains (fig. 1).⁶

This database is an ongoing and collaborative project which we plan eventually to make accessible online. We encourage anyone who wishes to participate in the research or reap its rewards to register on www. chineseporcelaindatabase.com.

Dating sources

A group of dated incense burners reveals why early 20th century scholars took a rather dismissive view of the 'Transitional' porcelain of the 17th century, a period when the Imperial kilns were closed. Six of them, with dates from the Chongzhen reign (1627-44), are almost identical. They are thickly and unevenly potted and are decorated formulaically in a dull-grey, underglaze cobalt blue. These cylindrical-shaped objects were offered by devout worshippers to temples and clearly there was no demand for innovation, as illustrated by a piece from 16117 and another from 16848 which are remarkably similar. Another group of eleven bombé-shaped incense burners with dates spanning from 1626 to 1732, although of higher quality, show a similarly conservative uniformity. An important piece dated the jimao year of Chongzhen, (or 1639), from the Butler Collection belongs to this group (fig. 2).

Another group of high-quality porcelains that are conservative in style were made in 1634 for a Ming princely family called Zhao.⁹ Our research has found eight dishes identical to one in the British Museum¹⁰ painted with a front-facing dragon predominantly in green and red enamels, as well as four dishes with the same decoration in underglaze blue.¹¹ The latter group

- ⁵ Butler, Medley & Little 1990.
- ⁶ See Appendix V.5 in Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 560–73.
- ⁷ Sotheby's London, 10.11.2017, lot 252.
- ⁸ Shanghai Museum 1987, p. 182.
- ⁹ Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 173, 175 and 177.
- ¹⁰ British Museum, Percival David Loan, PDF, A.753. Published in Wilson 1998, pp 30–31, no. 5.
- ¹¹ Canepa & Butler, 2021, pp 562–65.

	Exhibition	Exhibition			Exhibition		Exhibition			MA	MA			MA	
Туре	catalogue	catalogue	Book	Book	catalogue	Book	catalogue	Book	Book	Dissertation	Dissertation	Journal	Journal	Dissertation	Book
Date	1981	1983	1987	1988	1990	1993	2005	2007	2011	2012	2014	2017	2018	2019	2021
					Butler,				Chen,						Canepa
	Richard	Stephen	Wang	Sheaf &	Little,	Geng	Wang &	Liu	Chen &			Wang	Zheng	Wang	&
Author	Kilburn	Little	Qingzheng	Kilburn	Medley	Baochang	Butler	Youzheng	Chen	Ji Dongge	Shi Xialong	Guanyu	Hong	Zhenyu	Butler
	Transitional &		Underglaze			Ming &	17th			Early Qing	Dated	1552			1550 -
Focus	Forerunners	Transitional	Blue & Red	Hatcher	1600-1700	Qing	Century	Dehua	Dehua	dated	porcelain	vases	Shunzhi	Shunzhi	1722
1550 to			9									10			26
Wanli			18		24	7		16	8		9				68
Tianqi	2	3	12	3	15	10	2	2	9		4				24
Chongzhe															
n	10	6	27	22	52	18	8	6	6	7	29				92
Nanming	1	1			1			4	2	2					4
Shunzhi	2	8	18		17	15	3	3	1	11	19		13	29	37
Kangxi	6	3	36		80	36	13	19	19	30	46				187
Total	21	21	120	25	189	86	26	50	45	50	107	10	13	29	438

Fig. 1. Publications with illustrations or lists of dated Chinese porcelain from 1550–1722.

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Fig. 2. Incense burner, dated to the *jimao*.year of the Chongzhen reign (1639), blue and white porcelain, China, Jingdezhen, Ming dynasty, Chongzhen reign (1628–44), height 21 cm, diameter 32 cm, Butler Collection, inv. no. 1434.

relates closely to a piece in the Butler Collection and thus informs its date in the Chongzhen reign.¹²

In the 1980s, there was considerable confusion over the dating of Chongzhen porcelain caused by an unprecedented way of writing the date on some of the best quality objects produced during this reign. Inscriptions would show only the two-character cyclical year, or Ganzhi, and omit the characters for the emperor or dynasty. It is possible this was a subtle expression of distaste for the corrupt and chaotic regime, but whatever the motivation, it means the reader must know to which 60-year cycle the date corresponds. This allowed modern Chinese scholars to date a group of exceptionally high-quality porcelains, painted in a brilliant blue cobalt and in radically new shapes such as brush-pots, rolwagens and gu-shaped vases, to the 60-year cycle within the Kangxi reign (1661–1722) rather than to that of Chongzhen. This controversy¹³ galvanised Sir Michael in his transformation from collector to scholar and, in his first foray into academia in 1984,¹⁴ he systematically defined a chronology for Late Ming porcelain, coining the term 'High Transitional' to describe the disputed group. Further arguments were put forth in the catalogue of Sir Michael's first solo exhibition in 1986 in Leeuwarden,15

where he published 15 of his High Transitional pieces. Any last pockets of resistance were silenced by the publication by Regina Krahl of a 'pure' water bowl in the Museum of Chinese History in Beijing in 1986.¹⁶ This piece is High Transitional in decoration and is dated, not with a cyclical date but with what Professor Wang called an "absolute date";¹⁷ it is the 12th year of Chongzhen, (or 1639). Our research found 32 dated porcelains in the High Transitional style all dated between 1634 and 1644, of which 13 are *rolwagens*, seven are brush-pots and four are *gu*-shaped vases. Only four have "absolute" dates.

These superbly executed pieces of the 'High Transitional' dramatically challenged the ancient prejudice, of Asian and Western scholars alike, that only Imperial porcelain was of any quality. Once there was academic consensus that they were indeed late Ming, Sir Michael turned his campaigning energies to rehabilitating the reputation of the porcelain from a

- ¹³ Canepa & Butler, 2021, pp 18–23.
- ¹⁴ Butler 1983–84, pp 33–62.
- ¹⁵ Butler et al. 1986.
- ¹⁶ Krahl 1986, pp 51–53.
- ¹⁷ Butler & Wang 2005, p. 54.

¹² Canepa & Butler, 2021, p. 175, fig. III.2.4.



Fig. 3. Saucer-dish, blue and white porcelain, China, Jingdezhen, Qing dynasty, Shunzhi reign (1644–61), height 4.5 cm., diameter 21.5 cm, Butler Collection, inv. no. 1183.



Fig. 4. Saucer-dish, blue and white porcelain, China, Jingdezhen, Qing dynasty, Shunzhi reign (1644–61), height 8.5 cm, diameter 36 cm, Butler Collection, inv. no. 1233.

completely unrecognised reign, that of the first Qing Emperor, Shunzhi (1644-61). He eventually concluded that this period was one the most innovative and important in the history of Jingdezhen porcelain,18 and that amongst the great variety of shapes, decorations and glazes, many unique works of art were produced. Dated pieces in the Shunzhi style are rare however, and, in the 2002 exhibition titled Shunzhi, Treasures from an Unknown reign, Sir Michael and his fellow organisers were only able to include two Shunzhi dated pieces, one of which they subsequently discredited¹⁹ while the other was a calligraphic tomb plaque.²⁰ Our research identified 37 pieces with dates in the Shunzhi reign but fifteen of these are dedicatory vessels commissioned as gifts to temples or shrines and, as discussed already, inherently anachronistic in design. In the Palace Museum in Beijing there is an interesting group of six shallow bowls, inscribed wuzi, corresponding to 1648, with plain white glazed exteriors and a brown-glazed rim. Inside, they are decorated with a *taihu* rock and a poem. We found a pair to one of them in Australia which bears a four-character Shunzhi reign mark.²¹ This, in turn, is very similar to two undated pieces in the Butler Collection (fig. 3) which can thus be dated by analogy.²² Similarly, a dish in the National Museum of Scotland dated to the wuxu year, corresponding to 1658, bears striking similarity to a dish in the Butler Collection.23 They are the same size and

shape, with brown-glazed rims, both show Shoulao and the Eight Immortals and have a *ju tang jia qi* ('Fine vessel for the Jade Hall') mark. It seems safe to assume that the Butler piece and many similarly-shaped dishes are also from the Shunzhi reign (fig. 4).

A final example of the fruits of our research into dated pieces relates to porcelains²⁴ from the very rare Zhonghe Tang ('Hall of Central Harmony') group (fig. 5). Sir Michael had focussed a lot of attention throughout his collecting career on this exceptionally high-quality, dated group. He listed 26 in his 1990 catalogue, whilst a 2017 article referred to 27,²⁵ we have found 50. Debate has swirled as to whether they were made for the Imperial Court, but they are also important because they set a clear date by which time the use of underglaze red had been successfully revived. We found 30 of the group with a 1671 date, 18 with a 1672 date (to which six of the

- ¹⁹ "The Tyson Jar", The Art Institute of Chicago. Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 548, fig. IV.17.
- ²⁰ Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 265, fig. III.3.6.
- ²¹ Mossgreen Auctions, 21/11/2011, Sydney, Australia, lot. 50.
- ²² Both pieces are saucer-dishes. For an image of the other example, see Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 287, fig. III.3.35.
- ²³ Published in Hsu,1986, p. 142, pl. 65.
- ²⁴ Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 568.
- ²⁵ Lam, Huang & Huang 2016–17, pp 87–102. The 27 pieces excludes shards.

¹⁸ Butler & Wang 2005, p. 31.



Fig. 5. Group of Zhonghe Tang pieces, porcelain, underglaze blue and red, and celadon glaze, dated to the *xinhai, renzi* and *guichou* years of Kangxi (1671, 1672 and 1673), China, Jingdezhen, Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign (1662–1722), Butler Collection, inv. nos. 1316, 1053, 1334, 1692, 3000, 1457 and 1560.

seven lotus-shaped dishes belonged) and only two dated 1673.

Archaeological material

A critical aspect of Sir Michael's research that needed to be addressed was the limited availability and use of archaeological material, both terrestrial and marine. The comparative study of archaeological porcelains for classification has become more important than ever. Recent excavations conducted in and around Jingdezhen have significantly contributed to the establishment of direct links with the different kilns where 17th-century porcelains for both the domestic and export markets were fired. So far, 16 private kilns have been identified.²⁶ Only a few examples of the many pieces in the collection that can now be related to excavated shards will be discussed here. Some of them were produced specifically for the Japanese market in the new types of porcelain known as ko-sometsuke ('old blue and white') and ko-akae ('old coloured') that responded to the demand for wares intended for the *chado* (tea ceremony) and *kaiseki*, a light meal that preceded the serving of thick tea.²⁷ Excavations have shown that at least seven private kilns fired kosometsuke porcelain.²⁸ For instance, Tianqi saucer-dishes decorated with a hare, the inscription *yu tu* ('jade hare'), and blotches of paint in the 'blown ink' technique, were fired at the Fifth Primary School kiln (figs 6 & 7). Ko-akae porcelain was also fired in this kiln, as attested

by a fragment of a dish of fluted 12-sided shape and similar decoration to a Chongzhen example that bears the same *fu* ('happiness') seal mark.²⁹ Of particular interest is a Chongzhen plate with an indentation at the centre decorated with Budai, which bears a *tian xia tai ping* ('peace under heaven') mark (fig. 8). It is rare, as Sir Michael noted, to find turquoise enamel combined with underglaze blue. Such plates were fired at the Zhongdukou kiln, where a fragment showing only part of the outlines of Budai and the *ruyi*-clouds in underglaze blue was excavated (fig. 9).

A blue and white pot (fig. 10) belongs to a large group of pieces that were among about 25,000 porcelains recovered from a Chinese junk that sank in the South China Sea in circa 1643.³⁰ The cargo, primarily consisting of Jingdezhen blue and white porcelain of diverse types and varying quality, included a small part destined for the

- ²⁶ See Appendix V.3 in Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 555. With thanks to Professor Cao Jianwen, May Huang and Huang Qinghua for information and images of the excavated porcelains.
- ²⁷ Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 96–97.
- ²⁸ These kilns are Guanyinge, Third Middle School, Fifth Primary School, Zhongdukou, Shibaqiao, Daijianong and Zhejiang Road. Canepa and Butler, 2021, p. 97. For more information, see Cao 2011, pp 38–42; Huang 2018; and Cao 2019, pp 3–6.
- ²⁹ This fragment was shown during the OCS lecture. Huang 2018, p. 167. For the dish in the collection, see Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 125, fig. III.1.95.
- ³⁰ Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 139–40, fig. III.1.122.

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Fig. 6. *Ko-sometsuke* saucer-dish, blue and white porcelain, China, Jingdezhen, Ming dynasty, Tianqi reign (1621–27), height 3 cm, diameter 16 cm, Butler Collection, inv. no. 1445.



Fig. 7. Shard of *ko-sometsuke* porcelain excavated at the Fifth Primary School kiln site, photograph courtesy of Huang Qinghua, Tang Ying Society, Jingdezhen.



Fig. 8. *Ko-akae* plate, porcelain, underglaze blue and overglaze enamels, China, Jingdezhen, Ming dynasty, Chongzhen reign (1628–44), height 2 cm, diameter 21 cm, Butler Collection, inv. no. 1249.

Dutch market. This pot is one of a total of five modelled with an upward-pointing spout, a stoat-shaped handle and three lion-mask lugs applied in relief.³¹ We now know that pots of this type were fired at the Luomaqiao kiln, as attested by the excavated fragments of a pot with an all over flower-scroll similar to one of the 'Hatcher' pots (fig. 11). VOC documents show that such pots were not only



Fig. 9. Shard of *ko-akae* porcelain excavated at the Zhongdukou kiln site, China, Jingdezhen, photograph courtesy of Huang Qinghua, Tang Ying Society, Jingdezhen.

used for urine³² but also for water in both the VOC trading factory in Batavia and the Dutch Republic.³³

- ³¹ This pot and another example are decorated with blossoming flowers growing from rockwork. A third shows a dense design of flower scrolls, and the other two an overall design of fruiting melon vine.
- ³² Sir Michael used to call them 'piss pots'.
- ³³ Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 140.

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Fig. 10. Pot recovered from the 'Hatcher' wreck, circa 1643, blue and white porcelain, China, Jingdezhen, Ming dynasty, Chongzhen reign (1628–44), height 20 cm, diameter 22 cm, Butler Collection, inv. no. 1693.



Fig. 12. Shard of a brush-pot excavated at the Shibaqiao kiln site, China, Jingdezhen, photograph courtesy of May Huang, Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute.

An important find from the Shibaqiao kiln is a shard of a blue and white brush-pot dating to the early Kangxi reign with a well-finished convex groove within the foot ring left unglazed, commonly known as a 'channel foot ring' (fig. 12).³⁴ This distinct potting feature is seen on a number of pieces that appear to date from the previous Shunzhi reign. Its development has long been a subject of discussion. We have not found any pieces with this feature inscribed with a Shunzhi date; thus it is difficult to determine when exactly the feature began to be used. It is most probable that this type of foot ring did not serve



Fig. 11. Pot (reconstructed) excavated at the Luomaqiao kiln site, China, Jingdezhen, photograph courtesy of Jingdezhen Institute of Ceramic Archaeology, School of Archaeology and Literature, Peking University, and Jiangxi Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology.

a particular function in the firing or when in use, and that it was only a distinctive feature of a particular kiln.³⁵ It occurs mainly on large dishes and bowls decorated in underglaze blue or in combination with overglaze enamels, in the wucai palette. The noticeable differences suggest that the potters were freely experimenting with this feature at that time. We measured the depth and width of the grooves, as well as the height and thickness of both the inner and outer edges, and these vary from one piece to the next. Ranging from a very shallow, narrow groove³⁶ to a deeper and wider grove. The experimentation continued in the Kangxi reign. A blue and white brush-pot decorated with a refined 'Master of the Rocks' landscape, cyclically dated to 1667,37 demonstrates that by this year the potters had already replaced the shape of small brush-pots of the Chongzhen and Shunzhi reigns,³⁸ and were still producing pieces with an unglazed channel foot ring that had a very shallow, narrow groove.³⁹ Zhonghe Tang pieces bearing

- ³⁴ Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 262–63, fig. III.3.5a, b.
- ³⁵ Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 262.
- ³⁶ Sir Michael considered it to be an 'embryonic' channel foot ring. Butler, Medley & Little 2002, p. 163; and Butler & Wang 2005, p. 158.
 ³⁷ Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 411–12, figs. III.4.61a, b.
- ³⁸ The brush-pots produced during these reign periods had a narrower, more waisted body and a flat, unglazed base.
- ³⁹ The channel foot ring of this brush-pot dated to 1667 relates closely to that of the Shibaqiao kiln shard.

cyclical dates show that by 1671, a fully developed channel foot ring with a deeper and wider groove, and an outer ridge slightly thicker than the inner one, was being commonly used on deep dishes of large size decorated in underglaze blue and red,⁴⁰ and by the following year on saucer-dishes, like the two examples showing scenes from *Xi Xiang Ji* (The Romance of the Western Chamber) dated to 1672 and 1673 (fig. 5).⁴¹

Textual sources

Recent archival research has revealed that the production of a small High Transitional blue and white incense burner inscribed with a cyclical date corresponding to 1639 may have been supervised by Lu Hong Sheng, who took up a post of magistrate around the 11th year of the Chongzhen reign (1638) in Fuliang, the county in which Jingdezhen is located.⁴² Showing a scene of the Eighteen Lohan, it bears an inscription incised to the right of Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, that reads: jimao qiuyue, Lu Hongsheng jianzhi ('Supervised by Lu Hong Sheng in the autumn month of the *jimao* year [1639]'). An inscription recording the same year of production is seen in another blue and white incense burner decorated with two five-clawed dragons chasing flaming pearls (fig. 2). A second inscription written above one of the dragons, reading Xinshi Chen Yuqing ('the believer, Chen Yuqing'), may record the name of the person who presented it as an offering to the 'Xuan Miao Temple at Tongzhou'.43

Visual sources that inspired the decoration

A number of visual sources, including both woodblockprinted books and paintings, have been related in one way or another to 17th-century porcelain, and more specifically to pieces in the collection. A closer look at these and other woodblock-printed books, led to some interesting and surprising finds. As we see in an unusually tall High Transitional brush-pot of truly outstanding quality,44 the painted decoration - mostly executed with carefully delineated and fluid lines typically shows vertical layered rocks and swirling clouds linking the beginning and end of a narrative scene, which Sir Michael called a 'back' to the picture (fig. 13).45 This was not a novel feature used by the porcelain painters, as believed by Sir Michael and other researchers. At least from the Yuan dynasty, as Professor Ni Yibin has noted, narrative scenes painted on porcelain had been skilfully linked by a couple of trees or gnarly rocks.⁴⁶ However, the use of layered rocks and swirling clouds to

link the beginning and end of a scene was most probably inspired by prints like those from *Sancai Tuhui* (Collected Illustrations of the Three Realms), first printed in 1609 (fig. 14),⁴⁷ or *Tangshi huapu* (An Album of Tang Poetry and Paintings) published during the Wanli and Tianqi reigns,⁴⁸ or from those included in dramas such as *Gu zaju* (Ancient dramas) published in 1619.⁴⁹

The *Shizhu zhai shuhua pu* (Ten Bamboo Studio manual of calligraphy and painting) was one of the earliest Chinese book printed by the technique of polychrome xylography, known as *douban*, produced between 1619 and 1633.⁵⁰ It can now be cited with some certainty as the inspiration for the decoration of a few pieces in the collection, for example the scene

- ⁴⁰ For an example in the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, see Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 418, fig. III.4.68. Another example from the Sir Percival David Collection housed in the British Museum is illustrated in Pierson 2004, p. 45, colour pl. 653. There is also a saucerdish modelled with a fully developed channel foot ring and cyclically dated to 1671 in a private collection in China.
- ⁴¹ Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 419 and 424, and p. 421, figs. III.4.74a, b and III.4.73a, b respectively.
- ⁴² The authors owe a debt of gratitude to Liuyue Yang, PhD student at the University of Warwick, for providing us with information regarding Lu Hong Sheng's life and career. Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 221–22, figs III.2.52a-c.
- ⁴³ The inscription with the cyclical date, written in three columns, reads: *Daming Chongzhen jimao zhongchun, feng Tongzhou Xuanmiao guan yuhuang baodian* ('made for the Precious Hall of the Jade Emperor in the Xuan Miao [Daoist] Temple at Tongzhou, second month of Spring of the *jimao* year of the Chongzhen reign of the Great Ming'). Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 173–74, fig. III.2.3.
- ⁴⁴ The vase depicts a scene from the Han dynasty historical drama of Cai Yan.
- ⁴⁵ Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 202–03, figs III.2.36a, b.
- ⁴⁶ Ni 2014–15, p. 44.
- ⁴⁷ Compiled by the official-writer Wang Qi (fl. 1561–1614) and his son Wang Siyi, it is regarded as the earliest illustrated encyclopaedia printed in China. Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 192. However, the use of clouds to divide scenes vertically on woodblock prints can be seen as early as the Chenghua reign (1465–87) in *shuochang ben* such as *Bao daizhi chushen zhuan* (biography of the Early Years of Bao Zheng). See Wang 1987a, pp 57 and 61, fig. 1.
- ⁴⁸ Edited by Huang Fengchi. Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 190–91, figs III.2.25 and III.2.26.
- ⁴⁹ See, for example, Lin 2009, p. 157, fig. 95.
- ⁵⁰ *Douban* was a multiple-block colour printing technique that consisted in using separate small blocks for each colour. The manual that supplied ink cake designs, *Chengshi moyuan* (Cheng's Catalogue of Ink) by Cheng Dayue (1541–1616), published in 1606, is an earlier example of colour woodblock printing in China. Printed in five colours by applying the different colours to the relevant parts of the same block, this manual was a source of inspiration for the porcelain painters.

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Fig. 13. High Transitional brush-pot, blue and white porcelain, China, Jingdezhen, Ming dynasty, Chongzhen reign (1628–44), height 22.5 cm, diameter 17.5 cm, Butler Collection, inv. no. 1647.



Fig. 15. High Transitional brush-pot, dated to the *wuyin* year (1638) in ink, blue and white porcelain, China, Jingdezhen, Ming dynasty, Chongzhen reign (1628–44), height 18 cm, diameter 10 cm, Butler Collection, inv. no. 1410.



Fig. 14. *Sancai Tuhui* (Collected Illustrations of the Three Realms), woodblock-printed book, ink on paper, China, Ming dynasty, Wanli reign (1573–1620), 1609, facsimile reprint, Shanghai, 2014.



Fig. 16. *Shizhuzhai shuhua pu* (Ten Bamboo Studio manual of calligraphy and painting), polychrome xylographic printed book, China, Ming dynasty, developed and printed between 1619 and 1633 in Nanjing, Cambridge University Library.

of a bird perched upside down on blossoming prunus finely painted around the sides of an unusually tall, blue and white High Transitional brush-pot (figs 15 & 16). This piece is of particular interest as it bears two large characters, *Yu Win*, and across them the inscription *Wu Yin Zhang Chong Shan Zhi* ('acquired by Zhang Chongshan in the *wuyin* year'), corresponding to 1638, written in ink on the base.⁵¹ It is extremely rare, as Sir Michael noted, to find such an ink inscription on High Transitional porcelain.⁵² Closely related depictions of this

- ⁵¹ Canepa & Butler, 2021, pp 230–31, figs III.2.58a–c and III.2.59.to foot n
- ⁵² Dunand and Butler 1994, p. 22; and Butler & Wang, 2005, p. 76.



Fig. 17. *Rolwagen*, blue and white porcelain, China, Jingdezhen, Qing dynasty, Shunzhi reign (1644–61), height 47 cm, diameter 12.5 cm, Butler Collection, inv. no. 1429.

scene appeared on Shunzhi porcelain, including a large *rolwagen* in the collection.⁵³ Another print shows close similarities to an attractive decorative feature of using washes of diluted cobalt blue to surround the flowers of a



Fig. 18. *Shizhuzhai shuhua pu* (Ten Bamboo Studio manual of calligraphy and painting), polychrome xylographic printed book, China, Ming dynasty, developed and printed between 1619 and 1633 in Nanjing, Cambridge University Library.

prunus tree seen in a large, high-quality *rolwagen* dating to the Shunzhi reign (figs 17 & 18).54 This feature first appeared in the 1640s⁵⁵ and continued to be used in both blue and white, and wucai porcelain in the latter years of the Shunzhi reign as attested by a brush-pot cyclically dated to 1654 and by a beaker vase, both formerly in the Curtis Collection,⁵⁶ and in the Kangxi reign, as seen on the rim of a large, deep dish showing a superbly executed landscape in the 'Master of the Rocks' style in underglaze blue and red (fig. 19).⁵⁷ Could the newly invented *douban* technique reproducing the effect of watercolour painting used in this manual have inspired the painters to employ a similar palette of overglaze enamels to decorate the best quality porcelain? These pieces would have been most probably commissioned by the important and discerning new market of literati and wealthy merchant classes of Jiangnan.58

The 'Master of the Rocks' landscapes painted in underglaze cobalt blue or with accents of underglaze red in two Kangxi saucer-dishes show an unusual feature

- ⁵³ Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 300–01, figs III.3.47a–c.
- ⁵⁴ Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 298–99, figs. III.3.45a, b and III.3.46.
- ⁵⁵ Curtis 1995, p. 116.
- ⁵⁶ Offered for sale as lots 3530 and 3538 at Christie's, New York, 16 March 2015, respectively. The brush-pot, signed with the seals *zhuying* ('bamboo shadow'), is published in Butler, Curtis & Little 2002, pp 134–35, cat. 27.
- ⁵⁷ Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 416–17, figs III.4.67a, b.
- ⁵⁸ Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 243.

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Fig. 19. Dish, porcelain, underglaze blue and red, China, Jingdezhen, Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign (1662–1722), height 9.5 cm, diameter 32 cm., Butler Collection, inv. no. 1384.

(fig. 20).⁵⁹ Sir Michael suggested it represents heavy rain falling from a cloud, shown in the same style as the mountains and rocks.⁶⁰ This feature is also seen on a brush-pot with zig-zag and blobby-dots bands typical of the Kangxi reign (figs 21a & b).⁶¹ But it seems likely that it depicts a flat-topped mountain like those that appear in the first edition of *Jieziyuan huazhuan* (Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting), published in 1679, which reproduced paintings by famous artists of the Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties (fig. 22).⁶² The repetitive clusters of dots or circles, as well as the short lines suggesting the foliage of trees also look like those that appear in prints from this manual.⁶³

Woodblock prints in ink, colours and embossing like those from the catalogue of letter-paper designs, *Luoxuan biangu jianpu* (The Wisteria Studio Album of Stationery Decorated with Ancient and Modern Designs), published in 1626,⁶⁴ may have served as source of inspiration for the swirling clouds finely incised on the white body of a tall vase dating to the mid-Kangxi reign,⁶⁵ and more specifically for this type of decoration beautifully combining flat and low relief incised motifs executed in underglaze blue and red, and celadon glaze or left plain white (figs. 23 & 24). The use of these three high-fired colours together, particularly difficult to control, attests to the high technical achievements of the porcelain painters and kiln masters at this time. Although the tiger and the

- ⁵⁹ Both saucer-dishes are modelled with a fully developed channel foot ring. Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 407–08, figs III.4.56a, b and III.4.57.
- ⁶⁰ Butler 1986, p. 88; and Butler, Medley & Little 1990, p. 137.
- ⁶¹ Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 402–04, figs III.4.51a, b.
- ⁶² This manual, consisting of five volumes, focused solely on landscape painting. It was compiled by Wang Gai (*c*.1645–*c*.1707), a painter from Nanjing. Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 403–05, figs III.4.51a, b and III.4.52–III.4.53.
- ⁶³ Compare, for example, a print illustrated in Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 404, fig. III.4.53.
- ⁶⁴ For another print from this catalogue, see Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 443, fig. III.4.100.
- ⁶⁵ Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 440 and 442, figs III.4.96a-c.





Fig. 20. Two saucer-dishes, blue and white porcelain, underglaze blue and red, China, Jingdezhen, Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign (1662–1722), height 6.5 cm, diameter 32 cm, height 65 cm, diameter 33 cm, Butler Collection, inv. nos. 1058 and 1309.

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Figs 21a, b. Brush-pot, blue and white porcelain, China, Jingdezhen, Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign (1662–1722), height 15 cm, diameter 17 cm, Butler Collection, inv. no. 1470.



Fig. 22 *Jieziyuan huazhuan* (Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting), woodblock-printed book, ink on paper, China, Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign (1662–1722), 1679, photo courtesy of Princeton University Library.

dragon seem to be depicted in the style of the Southern Song Buddhist monk Fachang Muqi (1220–1279),⁶⁶ it is more likely that late Ming prints served as inspiration for these motifs. In fact, the body posture of the tiger resembles that of a print included in *Sancai Tuhui*.⁶⁷

Research on paintings by early Qing artists was also fruitful. Professor Craig Clunas has suggested that the sparse yet monumental landscape seen on a Kangxi blue and white incense burner raised on three short feet is in the style of Hongren (1610–1664) or another contemporary artist from Anhui.⁶⁸ Searching for paintings by Hongren, who became the greatest of the so-called Anhui School painters, we came across the hanging scroll *The Coming of Autumn* in the Honolulu Museum of Art showing a landscape with spindly trees in the foreground and tall, angular layered rocks and mountains which indeed resemble those of the incense burner.⁶⁹ The painting style is comparable to that of another brush-pot of this shape and size in the Palace Museum in Beijing, cyclically dated to 1673.⁷⁰

Material and visual sources for shapes

A question that still remains unanswered is the origin of an elegant vase shape that appeared in the late Kangxi reign. Modelled with a tall, square-sectioned body

- ⁶⁶ See, for instance, the hanging scroll *Dragon; Tiger* illustrated in Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 443, fig. III.4.97.
- ⁶⁷ Illustrated in Canepa & Butler, 2021, p. 443, fig. III.4.98.
- 68 Canepa & Butler, 2021, p. 414, figs III.4.63a, b.
- ⁶⁹ The hanging scroll was shown at the OCS lecture and is illustrated in Canepa & Butler, 2021, p. 414, fig. III.4.64.
- ⁷⁰ Chen 2005, pp 308–09, pl. 204.

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Fig. 23. Vase, porcelain, underglaze blue and red, and celadon glaze, China, Jingdezhen, Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign (1662–1722), sixcharacter Kangxi reign mark, height 44 cm, diameter 16 cm, Butler Collection, inv. no. 1059.

with tapering sides, and a trumpet neck of square or cylindrical section, it was produced in underglaze blue, underglaze blue and red or in overglaze enamels, but apparently only for a short period of time (fig. 25). We found three dated vases of this shape, all produced in the early 1690s.⁷¹ We searched tirelessly for earlier bronze or ceramic vessels of this shape, but no exact model appears to be recorded. The shape may have derived from vases modelled after ritual jade cong produced at Jingdezhen in the Ming dynasty.⁷² Although it shows some resemblance to the kraak square-sectioned bottles produced from the Wanli to Chongzhen reigns mainly for the export market, the profile and proportions are different.73 Another related shape is seen in *ko-akae* bottles.⁷⁴ However, it is clear this vase shape must be Chinese and was produced in some material such as bronze, jade or ceramic before the 1630s because squared-sectioned vases of a closely



Fig. 24. *Luoxuan biangu jianpu* (The Wisteria Studio Album of Stationery Decorated with Ancient and Modern Designs), woodblock-printed catalogue of letter paper designs, ink, colours and embossing on paper, China, Ming dynasty, Tianqi reign (1621–27), facsimile reprint by Shanghai Duoyunxuan, 1981, Collection of Professor Lee Yun-Woon.

related shape with both cylindrical and square-sectioned trumpet necks appear depicted in *bogu* or antiquities designs painted in High Transitional porcelain,⁷⁵ seemingly half a century before they were made in porcelain.

- ⁷¹ These vases were shown during the OCS lecture. See the list of dated porcelains in Appendix V.5 in Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 570.
- ⁷² For an example, recently added to the collection, see Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 448, fig. III.4.110.
- ⁷³ See, for instance, the example housed in Burghley House in Lincolnshire, England, illustrated in Lang 1983, p. 59, no. 142.
- ⁷⁴ An example recently added to the collection is illustrated in Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 442 and 448, fig. III.4.111.
- ⁷⁵ See, for instance, a vase from the Museum of East Asian Art in Bath illustrated in Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 449, fig. III.4.112. *Bogu* designs with such vases continued to be used in the Shunzhi reign. For a *rolwagen* with this design in the Palace Museum in Beijing, see Canepa & Butler 2021, p. 449, fig. III.4.113.



Fig. 25. Square-sectioned vase, blue and white porcelain, China, Jingdezhen, Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign (1662–1722), apocryphal six-character Chenghua reign mark, height 53 cm, width 16 cm, Butler Collection, inv. no. 1140.

Scientific studies into the glazes and the clay to determine authenticity and origin

From the mid–1990s, Sir Michael became increasingly suspicious that a large number of fakes of 'his' period was pouring into the market. On a visit to Jingdezhen, he tried to hunt out their source and even managed to order a copy of one of his square-shaped vases to learn more about the skills of these imitators. He encouraged debate as to the authenticity and origin of his pieces and campaigned to increase rigour in the auction houses. Recent scientific research using non-destructive spectroscopic techniques on both the glazes and the body of the porcelain may provide the firm answers that Sir Michael and his fellow collectors yearned for.⁷⁶ One study has found that there was a significant increase in the proportion of kaolin used in porcelain in Jingdezhen



Fig. 26. Plate, porcelain, overglaze enamels, Jingdezhen kilns, Jiangxi province or Dehua kilns, Fujian province, Ming dynasty, Tianqi/ Chongzhen reign (1621–44), height 2.5 cm, diameter 14 cm, Butler Collection, inv. no. 1469.

at the start of the 17th-century.77 Other studies on the glazes of Chinese and Japanese porcelain using energydispersive X-ray fluorescence (ED-XRF)78 have found that the blue enamel on shards from Japanese kilns sites was composed of cobalt imported from Europe. These findings provide new evidence in the debate79 over the origin of much of the porcelain made for the Japanese market. For example, a small dish in the Butler Collection decorated with tigers (fig. 26) has abundant use of a thick blue enamel which, if the piece was made in China between 1625 and 1644, as Sir Michael believed, would be the earliest use of such overglaze enamel on Chinese porcelain and was not much seen again before the famille verte pieces of the 1680s. However, an identical piece in the V&A is catalogued as Japanese.⁸⁰ Now an entirely non-invasive scientific process could reveal which designation is correct, or it might suggest, like a piece in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts,⁸¹ that the body is Chinese but the glazes were applied in Japan.

- ⁷⁶ Canepa & Butler, 2021, p. 541.
- ⁷⁷ Wood 2021, pp 49–65.
- ⁷⁸ Montanari et al. 2019, pp 94–102.
- ⁷⁹ Canepa & Butler 2021, pp 537–42.
- ⁸⁰ V&A Museum, Acc. no. C.5 1965. Described as Arita Kilns (Kutani type), Japan *c*.1670–90.
- ⁸¹ Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Acc. no. 34.221, Gift of Marshall H. Gould. See also R. Montanari et al. 2017, pp 232–237.

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Sir Michael's contribution to the study of 17thcentury Chinese porcelain was immense. By establishing a clear chronology, he helped prove that the superb quality, High Transitional pieces were indeed produced in the late Ming and that thus, even in non-Imperial times, great works of art could be made. His scholarship and championship have meant that the porcelain of the Shunzhi reign is now recognised for its exceptional beauty, variety, innovation and influence. In collaboration with Professor Ni, he pioneered and promoted the systematic identification of narrative scenes such that discussions of porcelains now seem incomplete without such information. Arguably, however, his most important legacy was his constant encouragement of scholarship and research using archives, excavations, objects and designs from other media, scientific analysis and critically, simply handling and comparing the porcelain. This inspiration will continue to lead to important new discoveries.

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