



Telling relics' vivid stories

Porcelain exhibits from former palace's royal collections and archaeological discoveries provide picture of imperial times



Nearly 300 royal porcelain artifacts from the late Ming Dynasty are displayed in the Palace Museum in Beijing at an ongoing exhibition. PHOTOS BY JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY

By WANG KAIHAO
wangkaihao@chinadaily.com.cn

The Palace Museum, also known as the Forbidden City, is showcasing porcelain artifacts from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), a period considered among the best in Chinese ceramic-making.

The ongoing exhibition in Beijing, *Imperial Ceramics and Porcelain of the Great Ming: Comparison of Excavated and Extant Ceramic Pieces from Jiajing (1522-66), Longqing (1567-72) and Wanli (1573-1620) Reigns*, is the sixth and final edition in a series of similar displays over the past three years.

The exhibition opened to the public on Nov 6 and will run through Feb 22.

The 298 exhibits from the former palace's royal collections and archaeological discoveries from today's Jingdezhen, in East China's Jiangxi province, give visitors a panoramic view of the styles of porcelain ware created over a century and also portray a general picture of society during imperial times.

"We want to tell the vivid stories behind the cultural relics," said Shan Jixiang, director of the Palace Museum, adding that the exhibition is able to display a wide range of artifacts.



Lyu Chenglong (first right), a porcelain researcher at the Palace Museum, introduces exhibits to visitors.

Shan said that by presenting the latest achievements in archaeological research, the exhibition series has gone beyond academia to the public domain.

The exhibits show the achievements in ceramics during the period and the rigid criteria in selecting royal artifacts at that time, said Lyu Chenglong, a porcelain researcher at the museum.

From the iconic blue-and-white porcelain items to others in pure and bright colors, which were established in previous reigns, to new shapes with images of dragons and other totems, many of the series' exhibits are rarely seen treasures.

More colorful artifacts — the most recognized feature of porcelain in that era — began to appear between the Jiajing and Wanli reigns.

"The decorative patterns became more complicated," Lyu said. "Colors got flamboyant, sizes bigger, and bizarre shapes were favored — reflective of the economic prosperity then and the indulgent lives people lived."

In 1369, a year after the start of Ming rule, a porcelain kiln was set up in Jingdezhen, which exclusively served the royals. Later the city would be dubbed the "china capital of China". Only the best products were taken to the Forbidden City, and the defective ones were broken

and buried on site in Jingdezhen.

Similar and even identical artifacts have been discovered among kiln relics in Beijing, giving scholars research material for comparative studies.

In the late Ming Dynasty, capitalism also guided tastes in ceramics, but the changes were such that the decorative elements in the later Ming era were not as exquisite as earlier examples. In addition, there were changes in the management system of the imperial kiln in Jingdezhen at the time.

In the early years of the kiln, the studios making royal porcelain items were separated from the production of artifacts for general use. But the porcelain-making technique had improved in general by the time of Emperor Jiajing's reign, and the turnover of the royal kiln could not meet the royal demand.

"Some privately owned kilns were finally given the green light to make artifacts for the emperor (Jiajing) under official supervision," Lyu said. "Some samples of these are also being exhibited."

Work at the imperial kiln was officially halted in 1603, and product contracts were given to privately owned kilns. It was reopened some 80 years later during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

Not all exhibits are intact, and some are excavated broken porce-

lain pieces. Lyu said these are equally important references for researchers to have a whole picture of the industry then.

Studies of unearthed relics from the royal kiln show the existence of at least 37 kinds of porcelain pottery during Jiajing's rule, indicating the boom in ceramics, as well as craftsmanship. A type of "melon skin porcelain", which is glazed in green and looks like a watermelon, reached its peak popularity in the Jiajing era, even though it appeared in the early Ming Dynasty.

A policy decision by Emperor Longqing opened China to world trade. Although he ruled for just five years, he lifted a longtime official ban on overseas trade shortly after taking power, allowing the country's wares to be purchased globally.

"That gave different civilizations a chance to communicate with each other through the marine trade route," Gu Yucai, deputy director of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, said at the opening ceremony of the exhibition on Nov 6.

"That reflects the inclusiveness of Chinese culture, and, more important, influenced the handicraft industry of other countries."

Gu said porcelain wares from Wanli's reign were later widely used by foreign studios as models to make colorful ceramics.