

On Ceramic Stories Telling in BBC Documentary *China in Six Easy Pieces*

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Abstract: *China in Six Easy Pieces* is a documentary produced by BBC related to Chinese porcelain. This documentary has a novel theme and adopts six representative pieces of Chinese porcelain as the narrative objects to tell the ceramic stories behind them, thus reflecting the more macro picture of Chinese ceramic culture. Based on the introduction to the background of this documentary, the author of this paper explores the ceramic story behind each of the six pieces of porcelain and points out the merits and limitations of the documentary so as to provide references for Chinese media to produce better porcelain-related documentaries.

Keywords: BBC Documentary; *China in Six Easy Pieces*; Ceramic Stories

1. General introduction to *China in Six Easy Pieces*

China in Six Easy Pieces is a Chinese ceramic themed documentary produced by BBC(British Broadcasting Corporation) in 2013. Different from other documentaries related to Chinese ceramics which adopt a macro perspective, the presenter Lars Tharp of *China in Six Easy Pieces* blazes a trail by choosing six representative pieces of Chinese porcelain and telling English audience the ceramic story behind each of them. Through a micro perspective, the documentary aims to reflect the panorama of Chinese ceramic culture^[1].

In the history of Chinese antique collection, Percival David(1892-1964) is a legend. He was born in a Jewish family in Mumbai of India, whose father is a locally known banker and entrepreneur. In 1913, Percival David moved to London and began to be keen on ceramic collection under the influence of the oriental art mania in Europe. Since 1920, he bought a great amount of porcelain from British antique shops and he went to China for several times to enrich his collection to set up Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art. Among his collection, there are over 1700 pieces of porcelain with a time span of nine centuries, the majority being the imperial porcelain from Song dynasty to Qing dynasty^[2]. Percival David believes that he can gain a deeper insight into the oriental culture through studying those collected pieces of porcelain.

Percival David is not the only person who has such an idea. Lars Tharp, a British ceramic expert, began to work in an antique auction shop at the age of 21 and touched many pieces of imperial porcelain. In the BBC documentary *China in Six Easy Pieces*, he carefully chose six pieces of porcelain, five from Percival David's collection and one from the modern Chinese porcelain. Through studying the six pieces of porcelain, the English audience can get a better understanding of Chinese ceramic culture.

2. Ceramic stories behind the six pieces of porcelain

2.1 White porcelain bowl and Cong-shaped vase

Song dynasty is a very prosperous period in the history of Chinese traditional porcelain making. Ceramic historians usually divide the porcelain kilns of Song dynasty into six kiln systems: Dingzhou kiln, Yaozhou kiln, Junzhou kiln, Cizhou kiln in the northern regions, and Longquan Celadon kiln and Jingdezhen Qingbai kiln in the southern regions. On the one hand, these kilns have some uniqueness due to the special materials of the regions where they locate, and on the other hand, they have something in common because of the political concepts, cultural customs and technical procedures of Song dynasty.

The northern kiln porcelain in Song dynasty is primarily grey or greyish in body but has various kinds of glaze colors. For example, the glazes of Junzhou kiln porcelain include crab apple red and rose purple, which are splendid like sunset clouds and ever changing like flowing water. The glazes of Ruzhou kiln porcelain are lustrous like condensed fat. The glazes of Cizhou kiln porcelain are mysterious crystallized ones like oil drops, partridge spots and tortoise shells. The southern kiln porcelain is white or grey white in body. The Qingbai porcelain of Jingdezhen kiln is white like jade and green like lake water, while the celadon of Longquan kiln is green and lustrous like green plum. The glazes of Ge kiln are covered with cracks like web, which is a unique defect beauty. Dingzhou porcelain is decorated with formal impressed patterns, while Yaozhou porcelain is ornamented with free carved patterns. With a pursuit of beauty in both the color and quality of glazes, the porcelain making techniques of Song dynasty reached a new aesthetic stage.

The porcelain of Song dynasty, with its elegant and lustrous style, deserves a monument in the world handicraft development. The main characteristics of Song porcelain are as follows: 1. various kinds of porcelain with different shapes; 2. beautiful monochrome glazes (Junzhou porcelain excluded) like jade, which conforms with the simple and elegant beauty advocated by the Confucianism and reflects the Chinese national spirit; 3. many decoration methods, such as impressing, carving, piercing, incising, applying and so on with patterns being mainly flowers, birds, insects and fish to gain a complete and poetic style.

The first piece of porcelain Lars Tharp chose is a simple but elegant white bowl. At the first sight, it is very unnoticeable with plain color and ordinary shape. It is no more than a dog's bowl in the eyes of the foreigners. However, its design is far from being simple. Its rim is inlaid with a round and smooth bronze ring and its body is carved with delicate patterns only to be seen with a very close distance. What is it used for? The experts conclude that it is probably a bowl for rinsing the writing brush by the scholars of Song dynasty. It reflects Chinese people's respect for knowledge and learned scholars. Lars Tharp extended his topic to the beauty of Chinese calligraphy based on the introduction of this white bowl, emphasizing that Chinese characters are not mere symbols but also art works so as to reflect the close relationship between porcelain and calligraphy.

According to the professions, people in the ancient times were divided into four categories, scholars, farmers, workers and businessmen, with scholars enjoying the highest social position. The people in Song dynasty showed a great respect towards knowledge. Those who were specialized in philosophy, art, music and even diet were respected by the ruling class.

Since Sui and Tang dynasties, those who were eager to become officials had to attend the entrance examination. In order to conform with the standard of the examination, those people must not only recite the classics of Confucianism but also be good at using the four treasures of the study (writing brush, inkstick, inkstone and paper). Therefore, calligraphy became an indispensable part of the scholars' life. Even the bowl for rinsing writing brush should be very pleasing to both the eye and the mind. Thus this delicate white porcelain bowl came into being.

The second piece of porcelain Lars Tharp chose is a Cong-shaped vase, which is usually considered to appear from the Southern Song dynasty. The imitation of antiques was in fashion in Song dynasty, and this Cong-shaped vase was modeled after the jade Cong of Liangzhu civilization in the Neolithic period. The Official kiln and Longquan kiln in the Southern Song dynasty both had such kind of porcelain. The fashion of imitating antiques reflects Chinese spirit of inheritance.

Simple as it seems, this Cong-shaped vase is of decent origin. With the monochrome glaze, formal and square appearance and solid surface, it belongs to the famous official kiln and was fired in the imperial kiln of the Southern Song dynasty. Through close observation, the surface of the vase shows the colors of blue and green with various tints.

This porcelain boasts a special name Cong, which had a long history and appeared in the neolithic period in the form of jade. The concrete meaning of Cong is hard to trace, but the shape evolved to Song dynasty, which reflects Chinese respect towards their ancestors and history.

2.2 Blue and white vases with the date of the 11th year of Zhizheng Reign of Yuan dynasty

This pair of blue and white vases are probably the most important and well-known blue and white porcelain, which are now in the British Museum. They are decorated with dragons and almost in good condition with the date of the 11th year of Zhizheng Reign of

Yuan dynasty(1351), which is a firm evidence that blue and white porcelain already appeared in Yuan dynasty.

There are subtle differences between the patterns of the two vases. The inscription at the top of the vases indicates that they were sent to a temple in 1351. However, the significance of the pair of the blue and white vases collected by Percival David lies not in religion but in trade. The appearance of blue and white porcelain has broken away the limitation of monochrome glaze, which owes greatly to the prosperity of international trade. Since the ancient times, trade has provided great stimulus for the development of China. In the middle of the 14th century, Chinese businessmen bought a mysterious mineral called cobalt from Persia, and when heated at the high temperature, cobalt can change into fantastic color of blue. Afterwards, Jingdezhen in Jiangxi province underwent a great technical revolution and blue and white porcelain came into being^[3].

2.3 Doucai teapot and Fencai vase of Qing dynasty

Chinese porcelain making technique reached its peak in Qing dynasty, especially in Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns, being unparalleled by the former dynasties both in quality and quantity. Jingdezhen remained the porcelain capital of China during the whole Qing dynasty with the imperial porcelain unquestionably representing the highest standard of Chinese porcelain. While blue and white porcelain is still the main stream, Doucai, Wucui, Fencai porcelain was fired with great techniques and splendid glaze colors^[4].

The fourth piece of porcelain Lars Tharp chose is a Doucai teapot, through which the documentary talks about the historical origin and tradition of Chinese tea drinking and the history of tea leaves export. This teapot is small and exquisite decorated with dense pine trees and green bamboos dotted with petals. It was produced in Jingdezhen exclusively for Emperor Yongzheng. At the bottom of the teapot is the clear mark of Yongzheng reign. It is the representative of Doucai porcelain.

This teapot reflects the unique charm of Chinese tea culture. Tea is the bonding agent of Chinese society in which everyone needs it whether he is the Emperor or a civilian. Tea was so important that it once threatened the security and stability of the society. In the Hongwu reign of Ming dynasty, the popular tea bricks even replaced the currency so as to anger the Emperor. Under the order of the Emperor, tea leaves were made very loose. The production of tea leaves stimulated the development of teapot making. There were many ways to drink tea. Besides following elegant ceremony to drink a teapot of tea, scholars preferred to enjoy tea to relax themselves and stimulate inspiration for composing articles. On one occasion, the tea was poured into the cups to float in the canal for scholars to drink, which was indeed a very interesting affair.

3. Conclusion

The BBC documentary *China in Six Easy Pieces* chooses six pieces of porcelain to tell the English audience the ceramic stories from Song dynasty to modern times. In this documentary, admiration of knowledge, respect towards ancestors, vigor and wisdom of trade, rich tea culture, the imperial authority and rebel against tradition are shown so as to provide a micro perspective for foreign audience to gain a deep insight into Chinese ceramic culture, which is worth learning for Chinese media to produce ceramic-related documentary. However, the sixth piece of porcelain, the butt-shaped porcelain was not properly chosen to truly represent the modern Chinese ceramic art. In order to well reflect the modern ceramic art, more representative porcelain should be adopted to tell the real Chinese ceramic stories.

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Introduction to the author: Deng Hongchun (1979-), male, Han Nationality, born in Songzi, Hubei province, master, associate professor of Jingdezhen Ceramic University, his research direction is the translation and dissemination of ceramic culture.