A Global Crayfish: The Transcultural Travels of a Chinese Ming Dynasty Ceramic Ewer

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Abstract An unusual type of small stoneware ewer in the shape of a crayfish was produced in private kilns in southern China during the second half of the sixteenth and the early seventeenth century. It seems that these vessels were made exclusively for export, for no "crayfish ewers" are known to be preserved in China proper. Three narratives will follow the global travels of this type of vessel; they will examine how the appreciation and use of "crayfish ewers" changed when crossing borders and entering different markets in varying historical and socio-cultural contexts. The "crayfish ewer" thus exemplifies the prototypical "trans-cultural" object.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, "bizarre" shapes in Chinese ceramics were highly appreciated by Western collectors and became part of the *Kunstkammer* or "Cabinet of curiosities" collections at European courts. In fact, a crayfish ewer was part of the famous "Medici Gift," of a group of Chinese porcelains given by the Medici to the Dresden court as a diplomatic offering in the year 1590. Objects like the "crayfish ewer" were appreciated and valued in this context as extremely rare and exotic decorative objects. But ewers in the shape of a crayfish were also used by the indigenous people of the Kelabit and Murut in Borneo on the Indonesian archipelago. Vessels in the shape of animals, such as ducks or crayfish, were used to drink *borak* (fermented rice-wine) as part of the traditional rituals for headhunting.

In Japan, highly sophisticated aesthetics developed around the ritual of tea drinking *chanoyu*. *Karamono,* literally "Tang things," referring to mostly antique Chinese objects assimilated to Japanese taste, played a prominent part in the aesthetic repertoire of the *chanoyu.* It is in this third context, that the type of ewer in the shape of a crayfish was appreciated, probably as a conversation piece.

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In some historic cases, the ways in which East meets West and East meets East materialize in surprising ways. The focus of this article is a rather unusual ceramic object, an ewer in the shape of a crayfish, and the role it played in East and West relationships as well as East and East connections.

The crayfish ewer belongs to a group of stoneware objects, which were made in kilns in Southern China, in the provinces of Fujian and Guangdong. These mostly molded pieces were glazed on the biscuit in a bright green, a deep yellow, a brownish and in a few cases, a turquoise glaze. They can be dated to the late Ming period, the second half of the sixteenth to the first half early seventeenth century. Chinese ceramics, from the Tang dynasty (618–907) onward, were made not only for the local market, but for different clients around the world. When they crossed culturally defined borders, they were "changed" by the people who took possession of them. In a different historical and socio-cultural context, objects were used for other purposes than originally intended by the Chinese potters and consequently appreciated in a different way in a variety of aesthetically defined systems.

As a museum curator for Asian ceramics one has the traditional option to present the pieces from your collection with a label that merely indicates measurements, material, provenance, and dating. One also has the option to allow a piece of ceramic to tell its own story, by addressing questions of use and other frameworks of reception (for example through collecting). The "object," sitting silently in all its beauty in the depot or in a showcase, does not simply speak to you, the curator, or others, the museum visitors. It often takes extensive research and sometimes also a good bit of luck, or a combination of both, to make the object "talk."

The story I am going to tell here is the story of a Chinese ceramic object, an ewer in the shape of a crayfish, and the three intercultural narratives related to it. The first time I came across this remarkable object was while I was working as a curator in the Dresden Porcelain Collection, which mainly consists of the porcelain accumulated by Augustus the Strong (1670–1733).[1] The ewer, however, came into the court collection much earlier, as part of a gift of 14 Chinese porcelains from the Medici family of Florence to the court of Dresden, in 1590.[2] Keeping in mind its history in the Medici collections in the Palazzo Pitti and other comparable pieces in European *Kunstkammer* collections, the small crayfish seemed to me to be a classical *Kunstkammer* object.

When I moved to the Netherlands a few years ago to work at the Princessehof Museum, Leeuwarden, I found a ceramic collection that was very different from the Renaissance and Baroque court collections in Dresden. The Princessehof Museum mostly consists of Chinese export ceramics that were found and collected in the twentieth century in the former Dutch colony of Indonesia, where Chinese ceramics

[1]Eva Ströber, '*La Maladie de Porcelaine': East Asian Porcelain from the Collection of Augustus the Strong* (Leipzig: Edition Leipzig, 2001).

[2]Eva Ströber, "Porzellan als Geschenk des Großherzogs Ferdinando I. de' Medici aus dem Jahre 1590," in *Giambologna in Dresden: Die Geschenke der Medici*, ed. Dirk Syndram et al. (Dresden: Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, 2006), 103–10.

Fig. 1 Ewer in the Shape of a Crayfish. Porcelain, unglazed, painted in overglaze enamels, traces of gilding. China, probably Fujian province. Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Jiajing period (1522–1566). H. 12.5 cm. Inv. No. P.O. 3479. State Art Collections Dresden, Porcelain Collection. Photo: Lukas Kraemer

traditionally played an important role as heirloom pieces, status symbols, as well as ritual vessels for the indigenous people, particularly on the island of Borneo.

Rummaging through the museum library for material on Borneo I came across the *Sarawak Museum Journal*, edited by the museum in Kuching, Sarawak, in Borneo. The articles deal with Orangutans and hornbills, excavations of Neolithic sculls, and Chinese coins. I was completely taken by surprise to find, in an old, rather grainy black-and-white photograph illustrating a headhunting ritual of the Kelabit, an ewer in the shape of a crayfish. How did this sophisticated *Kunstkammer* piece make it to a head-hunting ceremony in the highlands of Borneo?

When the crayfish ewer made its appearance again while I was preparing a presentation of objects used in the refined rituals of the Japanese tea ceremony, I was no longer surprised. I became curious. This article is an attempt to approach this intriguing, transcultural object as a case study in order to find out which role it played in the wider networks of relationships between East and West and between East and East.

Crayfish Ewers in European Cabinets of Curiosities

A couple of ewers in the shape of a crayfish found their way into European *Kunstkammer* collections and cabinets of curiosities. As published elsewhere, this type of vessel appeared as part of a seventeenth-century *Kunstkammer* in the Dresden Porcelain Collection, Germany.[3] In fact, there are two crayfish ewers in the Dresden collection. As mentioned, crayfish number one is part of the famous gift from the Medici family to the Dresden court in the year 1590 (Fig. 1). Eight of the original 14 pieces of this gift are still preserved in the Dresden collection: three blue

[3]The Medici gift is discussed in Eva Ströber, "The Earliest documented Ming-Porcelain in Europe: A Gift of Chinese Porcelain from Ferdinando de Medici (1549–1609) to the Dresden Court," *International Asian Art Fair* (2006).

Fig. 2 The Medici Gift. From left: *Kinrande* bowl, green. H. 6.5 cm. Inv. No P.O.3228; *Kinrande* bowl, red. H. 6.5 cm. Inv. No P.O. 3229; Porcelain, painted in overglaze enamel and gold. Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Jiajing period (1522–1566); Crayfish-shaped ewer. Porcelain, unglazed, painted in overglaze enamels, traces of gilding. China, probably Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Jiajing period (1522–1566). H. 12.5 cm. Inv. No. P.O. 3479; Phoenix-shaped ewer. Porcelain, unglazed, painted in overglaze enamels, traces of gilding. China, probably Fujian province, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Jiajing period (1522–1566). H. 28.5 cm; Inv. No. P.O. 3578; Bowl, painted with a river landscape. Porcelain, painted in underglaze cobalt blue. China, Jingdezhen, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Jiajing period (1522–1566), mark of the Xuande period (1426–1435). H. 6.7 cm. Inv. No. P.O. 3225; Bowl, painted with ships. Porcelain, painted in underglaze cobalt blue. China, Jingdezhen, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Jiajing period (1522–1566). H. 10.5 cm. Inv. No. P.O. 3226; Lamp with Kui Xing on a boat. Porcelain, unglazed, painted in overglaze enamels, traces of gilding. China, probably Fujian province, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Jiajing period (1522–1566). H. 9.5 cm. Inv. No. P.O. 3791; Bowl with cover. Porcelain, painted in underglaze cobalt blue. China, Jingdezhen, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Jiajing period (1522–1566). H. 11.5 cm. Inv. No. P.O. 3227. State Art Collections Dresden, Porcelain Collection. Photo: Lukas Kraemer

and white pieces, two so-called *kinrande* bowls glazed in green and red, and three figurative vessels: a wine jug in the shape of a phoenix, an oil lamp in the shape of the Chinese mythological figure Kui Xing 奎星 on a boat, and the ewer in the shape of a crayfish (Fig. 2). The Medici were the earliest collectors of Chinese porcelain in Europe.[4] Fifty-one pieces were recorded in the collection of Lorenzo de' Medici (1449–1492) alone. In the sixteenth century, Cosimo I (1519–1574) and his son Francesco I (1541–1587) also excelled as art collectors and collectors of porcelain.

[4]For the collecting of Chinese porcelain in Renaissance Italy, see Marco Spallanzani, *Ceramiche orientali a Firenze nel Rinascimento* (Florence: Libreria Chiari, 1997).

The collections by Cardinal Ferdinando I (1549–1609) comprised Greek and Roman sculptures, bronzes, and paintings; they were housed in the Villa Medici in Rome and formed the prototype for the opulence and splendor of Renaissance collecting. In 1587, Ferdinando became Grand Duke of Tuscany and moved his collections from Rome to Florence, where they were placed in the Palazzo Pitti.[5]

Far away from Italy, in Dresden, the Saxonian electors of the sixteenth century wished to turn Dresden into a princely city and to establish themselves as rulers of European-wide importance. This endeavor implied modernization, particularly in the cultural field, and modernization during the early modern period implied a certain degree of Italianization. Already by the middle of the sixteenth century, the Saxonian Elector Moritz (1521–1553) had made a journey to Italy; and in the year 1547, he had his portrait painted by Titian (probably 1488/90–1576). His successor, Elector Augustus (1526–1586) strengthened this relationship with Italy. After the death of Augustus in 1586, Christian I (1560–1591) became the elector, and ruled for only a short period until 1591. Christian, who loved everything Italian, was a great collector. His ambition was to enlarge the *Kunstkammer* and turn it into a collection of European-wide importance.

For their part, the Medici were interested in good relationships with these German princes who could provide them with skilled mining and artillery specialists, as well as give them political support. Gift exchanges were intended to serve the establishment, facilitation, and maintenance of these socio-political connections. In the year 1587, the Medici sent three works by the famous sculptor Giovanni da Bologna (1529–1608) to the Dresden court. To this day, his famous sculpture of the messenger of the Gods, Mercurius or Mercury, is one of the artistic highlights of the Green Vault in Dresden. But it was in 1590, on February 26 to be exact, that Cardinal Ferdinando gave 14 pieces of Chinese porcelain to Christian I of Saxony. This was the very first real porcelain (as opposed to other sorts of ceramic like earthenware or pottery) to appear in Dresden.

A register of these gifts has been preserved. It was written at the Medici court in Florence by a man called Giovanni del Maestro,[6] who packed three boxes for Dresden. The first contained bronzes and paintings; the list mentions "paintings from *Indie* with figures and landscapes."[7] *Indie* in this context refers generally to the Far East and other "exotic" places. While the Dresden examples have not been preserved, potentially comparable extant objects include the Chinese paintings in the *Kunstkammer* of Ambras Castle, Austria.[8]

[5]For the Medici porcelain collection, see Francesco Morena, *Dalle Indie orientali alla corte di Toscana: Collezioni di arte cinese e giapponese a Palazzo Pitti* (Florence: Giunti, 2005).

[6]The complete list in Marco Spallanzani, "Le porcellane Cinesi donate a Cristiano di Sassonia da Ferdinando I de' Medici," *Faenza* 65 (1979): 383.

[7]Orig. "quadro di pitura de l'Indie a figure e paesi." Quoted from Spallanzani, "Le porcellane Cinesi," 383.

[8]For the Chinese paintings in Ambras, see Harry Garner, "Chinese Paintings of the Sixteenth Century at Schloss Ambras," *Oriental Art* XXII (1976): 262–4.

The list of gifts was recorded in Florence as well as in Dresden. According to the preserved lists the second box was filled with classical Italian gourmet food that was very popular in the northern side of the Alps and remains so today. From the registry we know that this box contained "Parmesan cheese" (*cacio Parmigiano* respectively *Zwei Formen Parmesan kese*) and "sweet oil" (*barili dua di olio dolce* respectively *Zwei feslein mit suessem oel*), different kinds of special ham (*prosciutto*, *salami di Firenze*) and "salted geese" (*un baile doche salate* respectively *ein feslein mit eingesatzenenn Gensen*). To wash this down more pleasantly, the Medici also added Italian wine, for example *Graeco di 48 anno*, *Vino Falangino di Sicila* or *Trebbiano di Pesca*.[9]

The third box was filled with Chinese porcelain. Again, the list of gifts was recorded twice, first in Florence and again in Dresden's 1595 *Kunstkammer* inventory.[10] In this inventory the Medici porcelain gift appears as "drinking and other vessels from Italy,"[11] however, the entries of the inventory also allow for an identification of individual pieces. The crayfish vessel was inventoried as "one porcelain goblet with gold, blue, and red, almost the shape of a crayfish."[12]

The ewer is small, only about 10 cm high, and the crayfish is perched on a lotus pod and a brown lotus leaf. On the back of the animal is an opening through which the vessel can be filled. This opening is sculpted in the shape of a small flower and enameled in bright turquoise. The piece is decorated in yellow, green, brown, and turquoise, and the yellow-glazed parts show traces of gold leaf application.

In the description of the Medici collection from the year 1579, the entry for the crayfish ewer indicates "a vessel for pepper made of porcelain in the shape of a crayfish, with gold."[13] The term *peparola*, which can be translated as "a small pepper pot," is quite surprising. Based on its shape one might think that the vessel was used as a kind of dropper to pour water. But the term *peparola* indicates that the Medici apparently filled pepper—at that time an exotic and very expensive commodity—into the opening at the back and poured it from the spout and mouth of the crayfish ewer. This indication of the ewer's function corresponds with the fact that the Medici kept porcelain objects not only as collectors' items or for display, but actually used them at the table.[14]

As previously mentioned, there is yet another crayfish vessel in the Dresden collection. The crayfish of type number two is a modified shape, and with a height of 23.6 cm it is much bigger (Fig. 3). In this example the crayfish sits on an inverted

[9]The list is preserved in Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Dresden, Geheimer Rat, 8517–5.

[10]For the Medici lists, see Spallanzani, "Le porcellane Cinesi." The Dresden inventories are preserved in the archive of the Green Vault, Grünes Gewölbe, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.

[11]Orig. "Ahn Italienischen trinck und anderen geschirre."

[12]Orig. "1 Pocal von porcellana verguldet blau und rot farben fast eines Krebses gestaldt."

[13]Orig. "Una peparola di porcellana a moda di gambero, dorato."

[14]The functions of Oriental porcelain at the Medici court are discussed in Marco Spallanzani, *Ceramiche alla Corte dei Medici nel cinquecento* (Modena: Panini, 1994), 121–6.

Fig. 3 Ewer in the Shape of a Crayfish. Porcelain, unglazed, painted in overglaze enamels. China, probably Fujian province, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Jiajing period (1522–1566). H. 21.0 cm. Inv. No. P.O. 3480. State Art Collections Dresden, Porcelain Collection. Photograph: Lukas Kraemer

lotus leaf, the stalk of which forms a spout; on its back a lotus pod opening appears with a flat lid surmounted by a sculpted frog and a stalk forming the handle. The lower part is molded with a design of breaking waves and a leaping carp on both sides; a sculpted crab appears below the handle. The recessed, oval base is unglazed, but it is coated with washes of colored glazes in leaf-green, aubergine, and turquoise, the latter representative of the Ming porcelain glaze color palette. The body is glazed in yellow and has been gilded. The white crests on the green waves are coated with a thin, lustrous, and almost transparent wash, which fills in for white in the biscuit color scheme.

This vessel was probably already part of the seventeenth-century Dresden *Kunstkammer*, but it later entered the separate porcelain collection of Augustus the Strong and was inventoried in 1721 as "a teapot in the shape of a green and gilt

crayfish, with a yellow lid, on which sits a small frog. The pot is mounted with gilt brass."[15]

There is another extant crayfish that is very similar to the Dresden piece of type two in that it is also heavily gilt and is connected to a famous *Kunstkammer* collection known as the *Hainhofer Kunstschrank*, the Hainhofer cabinet, which is now on display at Uppsala University, Sweden.[16] The *Kunstschrank* is named after Philipp Hainhofer (1578–1647), the most famous early modern promoter of these special cabinets and a man of remarkable talents and manifold activities who provides a remarkable link between *Kunstkammer* collecting, the Medici, the court of Dresden, and the previously described Chinese crayfish vessels labeled as *peparola* or tea pot (*Thee-Kanne*). Hainhofer was a wealthy trader in luxury goods from Augsburg, Germany, with business contacts all over Europe. He was also a collector, and his *Kunstkammer* in Augsburg became famous and had many distinguished visitors, including King Gustavus II Adolphus of Sweden (1594–1632), German princes, the king of Denmark, some Medici princes, and traveling English aristocrats such as Thomas Howard, the second Earl of Arundel (1585–1646), one of the most famous English collectors of his time. Hainhofer's most famous and original achievement lies in the invention and strategic promotion of a piece of multipurpose furniture—his *Kunstschrank*. These cabinets were intended to be a *Kunstkammer en miniature*; Hainhofer had them custom-made by Augsburg artisans, and tried to sell them to kings, princes, and dukes.[17] In Italy, the cabinets were usually called *stipo tedesco,* German cabinets, a reference to their origin, and it was in a Hainhofer *Kunstschrank*, acquired by Ferdinando de' Medici, that the Medici family kept their porcelain treasures at the Palazzo Pitti in Florence.

Another spectacular cabinet made by Hainhofer between 1625 and 1631 remained in Hainhofer's house until the Swedish troops entered the city of Augsburg in 1632. Wishing to offer a spectacular gift to the king, the Lutheran counselors of Augsburg bought the cabinet from Hainhofer and proudly presented it to King Gustavus II Adolphus. It was transported to Sweden, and in 1694 the cabinet and its contents were given to the University of Uppsala, where it is still on display in one of the university buildings' most splendid rooms.

Gustavus II Adolphus's cabinet came with a number of curiosities that had been assembled by Hainhofer himself. Originally, there must have been an inventory of the objects, but it is now unfortunately lost. The crayfish vessel in the Hainhofer cabinet was surrounded by a host of other objects representing "natural items" (*naturalia*) and "artifacts" (*artificalia*), precious stones and minerals, biblical pictures, objects supposedly possessing medicinal or aphrodisiac properties such as the

[15]Orig. "Eine Thee–Kanne in Form eines gruenen und Verguldten Krebsses, mit enem gelben Deckel, worauff ein braunes Froeschgen. Die Kanne ist mit verguldtem Messing beschlage."

[16]For Hainhofer and his cabinets, see Hans-Olof Bolstroem, "Philipp Hainhofer and Gustavus Adolphus' Kunstschrank in Uppsala," in *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

[17]See Bolstroem, "Philipp Hainhofer," 125–32.

Seychelles nut, objects "*for vexation*" creating special effects like vexing mirrors, automata, and pastimes "amusements."[18] Apparently, the objects that qualified for inclusion in this *Kunstschrank* had to be rare, peculiar, and exotic, and it seems the crayfish ewer fit this description perfectly.

Crayfish Ewers Used in Rituals on Borneo

The second part of the story of an ewer in the shape of a crayfish takes place in Borneo. For centuries the people on the Southeast Asian archipelago—present-day Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei—have had a special relationship to and with Chinese ceramics, be it blue-and-white porcelain or wares decorated in the bright colors of over-glaze enamels. They were not only used as vessels, but also represented status and became part of a number of rituals.

In the year 1956, Penghulu Miri, a local chief from the Kelabit, indigenous people who live in the highlands of Sarawak (present-day Malaysia) and North Kalimantan (present-day Indonesia, on the island of Borneo),[19] presented a vessel in the shape of a crayfish to the Sarawak Museum in Kuching. The chief reported that the ewer was a family heirloom that had been passed down for generations.[20] Unfortunately, we do not know much about Penghulu Miri and his family, and the generation-spanning meanings, symbolisms, or (ritual) functions they might have ascribed to their crayfish ewer. We are, however, better informed about the Englishman Tom Harrisson (1911–1976), the curator who accepted the special treasure presented by the local chief for the collections of the Sarawak Museum in present-day Sarawak, Malaysia.

Harrisson was born in Argentina and educated at Harrow School in England. Over the course of his remarkable life he worked as ornithologist, explorer, mass observer, journalist, broadcaster, soldier, ethnologist, museum curator, archaeologist, filmmaker, ecologist, and writer.[21] During the Second World War, Harrisson joined the army and was at some point attached to a special Allied unit executing a plan that was intended to exploit and instrumentalize the native peoples of Borneo against the Japanese forces, and in 1945 Harrisson was parachuted onto a high plateau occupied by the Kelabit people. After the war, he joined the Sarawak Museum where he held the position of a curator from 1947 to 1966. He and his wife, Barbara Harrisson (1922–2015), were working on the excavation, collection, preservation, and interpretation of Chinese export ceramics on the archipelago. At a

[18]Bolstroem, "Philipp Hainhofer."

[19]*Penghulu* in Malay refers to a local chief, from the Malay *hulu*, "head, top."

[20]Tom Harrisson, "Ceramic Crayfish and Related Vessels in Central Borneo, the Philippines and Sweden," *Sarawak Museum Journal* XV, no. 30–31 (1967): 1–9.

[21]For Harrisson's biography, see Judith M. Heimann, *The Most Offending Soul Alive: Tom Harrisson and His Remarkable Life* (London: Barnes and Noble, 2003).

time when the traditional societies and cultures of the natives on Borneo were disintegrating, the Harrissons were on hand to observe and listen in order to "translate" their knowledge into publishable scholarship. The results of their research appeared in numerous articles in the *Sarawak Museum Journal*.[22]

In Tom Harrisson's article on the crayfish vessel, published in 1967 in the *Sarawak Museum Journal*,[23] he reported that during the Japanese occupation

> I was dropped into the Bornean cult of old stone wares and porcelains. From the Kelabits, I first learned to respect, indeed to love the great export ware jars and other artifacts brought to Borneo centuries ago from China... in many parts to become the principal base line for value judgment, taste and status symbolism. The Kelabits are principally jar-lovers... But they have (or had, until recent devaluation of the old ways) high regard for many other ceramic forms as well. Notable among these were curious figures of various aquatic creatures, in several bright colors, shaped as vessels to contain fluid – in the Kelabit context inevitably borak, rice wine. The few such ewers existing in the uplands in 1945 were not regarded by their owners as the oldest sort of the Kelabit scale of time, which is closely traced into the ancient past. They were, however, regarded as old, rare, and used especially in connection with head-rites (from headhunting), associated with crop fertility and some other (largely alcoholic) ceremonials.[24]

After Tom Harrison received the gift of this crayfish-shaped vessel from Penghulu Miri for the Sarawak Museum, he began research on the new acquisition, trying to find documented pieces for comparison. To his surprise he found that there was a comparable piece in the Hainhofer cabinet in Uppsala, which had been published in the book by Robert Lockhart Hobson, *The Wares of the Ming Dynasty*, in 1923.[25] Hobson (1872–1941) dated the group of biscuit figures glazed yellow, green, turquoise, and brown from kilns in Southern China into the Kangxi period (1662–1722). But how did this dating align with the crayfish ewer in the Hainhofer cabinet that was definitely made no later than the late Ming? Hobson describes this ewer as a "bizarre piece, shaped like a crayfish on a rock," which, because it is documented as belonging to the first half of the seventeenth century, had to be "definitely authenticated as Ming."[26]

In his article on the crayfish ewer, Tom Harrisson makes an interesting observation, when he —mockingly—mentions that Hobson was reluctant to date the piece to the Ming because it did not fit the conservative Western, and particularly British

[22]Barbara Harrisson was later to become the director of the Museum Princessehof, Leeuwarden, the Netherlands, and published the results of her pioneering research on the important collection of Swatow/Zhangzhou ware in the Keramiekmuseum Princessehof Leeuwarden and of Martaban, ancient jars. See Barbara Harrisson, *Swatow in Het Princessehof: The Analysis of a Museum Collection of Chinese Trade Wares from Indonesia* (Leeuwarden: Gemeentelijk Museum Princessehof, 1979); and Barbara Harrisson, *Pusaka: Heirloom Jars of Borneo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[23]Tom Harrisson, "Ceramic Crayfish," 1–2.

[24]Tom Harrisson, "Ceramic Crayfish," 1–2.

[25]Robert Lockhart Hobson, *The Wares of the Ming Dynasty* (London: British Museum, 1923), 127, pl. 36.

[26]Hobson, *Wares of the Ming Dynasty*.

Museum, concept of "Ming." According to this stylistic categorization, "Ming" was classical and could hence never be "bizarre." Tom Harrisson comments: "Though the Kelabits, with their more liberal ideas about Asian art-form, would hardly use his word 'bizarre,' the Hainhofer crayfish indeed disturbs western scholars of eastern ceramics because they have decided that this sort of thing does not really belong to their conception of what is (or should be) 'Ming.' The more we learn of the Far Eastern end of the ceramic trade, the less we can be satisfied that this expertise has got its sequences correct for these sorts of ceramics, so far less esteemed in the west; the pieces there thought of as bizarre, odd, even ugly and (whisper) un-Chinese."[27]

Harrisson's article not only reflects the cultural context of the Indonesian crayfish ewer, but also the difficulties of doing research in Borneo some 50 years ago. It was a time without fax machines or emails, and so communicate with colleagues in England or Sweden was limited.

Harrisson had meanwhile found comparable, as well as matching, material that had been excavated on the Philippines from a Ming site and thus dated his crayfish vessel—quite correctly—between the late sixteenth to early seventeenth century. On this site in the Philippines, comparable pieces in animal shapes, including ducks, cranes, and fish, were found.[28] In his 1967 article, Tom Harrison mentions a detail which at first sight seems unremarkable. Parts of some of the animal shaped ewers, were broken off, or, as in the case of the crayfish ewer, their feet were missing. When I talked to Barbara Harrisson, who lived and worked with her husband Tom on Borneo, she mentioned that the people there used parts of Chinese pots and dishes and buried them into the ground for a length of time, after which they dug them up, ground them, and ate them, thereby participating in the magic powers of these vessels by consuming them.[29] But how were these vessels in the shape of aquatic animals, such as the crayfish ewer, used on Borneo? The Kelabits and the Dayak on Borneo had a tradition of head hunting; Fig. 4 shows an old photograph of a Kelabit ritual related to this practice. In the image, we can see pots of different sizes placed in front of a small table, which can be identified as Thai and from the fifteenth and sixteenth century. At ceremonies these jars were sealed with wooden or antler stoppers to preserve their spirits: strings of beads, highly valued by the Kelabits and used in ritual, were attached to the jars. On the table, a number of animal-shaped vessels also appear. In the center, there is an ewer in the shape of a duck known as the "Kelabit duck," on the right a vessel in the shape of a flying fish, and on the left a vessel in the well-known crayfish shape. These vessels were used for passing around rice wine (*borak*) among Kelabit aristocrats. Until recently, these objects were regarded as so valuable and sacred, that outsiders were not permitted to handle them.

We do not know how exactly our example of the crayfish ewer was used during these ceremonies, but it is certain that its function and treatment was similar to the

[27]Harrisson, "Ceramic Crayfish," 3.

[28]Robert B. Fox, *The Calatagan Excavations: Two 15th Century Burial Sites in Batangas, Philippines* (Manila: Philippine Province of the Society of Jesus, 1965).

[29]The author is grateful to Barbara Harrisson for personal communication on the subject.

Fig. 4 Vessels for a Kelabit Ritual. Photo of Sarawak Museum exhibit 1965. *Sarawak Museum Journal* XV, 30–31 (1967): plate V

vessel in the shape of a duck, the so-called Kelabit duck. A duck-shaped vessel was known to be in the possession of a Kelabit from the highlands, the village headman Anyi. After the Second World War he, too, presented his vessel to the Sarawak Museum. Tom Harrisson reported:

> This vessel was used in ritual drinking of rice wine at head and other festivals, when I first reached the uplands in 1945. Fill by the spouted hole above, hold high over the head, tilt until the booze jets out of the duck's beak into your open mouth. The Kelabits of the forties did not consider these and other related vessels as very ancient ceramics. Rather, they were esteemed as unusual, rare. Headman Anyi felt his duck one was unique; indeed no others are known in the interior. It was a big thing when he gave it to me. I hope that since I presented it to the Sarawak Museum, it will always be treated as the curious treasure that is, echoing now not only a Chinese mainland past but the departed virile adat of the "old days" before the Borneo Evangelical Mission took over the ritual and spiritual life of the far interior, in imitation of the West.[30]

[30]Tom Harrisson, "The Kelabit 'Duck Ewer' in the Sarawak Museum," *Sarawak Museum Journal* XVI, no. 32–33 (1968): 100.

Crayfish Ewer in the Japanese Tea Ceremony

The last stop on the journey of the crayfish ewer is Japan. In the Japanese tea ceremony (*chanoyu*), a number of vessels are employed for special purposes, and all vessels should blend into a particular kind of aesthetic system, creating an atmosphere of naturalness, refined simplicity, calmness, and austerity. Objects considered to be antique are particularly desirable in this context.

For centuries, all things Chinese formed a part of Japanese culture. They were called *karamono*, or "Tang things," referring to the Chinese Tang dynasty (618–907) when China exerted an enormous amount of influence over Japan. In later centuries, the term *karamono* continued to signify Chinese elements that had been assimilated into Japanese culture, and "Tang" came to denote a remoteness from contemporary China as well as an idealized "China past." *Karamono*, which was highly appreciated and venerated by the Japanese elite, included Chinese paintings, bronze vessels, and ceramics.

Ceramic vessels made in Southern China were already being imported to Japan by the twelfth century, but it was only from the fourteenth century onward that they were aesthetically appreciated and finally considered an appropriate part of the sophisticated ensembles of the *chanoyu* tea ceremony. By contrast, in China these vessels were considered purely functional, utilitarian, and without any aesthetic appeal.[31]

A most spectacular example of this is the story of a Chinese storage jar, which was made as a commonplace container. After it arrived in Japan, it was appropriated for *chanoyu* use and highly valued both as a functionally superior jar for storing tea leaves and as an aesthetically outstanding object. It was given the Japanese name, *Chigusa*, which means "myriad plants" or "myriad things," a poetical name referring to autumnal motifs. Starting in the sixteenth century, tea men wrote about this jar in their diaries and letters, and various owners of the jar transmitted these documents together with the jar, reflecting the jar's long history. In 2014, The *Chigusa* jar formed the focus of an outstanding exhibition in Washington D.C.[32] The jar was produced in China, but "remade" in Japan through a transcultural process that Watsky elsewhere calls a "critical creative act," arguing that in "recontextualizing the Chinese jar, tea men participated in a longstanding tradition in Japan of collecting all manner of things from China and around the world and absorbing them into Japanese cultural practices."[33]

The Chinese crayfish ewer encountered a comparable fate when it reached Japan. In a number of Japanese collections of traditional tea utensils, we once again encounter vessels made in Southern China during the sixteenth and seventeenth

[31] Andrew Watsky, "Locating 'China' in the Arts of Sixteenth-Century Japan," *Art History* 29, no. 4 (September 2006): 614.

[32] Louise Cort and Andrew M. Watsky, ed., *Chigusa and the Art of Tea* (Washington D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2014).

[33] Cort and Watsky, *Chigusa*, 18.

centuries that were painted in the biscuit in green, yellow, and brown, and formed a type ewer in the shape of a crayfish. They include items in the shape of small boxes, originally used as incense containers, and water droppers, some in the shape of animals, which were considered appropriate for use during the tea ceremony.[34] Pieces of the incense container type known as *kogo* included small lidded ceramic boxes in the shapes of fruit, flowers, or animals. They contained incense, valued for its special scent, that was added to the charcoal used to heat the water during the *chanoyu*. Some Guangdong-made containers used in the *chanoyu* are preserved in venerable wooden boxes. These storage boxes are not part of the tea equipment, but have an important role in the practice of *chanoyu*, as they carry inscriptions that give names to a particular vessel or indicate the names of previous owners.[35]

In Japan, this colorful stoneware is known as *Cochi* (or *Guchi* in an antiquated form), after an area in Northern Vietnam, Cochin China. Some Japanese collectors mention that these wares were actually produced in this region. In their 1993 publication, Honda and Shimazu suggest by contrast that Cochi indicates a market, not a kiln, implying that the wares were merely traded in a region of that name, a region that was frequented by Japanese traders. During the fifteenth century, the markets of the Red River delta area in Cochin China came under Chinese control. They then became a major *entrepôt* for cargoes from China, a position they hold to this day. These markets connected (and still connect) objects from a variety of regions, since important shipping lines merge in this region. They include a southern route (via the Gulf of Siam to western Indonesia), an eastern way across the South China Sea to Luzon, a third line going north to Taiwan and Japan, and another fourth connection linking the Red River to important inland markets. Many of the objects named *Cochi* in Japan can tentatively be assigned to the kilns south of Guangzhou in Guangdong. One specialty of the Guangdong kilns was the use of green lead glaze, a tradition dating as far back as the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), with its most popular color scheme, a combination of yellow, ochre, and brown, emerging during the Tang dynasty (618–907). The famous *Tang sancai*, "Three colors of Tang" ware was traded "internationally," overland by the Silk Road to inner Asia and India, northwards along the coast to Japan, or southwards and westwards to Persia.

In the sixteenth century, with the loosening of the Ming court official bans on private sea trading, a revival of these wares came with the return of the private junk trade to Southeast Asia. In the Philippines and Indonesia, as in Japan and Vietnam, clients ordered green and polychrome wares, which were kept as heirlooms or used on special occasions. Numerous vessels, glazed in green, yellow, and aubergine,

[34]For a discussion of these pieces, see Hiromu Honda and Noriki Shimazu, *Vietnamese and Chinese Ceramics used in the Japanese Tea Ceremony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[35]Seikaido Bunko Art Museum, *Masterpieces of Tea Utensils from the Seikado Collection* 静嘉堂茶道具名品選 (Tokyo: Seikadō Bunko Bijutsukan, 2004), nos. 37–39. For a spectacular example of a Chinese storage jar used in Japan as vessel for tea leaves in the *chanoyu* context, see Cort and Watsky, *Chigusa*.

were found in Indonesia.[36] To this day Japanese connoisseurs are charmed by the sophisticated simplicity of this type of Southern China stoneware, a visual and material criterion which, in addition to the objects being perceived as related to antiquity, qualify them to be accepted as part of the aesthetic language of the Japanese rituals of tea drinking.

The kilns in Guangdong produced mainly small-scale objects, like water droppers, ewers, covered boxes that were to be used as incense containers in Japan, jarlets and figurines, as well as vessels in the shapes of fruits, plants, and animals such as fish and birds—motifs that appear throughout the designs of Japanese tea wares.[37] The collection of ceramics used in the Japanese tea ceremony, as found and published by the Japanese connoisseurs Honda and Shimazu, include a vessel in the shape of a duck, which is comparable to the aforementioned "Kelabit duck." Consequently, we also discover the well-known shape of a crayfish in the panoply of tea ceremony objects.[38] It is exactly the same kind of crayfish ewer as the type number one that we encountered as part of the 1590 Medici gift to the court of Dresden.

But what was the function of these ewers in animal shapes in the Japanese tea ceremony? I would suggest that in the context of the tea ceremony these vessels were considered interesting conversation pieces, through which the owner could show the refinement and sophistication of his taste. As Watsky has demonstrated for "Tang things" (*karamono*), Chinese objects that were re-contextualized in the Japanese rituals of *chanoyu*[39] served as "conversation pieces" in the personal comments in diaries or letters, and in the poetic descriptions or aesthetic reflections of the tea men. Conversing on a special object formed an integral part of the ritual of drinking tea and, at the same time, these "materialized conversations" created the story of the object itself. Who knows: Perhaps someday we will find a poem praising the small Chinese crayfish among the notes of a Japanese tea lover.

Conclusion

As has been illustrated, there are a number of ways in which to look at the crayfish-shaped vessel and its stories. At the start of the early modern period, which in China has been dated to the late Ming dynasty by some scholars,[40] the private kilns in

[36]See Sumarah Adhyatman, *Antique Ceramics found in Indonesia* (Jakarta: The Ceramic Society of Indonesia, 1990), 240–1.

[37]See Seikaido Bunko Art Museum, *Masterpieces.*

[38]Honda and Shimazu, *Vietnamese and Chinese Ceramics*, 164, pl. 152.

[39]Watsky, "Locating 'China'."

[40]For a discussion of this as a problematic way of equating Europe and China, see Søren Clausen, "Early Modern China—A Preliminary Postmortem" (Working Paper 84–00, Centre for Cultural Research, University of Aarhus, 2000), accessed July 11, 2017, http://www.hum.au.dk/ckulturf/pages/publications/sc/china.pdf.

Southern China supplied a "globalized" market with colorful ceramics in shapes modelled after existing animals and fruit that are dominated by the color palette of green, yellow, and ochre lead glazes. Through not only the inner Asian junk trade to markets on the Southeast Asian archipelago and Japan, but also the ships of the Portuguese and the Spanish, and later the Dutch, a few pieces of these wares eventually reached the West.

The case study of an ewer in the shape of a crayfish illustrates how objects of a certain type are appreciated and used in varying cultural contexts and in different ways. European Renaissance rulers and collectors used the rare pieces as parts of their sophisticated *Kunstschrank* ensembles and for German-Italian gift exchanges, Borneo tribesmen employed the vessels in their fertility and head-hunting rituals, museum curators have engaged in debates on historic tastes and dating, and Japanese connoisseurs have made the ceramics part of the highly formalized aesthetic system of the tea ceremony. All these different people, in different times, and in different parts of the world, with different religious and cultural backgrounds and various concepts of what defines a "vessel" in terms of functional and aesthetic criteria, became involved with and were fascinated by an ewer in the shape of a crayfish.

The recorded narratives leave us wondering about the stories related to this type of ceramic in China proper. However, it seems that in China almost all comparable pieces are lost; to my knowledge no crayfish ewer has been preserved in China itself. By the Chinese elite these wares were perhaps regarded as export pieces, as functional, and not artistic. The taste for porcelain within the Chinese elite was, and still is, focused on the "perfect" piece; the highest standard is represented by the wares produced for the imperial court: made of only the finest clay, decorated in a controlled manner with refined styles, and impeccably executed. Consequently, our examples were not appreciated, collected, and carefully preserved in China proper.

In recent scholarship, "there is a growing awareness of the social and economic factors that influenced the development of the Chinese ceramic industry, and the ways in which Chinese ceramics have linked widely different social groups of merchants and consumers."[41] As further illustrated by the recorded narratives, the type of object discussed here is just a tiny material fragment of the enormous number of ceramics "made in China" for an early modern globalized market. Thus, the ceramic examples presented in this article once more prove that, as John Carswell put it, "it seems there is no other commodity that can so perfectly illustrate the complexity of human relations in the past, and the interaction of civilizations at the opposite ends of Asia and indeed around the whole world."[42]

With thanks to Lukas Kraemer and Aafke Koole

[41]John Carswell, *Blue & White: Chinese Porcelain around the World* (London: The British Museum, 2000), 195.

[42]Carswell, *Blue & White*, 195.

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