

The story of the Cizhou storage jars

During my trips to China I have seen and bought over the years hundreds of storage jars that clearly belonged to one and the same group.

Part of them had wide necks, others had narrow necks, some were bigger, some smaller.

Regarding glaze and decoration there was an overall similarity: the inner side was covered with a blackish-brown to greenish brown glaze, the outside white with a in most cases simple decoration in brown.

It didn't take long to find out that they were mainly used for the storage of rice whisky, that they had a considerable age and that they were originating from Shanxi province, roughly at 750 km SW of Beijing.

Apparently their practical use made them survive the centuries.

And now suddenly they became merchandise eagerly sought after by local Chinese antique dealers who bought them up in great numbers to be sold in Beijing to Western dealers.

Every now and then there was one that was exceptionally well decorated- made for a special occasion?- and with a mark. Now that was interesting!

After years of investigating the counter for the oldest one with mark stands at 1543 and for the youngest at 1663.

These so called Cizhou jars were thus made during the late Ming period up to the early Qing period. Somewhere at the end of the 17th century the production stops.

There are more aspects that caught my attention:

-the older examples are better made and decorated with more care than later examples. Some of the oldest jars Cizhou jars I know are decorated around the body with a (recognizable) motif called in China "ducks flying over the reed reflected in the water". With later jars this became a Rohrschacht test with neither duck nor reed as an outcome.

-the older group is often decorated with characters and text, praising the quality of the potter or the wine inside: "jars from Li- best available" or a complete poem from 1661: "garden and mountain protecting spring- whenever drunk earth and heaven are without end- you will spend your life drinking." Last one apparently meant to indicate how special the quality of the wine kept inside.

Also I have seen more than a few texts stating the kiln was located in Shanxi province. "Made in Shanxi" as it were. Sometimes the name of the kiln is even mentioned, for example one called "Fu".

Maybe there were several kilns at a single production location or were they spread over a region? I do not know.

Towards the end the jars become less elegant, heavier and more poorly glazed with a minimalistic decoration.

Was the production required to become cheaper? Were they under pressure from competition?

There's also something to tell regarding the common sizes which were four:
XL, L, M, SM

-The XL is the oldest one with the 1543 mark and the only one ever seen in this size.

-The L rule the early period. They are as a rule well decorated and have a nice shape that was potted with attention. They come with the narrow necks for storing wine or with wide necks for storing probably grain or rice.

It is remarkable that I know only one single M jar that fits in this early group.

Apparently it was not a standard size at the time. Even more so because the large ones were more vulnerable than the more compact medium ones that had thus more chance to survive.

-At the end of the 17th century the M outnumber the L 10:1. There even appears a small percentage of SM jars on the market.

This signifies economic trouble!

Either wine became expensive, maybe through taxes, or people simply had less to spend. One thing we know for sure: the common units became smaller.

There is one more important factor: around 1640 China was in the grip of an ongoing civil war between the remnants of the Ming dynasty and the invading Manchu who put in 1644 Shunzhi on the throne as the first emperor of the new Qing dynasty. It is not unthinkable that the war had such an impact on the economy that it eventually led to the end of the Cizhou jar production.