

Iraj Afshar

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A Chinese Dish from the Lost Endowment of Princess Sulṭānum (925–69/1519–62)

Abolala Soudavar

INTRODUCTION

DESPITE ITS OWN LONG-ESTABLISHED TRADITION OF ceramic production, Iran valued throughout the middle ages the refined techniques of Chinese porcelain, the highest quality of which was referred to as *chīnī-i Faghfūrī*. *Faghfūr* was the Arabicized version of *Baghpūr*, literally meaning Son of God in Middle Persian, and equivalent to the appellation Son of Heaven that the Chinese used for their emperors.¹ Thus, the phrase *chīnī-i Faghfūrī* referred to porcelain from the imperial kilns of China and, by itself, indicated that porcelain imports in Iran predated the Mongol invasions. Otherwise, these porcelains would have been referred to as *Qā'ānī* rather than *Faghfūrī*, as *Qā'ān* was the title used for the Yuan emperors (1271–1368) in the Persian lands.

Persian merchants had settled in China prior to the Mongol invasions of the 13th century and some, such as the fleet-owner of Persian descent, P'u Shou-kêng, had achieved great wealth and power.² Persian traders so dominated the trade between China and the Middle East that Persian became the *lingua franca* along both the Silk Road and the maritime trade routes from the Persian Gulf to the Sea of China. As both China and Iran came under Mongol rule, many more took advantage of the *pax mongolica* and settled and prospered in China;³ a prosperity that inevitably became the solicitation target of religious institutions in the Persian motherland. Thus, when the Moroccan traveler Ibn Baṭūṭah visited the port of Zaytūn—modern day Ch'üan-chou (Quanzhou)—in mid-8th/14th century, he encountered a certain Shaykh Burhān al-Dīn who gathered donations for the Ṣūfī congregation of the Shrine of Abū Ishāq Kāzīrūnī in Kāzīrūn, Iran.⁴

Much like today's Chinese expatriates who have facilitated trade with China by adapting export production to local markets, Persian merchants reoriented the production of the Chinese kilns—which had suffered from a

¹ Pelliot 1959–73, 1:652.

² Medley 1975, 32.

³ Bailey 1996, 7; Chen Da-Sheng 1992, 191–3.

⁴ Soudavar 1992, 78–80; Ibn Baṭūṭah 1853–8, 4:89, 271.

crumbling market due to the Mongol invasions—towards the Persian lands. New products emerged from these kilns, larger in size than traditional Chinese vessels and more adapted to the Middle Eastern food servings, with a pattern of decoration that made use of the concentric and geometrical designs of Islamic wares in order to fill their larger surfaces. And cobalt blue—mainly imported from the province of Kirmān in Iran—was gradually used for underglaze painting over the admired white porcelain.⁵ The result was the creation of the blue-and-white porcelain that was initially considered “extremely vulgar” by the educated Chinese elite, but was subsequently embraced as the most elegant type of porcelain.⁶

THE ALLURE OF CHINESE PORCELAIN AT THE PERSIAN COURTS

Perhaps the earliest recorded evidence of Chinese porcelain specifically crafted for the Persian market is a reference included in a will-letter of the celebrated Ilkhanid *vazīr*, Rashīd al-Dīn Faḡl Allāh (d. 718/1318), reproduced in one hundred copies and distributed throughout the Ilkhanid empire. There, the *vazīr* listed his vast holdings and enumerated some of his most valuable objects. In a section pertaining to the hospital that he had built within the Rab‘-i Rashīdī complex at Tabriz, he boasted to have commissioned “one thousand elaborately designed jars (*khumrah*) for syrups” from China, “bearing his epithets (*alqāb*)” and inscribed with the syrup name, and also, lidded boxes (*qūṭī*) for drug mixtures.⁷ Chinese porcelain jars were luxurious and expensive items that only individuals like the immensely rich Rashīd al-Dīn could afford to buy in such quantities. Thus, in a 14th-century painting of an illustrated copy of the *Shāhnāmāh*, the porcelain holdings of Rashīd al-Dīn were used as an indicator of his identity: Rashīd al-Dīn—who was trained as a physician—is portrayed in an apothecary surrounding with porcelain jars.⁸ But, since Rashīd

⁵ Medley 1975, 32–4.

⁶ Ibid., 32; Pope 1981, 44.

⁷ Rashīd al-Dīn Faḡl Allāh 1980, 214.

⁸ The painting in question is in an album in the Topkapı Palace Library in İstanbul (Hazine 2153, fol. 112v). It actually depicts (and is entitled) the poet Daqiqi being stabbed to death by his servant, see Soudavar 1996, 150–3, Atasoy 1970, 41–2, and, for a color reproduction, Gray 1979, 99, pl. xxi. But as argued elsewhere (Soudavar 1996), it is a Jalayirid painting that was made for insertion in the celebrated—and presently dispersed—Ilkhanid *Shāhnāmāh* of Abū Sa‘īd Bahādur Khān (r. 717–36/1317–35), or a later Jalayirid copy of it. Every painting of this *Shāhnāmāh* project was meant to illustrate not only an episode of the *Shāhnāmāh* but also an event in the Mongol history, and thus in this painting the death of Daqiqi was to evoke the death of Rashīd al-Dīn as both authors were killed before they could finish their works.

al-Dīn was executed in 718/1318 and his building activity at the Rab‘ was mostly in the first decade of the 7th/14th century, and since the production of blue-and-white started ca. 1320,⁹ the depicted jars are not blue-and-white but seem to be of the Longquan type celadon.

For the *vazīrs* who rose to power and accumulated much wealth under Turco-Mongol rulers, possession of Chinese porcelain was *de rigueur*. Invariably though, they were arrested while in office, and saw their possessions confiscated for the benefit of the Sultān. Such is the case of the powerful *vazīr* Majd al-Dīn Muḥammad who amassed great riches and dislodged his former protector, ‘Alishīr Navā’ī (844–906/1441–1501), as the second most powerful man of the kingdom, but soon fell in disgrace. Upon seeing the confiscated riches of his *vazīr*, which included Chinese porcelain of the highest quality, the Timurid Sultān Ḥusayn Bāyqarā’ (r. 873–911/1469–1506) exclaimed: “it was our expectation from Majd al-Dīn Muḥammad that should he have come across such valuable pieces he should have presented them to us.”¹⁰

Timurid princes cherished blue-and-white ceramics, and Ulugh Beg (r. 850–3/1447–9) reputedly built a *chīnī’khānah* (porcelain house) to house his collection of Chinese porcelain.¹¹ The Safavids (907–1105/1501–1694) continued the tradition set by their predecessors and collected both Yuan and Ming blue-and-white. The only surviving Safavid collection of blue-and-white is the one endowed by Shāh ‘Abbās I (r. 995–1038/1587–1629) to the Ardabil Shrine where a special *chīnī’khānah* was created for its display.¹² So famous has become this endowment that a blue-and-white dish with a blurred endowment inscription, displayed in the “Romance of the Taj Mahal” exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1989, and at the time of publication of this article on loan to the Brooklyn Museum, was presumed to have come from the Ardabil Shrine collection.¹³ As we shall see, it was actually part of an earlier collection gathered by the great aunt of Shāh ‘Abbās I, the princess Mahīn Bānū, better known as Sultānum (925–69/1519–62), and endowed to the Shrine of the Eighth Shī‘ite Imām Riḏā at Mashhad.

⁹ An attempt to reattribute Yuan wares to the Sung period (Kessler 1993, 134–43) has been discredited among others by S. G. Valenstein (1994, 71–4), citing kiln-site archaeological evidence reported in recent Chinese publications.

¹⁰ Khvānd Amīr 1938, 415.

¹¹ Lentz and Lowry 1989, 229; Bābur 1996, 86.

¹² Pope 1981, pl. 4. The collection is now at the Mūzih-i Milli-i Īrān (formerly Mūzih-i Īrān-i Bāstān) in Tehran.

¹³ Pal et al. 1989, 166–9.

PRINCESS SULTĀNUM

The blue-and-white vessel in question is a very large Ming dish (43 cm. wide) of ca. 828–33/1425–30 (Fig. 1), most probably imported into Persian lands under the Timurids (771–913/1370–1507). Three inscriptions are carved on it. The first reads (Fig. 2):

Shāh Jahān ibn Jahāngīr Shāh; 16, 1053

Translation

Shāh Jahān son of Jahāngīr Shāh; 16, 1053

It is written in a fine *nasta'liq* script and gives the name of its owner, the Mughal emperor Shāh Jahān (r. 1037–68/1628–57), and the date it entered into his possession, the year 1053/1644, equivalent to his 16th regnal year. This inscription is on the outer edge of the foot-ring and visible when the dish rests on a table or a tray, while the other two are not. The second inscription is an inventory mark under the foot-ring that reads *251 tūlah* and records the weight of the dish at the time of acquisition as 2.91 kg. (Fig. 2).¹⁴ The third inscription is carved in the form of a seal type roundel on the bottom of the dish. Strong signs of abrasion indicate that there was an unsuccessful attempt to erase it. As the initial carving was deep, the inscription (Fig. 3) can still be deciphered as follows:

Vaqf-i 'atabah-'i Razavīyah • 'an Mahīn Bānū-yi Šafavīyah

Translation

Endowed to the Razavī Shrine • By Mahīn Bānū, the Safavid [Princess]

The inscription is in the form of rhyming couplets that Persian rulers and dignitaries used on their seals and coinage. The Razavī Shrine refers to the

¹⁴ A *tūlah* is an Indian weight measure that was used for precious items, especially herbs (see, for instance, Abū al-Faḍl ibn Mubārak 1989, 1:85); it weights 2.5 *miṣqāl* (*miṣqāl* = 4.64 g.), see Dihkhudā 1969. A similar inscription found at the bottom of a small Hung-chin (Hongzhi) bowl that once belonged to the Mughal emperor Jahāngīr Shāh (r. 1014–37/1605–27) reads: *28 tūlah, 2 māshah*, see Pope 1981, pl. 6J. Pope thought these inscriptions to indicate the day and the month of acquisition (*ibid.*, 56–7), while they clearly indicate the bowl's weight with a precision of a 1/12th fraction of a *tūlah* known as *māshah*, see Dihkhudā 1973.

shrine of the Eighth Imām Riḍā, who is buried at Mashhad, and Mahīn Bānū Sultānum, who was the full sister of Shāh Ṭahmāsb (r. 930–84/1524–76).¹⁵

Sultānum is known from historical sources as a learned princess who had received instructions in fine arts, and was taught calligraphy by the scribe Dūst Muḥammad, the head of the royal library-atelier in mid-10th/16th century.¹⁶ Specimens of her calligraphy are included in the Bahrām Mirzā album in the Topkapı Palace Library in İstanbul.¹⁷ She was much respected by Ṭahmāsb, and accompanied him on hunting trips, and even watched official ceremonies on horseback at his side, at a time when it was customary for royal brides and princesses to sit on a palanquin and watch from afar.¹⁸

When the Mughal emperor Humāyūn (r. 937–47/1530–40, 962–3/1555–6) sought asylum in Iran and help from Ṭahmāsb in 951/1544, the Shāh demanded that he convert to Shī'ism. As Humāyūn refused, Ṭahmāsb grew angry and threatened to kill him. The critical situation was diffused by the intervention of Sultānum who persuaded her brother to assist Humāyūn in his efforts to recapture his lost throne.¹⁹ Her role as advisor to the king became legendary and in a letter addressed to Shāh 'Abbās, one of his generals deplored the lack of wise advisors—like Sultānum—in the monarch's retinue.²⁰ Rumors about her intimate relationship with Humāyūn's trusted lieutenant, Bayram Khān, had spread in Safavid circles, even though Ṭahmāsb jealously watched over his sister and dissuaded all potential suitors by his violent reactions to any hint of amorous intent or marriage proposal.²¹ As Ṭahmāsb slipped into religious bigotry, he promised the hand of his sister to the Disappeared Twelfth Imām, the Mahdī, for whose expected return a white horse was saddled every evening at the gates of the royal encampment.²² Thus, Sultānum remained an unmarried woman, and consequently she endowed her considerable wealth to various shrines and pious institutions in her own lifetime. More particularly, in confirmation of the second inscription on our dish, the Safavid chronicler Qāzī Aḥmad Qumī related that Sultānum endowed “her jewelry and chinaware (*chini'ālāt*)” to the Shrine of the Eighth Imām at Mashhad.²³

¹⁵ Hasan Beg Rūmlū 1979, 536.

¹⁶ Budāq Munshī Qazvīnī, *Javāhir al-akhbār*, State Public Library, Saint Petersburg, MS Dorn 288, dated 984/1576, fol. 110r; cf. Adle 1993, 287.

¹⁷ Hazine 2154, fol. 7r; see also Soudavar 1992, 172, and Roxburgh 1996, 2:816, 1128–9.

¹⁸ Gulbadan Begam [1902] 1972, 169–70, 69 (Persian section), and 1996, 114.

¹⁹ Riazul Islam 1970, 29–37; Soudavar 1992, 172–3.

²⁰ Navā'i 1987, 2:21.

²¹ Soudavar 1992, 172–3.

²² Membre 1993, 25.

²³ Qāzī Aḥmad Qumī 1980–4, 1:431.

FROM MASHHAD TO AGRA

The Sulṭānum dish was certainly acquired by Shāh Jahān in Agra where he stayed from late Shawwāl 1052/mid January 1643 to 26 Dhū al-Qa'dah 1054/24 January 1645.²⁴ However, two questions are pertinent in respect to its transition from Mashhad to Agra: how was this dish removed from the Shrine, and why did Shāh Jahān purchase or accept a previously endowed plate in his treasury, a clear violation of the Islamic law, the *sharī'ah*?²⁵

The answer to the first question is that it must have been removed from the Shrine during the period between Sulṭānum's death in 969/1562 and 1053/1644, the year of its acquisition by Shāh Jahān, or, more precisely, at the time of the conquest of Mashhad by the Uzbek Prince 'Abd al-Mu'min (d. 1006/1598) in 998/1590. Two years earlier, 'Abd al-Mu'min had accompanied his father 'Abd Allāh Khān II (r. 991–1006/1583–98) in the conquest of Harāt, and had massacred the Qizilbāsh garrison stationed there. At Mashhad, as a last ditch effort, the defeated Qizilbāsh garrison retreated within the confines of the Shrine where massacres were traditionally avoided, even by Sunni Uzbeks. To no avail. 'Abd al-Mu'min's troops not only massacred all the Qizilbāshs and the workers of the Shrine, but looted every gold and silver object, jewel studded lamps, carpets, valuable Korans and "Chinese vessels," and subsequently traded them "for the price of cheap ceramic shards" among themselves.²⁶ The Uzbeks were finally driven out of Mashhad in 1007/1598. In the meantime, the looted Chinese vessels were most probably sent to Transoxiana, from where the Mughal emperors managed to acquire some, along with numerous calligraphy specimens of the celebrated calligrapher Mīr 'Alī (active first half of 10th/16th century), as well as some of the finest illustrated manuscripts (Mīr 'Alī himself was taken from Harāt to Bukhārā around 935/1529).

The answer to the second question is more problematic. Instead of trying to completely erase the endowment engraving, it seems that a few key letters within specific words (such as the "q" in *vaqf* and the "f" in *Ṣafavīyah*) were initially erased to modify their meaning. However, the result was far from

²⁴ Beach and Koch 1997, 11.

²⁵ Exceptionally, relying on the concept of *tabdīl bih aḥṣan* (exchange for a better [item]) a religious scholar could allow an endowed property to be exchanged for something more useful when the usefulness of the original property was diminished, see Salīmī'fard 1991, 41–2. In our case, however, it is highly unlikely that a Safavid religious scholar would have granted permission for the "exchange" of a porcelain dish endowed by the sister of Shāh Ṭahmāsb. Furthermore, had there been a "legal exchange," the abrasion of the endowment roundel would have been unnecessary.

²⁶ Iskandar Munshi 1970, 1:412–3.

successful and any Mughal superintendent would have recognized the endowment nature of the inscription. The fact that the Shāh Jahān inscriptions are on the foot-ring and not on the bottom of the plate,²⁷ perhaps indicates that a covering attachment—be it a wooden base, a metal plate, or an extra layer of ceramic—had been added to the bottom (inside the foot-ring) to conceal its provenance; and it may well be that the otherwise unexplained clusters of small holes on the bottom of the dish (Fig. 3) were drilled for attachment of such a cover.²⁸

²⁷ The ownership inscription of endowed vessels were carved on the outside of the foot-ring so that subsequent alterations would be visible at all times (see, for instance, the carvings on the Ardabil vessels, Pope 1981, pl. 6). For items of the royal treasury, however, one would think that a concealed engraving would be more proper. In the case of the two Rockefeller plates at the Asia Society in New York, the Shāh Jahān ownership inscription of one of them (1975.150) is carved on the bottom, while for the other (1975.151) it is on the outside of the foot-ring (Pal et al. 1989, 167–9).

²⁸ It was not possible to weigh the dish before the publication of this article. Should the dish be weighed in the future, and should its weight be lower than the inscribed 2.9 kg.—and assuming that the Shāh Jahān measures were correct—one may then ascribe the difference to the weight of a missing bottom cover.

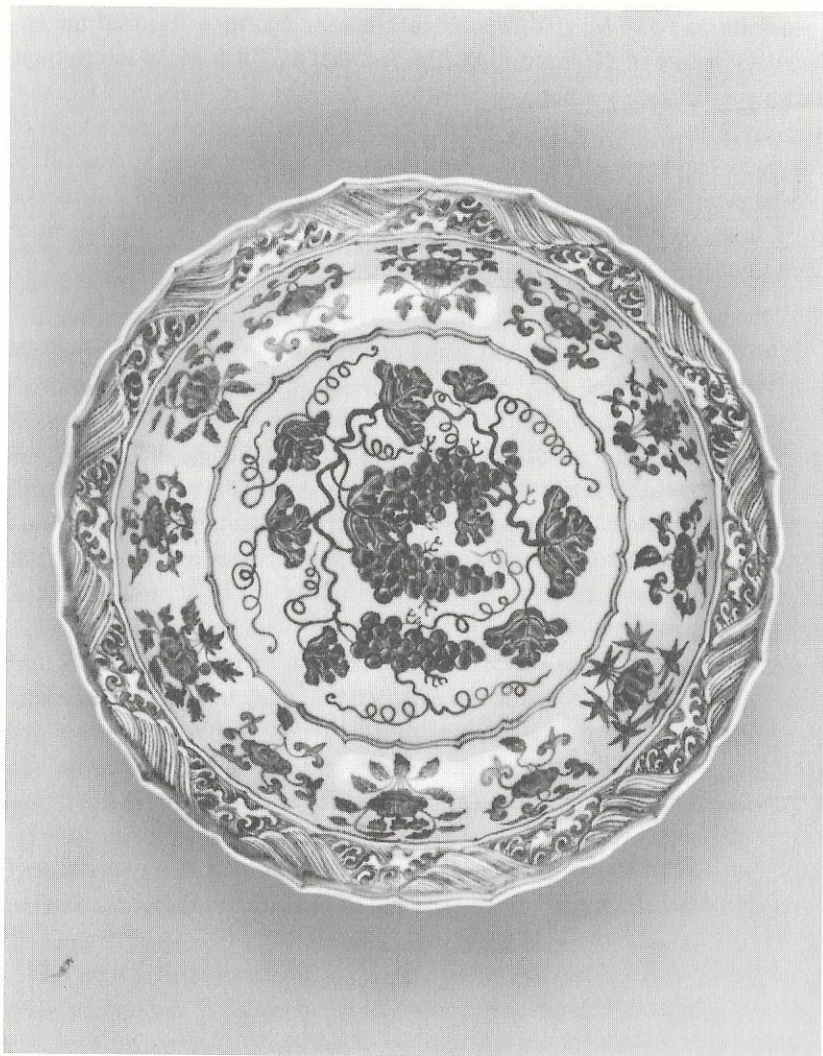


Fig. 1. Large dish with grape design. China, Xuande period (1426-35). Porcelain, underglaze cobalt blue decoration. No. L.1991.4. Anonymous loan. Brooklyn Museum of Art. Diam: 17 in. Height: 3 in. By permission of the Brooklyn Museum of Art



Fig. 2. Detail of the large dish. Ownership engraving of Shāh Jahān. By permission of the Brooklyn Museum of Art



Fig. 3. Detail of the large dish. Endowment engraving of Princees Solṭānum. By permission of the Brooklyn Museum of Art

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Texts, Inscriptions, and the Ardabil Carpets

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IRAJ AFSHAR IS WELL-KNOWN TO ALL STUDENTS AND scholars of Iranian studies as a masterful historian who has edited and published a wide variety of medieval texts. One of his many interests is the use of specialized terminology, particularly that concerning art and architecture. A good example of his methodology is his recent study of the flat-woven carpets known as *zīlū*.¹ He began by collecting citations in written sources, including early geographies, histories, literary texts and dictionaries, and then matched that textual information with extant fragments which survive from the 10th/16th century. In homage to this historian and his method, I offer this short article on a related topic, Safavid pile carpets, particularly the matched pair known as the Ardabil carpets, to show how texts and inscriptions can help us understand the meaning and use of works of art.

The two Ardabil carpets are the most famous Safavid carpets. There is a well-preserved one acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London in 1893 (inv. no. 272-1893), and a patched one presented by J. Paul Getty to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1953 (inv. no. 53.50.2) (Fig. 1).² Neither carpet is complete. The London carpet is bigger (it now measures 10.5 by 5.3 meters, or 34.5 by 17.5 feet), than the Los Angeles carpet, which has been drastically shortened and lost its outer border (it now measures 7.3 by 4.1 meters, or 23.1 by 13.5 feet).³

¹ Afshar 1992.

² The basic publication of the Los Angeles carpet is Stead 1974; the most up-to-date information about the pair is summarized in Beattie 1986. More recent articles include Ittig 1993, Wearden 1995, and King 1996.

³ Kambiz Eslami kindly brought my attention to an article in the newspaper *Iran Times* (vol. xxvii, no. 17 for Friday, July 11, 1997) about a third Ardabil carpet. A similar story was published in the newspaper *Ittilā'āt* from July 2, 1997. According to the stories (whose details differ slightly), this carpet had been exported from Iran during the Persian Gulf War and bought by a British collector. Iranian authorities successfully reclaimed the carpet on the grounds that it had been exported illegally, and it is to go on display in the Carpet Museum (*Mūzih-i Farsh*) in Tehran. From the photographs in *Iran Times* and *Ittilā'āt*, the carpet has the same design as the matched pair of Ardabil carpets in London and Los Angeles and approximately the same dimensions (52 square meters). Technical examination is necessary to verify its authenticity, for this third carpet is without provenance.