

A Chinese Dish from the Lost Endowment of Princess Soltā num

1. 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 *chini-ye faghfuri*. *Faghfur* was the Arabicized version of *bagpur*, 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 *chini-ye faghfuri* 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 ā ni* rather than *faghfuri*, as *qā ā n* 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 thirteenth century and some, such as the fleet-owner of Persian descent, P'u Shou-kê ng, 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 became the solicitation target of religious institutions in the Persian motherland. Thus, when the Moroccan traveler Ebn-e Batutta visited the port of Zaytun - modern day Ch'üan-chou (Quanzhou) - in mid-fourteenth century, he encountered a certain Shaykh Borhā noddin

¹ P. Pelliot, *Notes on Marco Polo*, Paris, 1959, p. 652.

² M. Medley, *Islam, Chinese Porcelain and Ardabil*, in *IRAN*, London 1975, vol. XIII, p.32.

³ G.A. Bailey, *The Stimulus: Chinese Porcelain Production and Trade with Iran*, in "Tamelane's Tableware, A New Approach to the Chinoiserie Ceramics of Fifteenth- and Sixteenth- Century Iran," G. Bailey et al., Costa Mesa, CA 1996, p.7; Chen Da-Sheng, *Sources from Fujian on Trade Between China and Hurmuz in the Fifteenth Century*, in "Timurid Art and Culture, Iran and Central Asia in the Fifteenth Century," ed. L. Golombek and M. Subtelny, Leiden 1992, pp. 191-93.

who gathered donations for the Sufi congregation of the Shrine of Abu Es'hāq-e Kāzeruni in Kāzerun, 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 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 Kermān 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

2. 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 Il-Khānid vizier, Rashidoddin Fazlollāh (d. 1319), reproduced in one hundred copies and distributed throughout the Il-Khānid empire. There, the vizier 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`-e Rashidi complex at Tabriz, he boasted to have commissioned "one thousand elaborately designed jars (*khomré*) for syrups" from China, *bearing his epithets* and inscribed with the syrup name, and also, lidded boxes (*qutī*) for drug mixtures.⁷ Chinese porcelain jars were luxurious and expensive items that only individuals like the immensely rich Rashidoddin could afford to buy in such quantities, intended for a hospital that he wished to become the most renowned of the Islamic world. Thus, in an illustrated copy of the *Shāhnāmé* prepared for the *il-khān* Abu-Sa`id Bahādor Khān (r.1317-1335) for which every painting was meant to illustrate an episode of the *Shāhnāmé* as well as an event of Mongol history, the porcelain holdings of Rashidoddin were

⁴ A. Soudavar, *Art of the Persian Courts*, New York 1992, pp. 78-80. Ebn-e Battuta, *Voyages d'Ibn Battuta, Texte Arabe Accompagné d'une Traduction*, transl. by C. Defermery and B.R. Sanguinetti, 4 vols, Paris, 1979, p. 89, 271.

⁵ Medley, *Islam*, p. 32-34

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.32; J.A. Pope, *Chinese Porcelaine from the Ardabil Shrine*, London 1981, p. 44.

⁷ Rashidoddin Fazlollāh, *Savānehol-afkār-e Rashidi*, ed. M. Dānesh-pajuh, Tehran, 1358/1979, p. 214.

used as an indicator of his identity: Rashidoddin - who was trained as a physician - was portrayed in an apothecary surrounding with porcelain jars.⁸ But, since Rashidoddin was executed in 1319 and his building activity at the Rab` was mostly in the first decade of the fourteenth century, and since the production of blue-and-white started circa 1320,⁹ the depicted jars are not blue-and-white but seem to be of the Longquan type celadon.

For the viziers 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 invariably saw their possessions confiscated for the benefit of the *soltān*. Such is the case of the powerful vizier Majdoddin Mohammad (d. 1494) who amassed great riches and dislodged his former protector, Amir Ali-Shir Navā`i, as the second most powerful man of the kingdom, but soon fell in disgrace. Upon seeing the confiscated riches of his vizier which included Chinese porcelain of the highest quality, the Teymurid Soltān-Hosayn (r.1470-1506) exclaimed: "it was our expectation from Majdoddin Mohammad that should he have come across such valuable pieces he should have presented them to us."¹⁰

Teymurid princes cherished blue-and-white ceramics and Ologh Beyg (r. 1447-49) reputedly built a *chini-khāné* (Porcelain House) to house his collection of Chinese porcelain.¹¹ The Safavids (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. 1588-1629) to the Ardabil Shrine where a special *chini-khāné* was created for its display.¹² So famous has become this endowment that a blue-and-

⁸ A. Soudavar, *The Saga of Abu-Sa`id Bahādur Khān: The Abu-Sa`idnāmé*, in "The Court of the Il-Khāns, 1290-1340" ed. by T. Fitzherbert and J. Raby, Oxford 1997, p. 150-3, Atasoy 1970, 41-2 and for a color reproduction see Gray 1979, 99, pl. XXI. But as argued elsewhere (Soudavar 1996), it is a Jalāyerid painting that was made for insertion in the celebrated - and presently dispersed - Ilkhanid *Shāhnāmah* of Abu Sa`id Bahādur Khān (r. 717-36/1317-35), or a later Jalāyerid copy of it. Every painting of this *Shāhnāmah* project was meant to illustrate not only an episode of the *Shāhnāmah* but also an event of Mongol history, and thus, in this painting, the death of Daqiqi was to evoke the death of Rashid al-din as both authors were killed before they could finish their works (idem).

⁹ An attempt to reattribute Yuan wares to the Sung period (A. Kessler, *Empires Beyond the Great Wall*, Los Angeles 1993, pp. 134-43) has been discredited among others by S.G. Valenstein (*Concerning a Reattribution of Some Chinese Ceramics*, in "Orientations," Hong Kong Dec. 1974, pp. 71-74) citing kiln-site archeological evidence reported in recent Chinese publications.

¹⁰ Ghiyā`soddin b. Hemā`m known as Khāndamir, *Dasturo'l-vozarā*, ed. M. Nafisi, Tehran 1317, p.415.

¹¹ T. Lentz and G. Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision*, Los Angeles 1989, p.228; Zahiruddin Mohammad Bābor, *Bāburnāma*, ed. W. Thackston, Harvard 1993, vol 1, p. 96.

¹² Pope, *Chinese*, pl. 4. The collection is presently on display at the Iran Bāstān museum in Tehran.

white dish with a blurred endowment inscription, displayed in the “Romance of Taj Mahal” exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1990, and presently on loan to the Brooklyn museum, was routinely 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 Shāh `Abbās, the princess Soltānum (1519-1562), and endowed to the Shrine of the Eighth Shiite Imam at Mashhad.

2. Princess Soltānum

The blue-and-white vessel in question is a very large Ming dish (43cm wide) of circa 1425-30 (fig. 1), most probably imported into Persian lands under the Teymurids (1370-1506). Three inscriptions are carved on it. The first reads (fig. 2):

شاه جهان ابن جهانگیر شاه ، ۱۰۵۳ ، ۱۶

Shāh Jahān son of Jahāngir 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. 1628-57), and the date it entered into his possession, the year 1053AH/ 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 *tulah*” and fixes the weight of the dish at the time of acquisition at 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:

وقف عتبة رضويه عن مهين بانوی صفويه

Endowed to the Razavid Shrine, By Mahin Bānu, the Safavid (princess)

The inscription is in the form of rhyming couplets that Persian rulers and dignitaries used on their seals and coinage. The Razavid Shrine refers to the shrine of the Eighth Imam, Rezā ,

¹³ S. Markel, P. Pal, et al., *Romance of Taj Mahal*, Los Angeles 1990, pp. 167-69.

¹⁴ A *tulah* is an Indian weight measure that was used for precious items, especially herbs (see for instance Abul-fazl 1985, p. 85); it weighs 2.5 *mesqāls* (*mesqāl* = 4.64g); see Dehkhodā 1994, 5:6271. A similar inscription found at the bottom of a small Hung-chih (Hongzhi) bowl that once belonged to the Mughal emperor Jahāngir (r. 1014-37/1605-27) reads: 28 *tulah*, 2 *māshah*; see Pope 1981, 56-7, pl. 6J. Pope thought these inscriptions to indicate the day and the month of acquisition (*idem*), while they clearly indicate the bowl's weight with a precision of a 1/12th fraction of a *tulah* known as *māshah* (see Dehkhodā 1994, 12:17625).

buried in Mashhad and Mahin Bānu, also known as princess Soltānum, is the name of the full sister of Shāh Tahmāsb.¹⁵

Soltānum is known from historical sources as a learned princess who had had instructions in fine arts, and was taught calligraphy by the scribe Dust-Mohammad, the head of the royal library-atelier in mid-sixteenth century;¹⁶ specimens of her calligraphy are included in the Bahrām Mirzā album in the Topkapi Saray Library (H. 2154, fol. 7a), Istanbul.¹⁷ She was much respected by Tahmāsb, 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 Homāyun (r. 1530-40, 1555-56) sought asylum in Iran and help from Tahmāsb in 1544, the *shāh* demanded that he convert to Shiism. As Homāyun refused, Tahmāsb grew angry and threatened to kill him. The critical situation was diffused by the intervention of Soltānum who persuaded her brother to assist Homāyun 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 Soltānum - in the monarch's retinue.²⁰

Rumors about her intimate relationship with Homāyun's trusted lieutenant, Bayrām Khān, had spread in Safavid circles, even though Tahmāsb 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 Tahmāsb slipped into religious bigotry, he promised the hand of his sister to the Disappeared Twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, for whose expected return a white horse was saddled every evening at the gates of the royal encampment.²² Thus, Soltānum remained an unmarried woman, and consequently she endowed her considerable wealth to various shrines and pious

¹⁵ Hasan-Beyk Rumlu, *Ahsanottavārikh*, ed. A. Navai, Tehran 1357/1978, p. 536.

¹⁶ Budāq-e Monshi-ye Qazvini, *Javāherol-akhbār*, manuscript copied in 1576, State Public Library, St. Petersburg, Dorn 288, p.110a.

¹⁷ Soudavar, *Art*, p. 172.

¹⁸ Gul-Badan Beygam, *Le Livre de Humāyun*, transl. P. Pifaretti completed by J.L. Bacqué-Grammont, Paris 1996, p. 114.

¹⁹ Riaszul Islam, *Indo-Persian Relations*, Tehran 1970, p. 29-37; Soudavar, *Art*, pp. 172-73.

²⁰ A. Navā'i, ed., *Shāh `Abbās, Majmu'eh-ye Asnād va Mokātebāt-e Tārikhī*, Tehran 1367/1988, vol. 2, p. 21.

²¹ Soudavar, *Art*, pp. 172-73

²² M. Membre, *Mission to the Lord Sophy of Persia (1531-1542)*, transl. A. Morton, London 1993, p. 25

institutions in her own lifetime. More particularly, in confirmation of the second inscription on our dish, the 16-17th century chronicler Qāzi Ahmad-e Qomi related that Soltānum endowed “her jewelry and chinaware (*chini-ā lā ḥ*)” to the Shrine of the Eighth Imam in Mashhad.²³

3. From Mashhad to Agra

The Brooklyn dish was certainly acquired by Shāh Jahān in Agra where he stayed from mid January 1643 to 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 *shari`ā*?²⁵

The answer to the first question is that it was probably removed from the Shrine during the only Ozbak occupation of Khorāsān from Soltānum’s death in 1562 until 1644, the year of its acquisition by Shāh Jahān in; more precisely, at the time of the conquest of Mashhad by the Ozbak prince `Abdol-mo`men (d.1598) in 1590. Two years earlier, `Abdol-mo`men had accompanied his father `Abdollah Khān II (r.1583-98) in the conquest of Herāt, and had massacred the Qezelbāsh garrison stationed there. In Mashhad, as a last ditch effort, the defeated Qezelbāsh garrison retreated within the confines of the Shrine where massacres were traditionally avoided, even by Sunni Ozbaks. To no avail. `Abdol-mo`men’s troops not only massacred all the Qezelbāshs and the workers of the Shrine, but looted every gold and silver object, jewel studded lamps, carpets, valuable Qorāns and “Chinese vessels,” and subsequently traded them “for the price of cheap ceramic shards” among themselves.²⁶ The Ozbaks finally evacuated Mashhad in 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 Mir `Ali (active first half of 16th century), as well as some of the finest illustrated manuscripts (Mir `Ali himself had been taken from Herāt to Bokhārā c. 1529).

²³ Qāzi Ahmad-e Qomi, *Kholāsatottavārikh*, ed. E. Eshraqi, Tehran 1359/1980, p. 431.

²⁴ M. Beach and E. Koch, *King of the World*, London 1997, p. 11.

²⁵ Exceptionally, relying on the concept of *tabdil be ahsan*... .. In our case, however, it is highly unlikely that ~~any~~ a Safavid religious scholar would have granted permission for the “exchange” of a porcelain dish endowed by the sister of Shāh Tahmāsb. Furthermore, had there been a “legal exchange,” the abrasion of the endowment roundel would have been unnecessary.

²⁶ Eskandar Beyg-e Torkamān, *Tārikh-e `Ālam-ārā-ye `Abbāsi*, Tehran, 1350/1971, pp. 412-13.

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 *qāf* in *vaqf* and the *fā* in *Safaviyyé*) were initially erased to modify their meaning. However, the result was far from successful and any Mughal superintendent would have recognized the endowment nature of the inscription. The fact that the Shā h Jahā n's inscription is on the outside of 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 to conceal its provenance; and it may well be that the otherwise unexplained clusters of small holes on the bottom of the dish (see fig. 3) were drilled for attachment of such a cover.²⁸

In conclusion, a marvellous tale of provenance is intertwined in the delicate design pattern of this blue-and-white dish. At present, it seems to be the only surviving vessel from the looted endowment of Princess Soltā num, but a careful examination of other blue-and-white vessels may identify some more.

²⁷ The ownership inscription could have been carved on the outer edge of the foot-ring so that subsequent alterations would be visible at all times (see for instance the carvings on the Ardebil vessels in Pope, *Chinese*, pl.6). However, on all other Shā h Jahā n plates such as the Rockefeller plates (1975.150 and 151) at the Asia Society in New York, the ownership inscriptions are carved on the bottom (I am indebted to Ms. C. Smith from the Asia Society who confirmed the position of the engravings on the bottom and corrected the erroneous assertion to the contrary in Markel, *Romance*. p. 169) .

²⁸ As the dish is on display at the Brooklyn Museum it was not possible to weigh it before the publication of this article. Should the dish be weighed in the future and should its weight be lower than the inscribed 2.9kg - and assuming that the Shā h Jahā ni measures were correct - one may ascribe the difference to the weight of a missing bottom cover.