Taiwan

A New Discovery of dated Dong-xi Kiln Celadon from the Qing dynasty in Taiwan

Tai-kang Lu, Professor, Department of Art History, Tainan National University of the Arts

The island of Taiwan, also called Formosa is situated off the southeastern shore of the Asian continent. It plays a pivotal role in East Asia’s maritime system, with Japan and the Ryūkyū Islands to the north, the Philippines neighbouring to the south across the Bashi Channel, the Pacific Ocean to the east, and Mainland China’s Fujian Province lying to the west, beyond the 200 kilometer wide Taiwan Strait. In recent years, after investigating many cultural relics around Taiwan, the author discovered a large quantity of heirloom celadon from temples made by the Dong-xi kiln in Fujian province in south China during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). Among these are some rare examples with dated inscriptions.

The Dong-xi kiln, previously named Hua-An kiln, was located in the Dong-xi River basin, where the southwestern border of Hua-An county meets the eastern border of Nan-Jin county in the Zangzhou area west of the Jiu-long River in southern Fujian. The investigation and excavation of the Dong-xi kiln began in the 1980s. Through the analysis of unearthed objects, it has been concluded that the Dong-xi kiln was in production during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties, firing a great variety of ceramics, including celadon, white porcelain, blue-and-white porcelain, green-glazed stoneware, etc. From the 17th to 19th centuries, considerable quantities of ceramics produced by the kiln were exported overseas, although little was known of the trading of celadon from this kiln.

The only exception is from the ceramic cargo of the Tek Sing shipwreck, which was recovered in 1999 in the waters of Indonesia. However, this author’s field studies on artefacts in Taiwan and surrounding islands resulted in finding quite a number of well-preserved Qing dynasty Dong-xi kiln celadons in temples in various locations (fig. 1). They are mainly incense burners and floral offering vases intended for religious ceremonies, some of them with dated inscriptions. The inscriptions on the vessels contain important information pertaining to the title and name of the deity, the name of the temple and donors, and the date of offering, etc.

A celadon baluster vase with an ovoid body and trumpet neck (fig. 3) is in the collection of Protection Temple on the island of Kinmen. It is 47 centimeters high with incised peony flower decorations and covered in a light cyan glaze. On the front of the vase, written in underglaze cobalt blue, is the former name of the temple ‘Pinglin Temple’ and the names of the two deities worshiped there: ‘Baosheng Emperor’ (a medicine god of southern Fujian) and ‘Lord Li’ (a famous general in the Tang dynasty turned deity). The writing on the right notes the offering date of 1825 and the left indicates the donors to be worshippers from the Dong-xi kiln area.

In the collection of Haotien Temple in Taichung in central Taiwan is a cylinder-shaped celadon incense burner measuring 18 cm in height (fig. 4). It is covered in a pale green glaze with an inscription that reads ‘Haotien Temple’ and ‘Holy Mother in Heaven’ incised on the front. The inscription on the right side states that this vase was an offering made in 1879 and the left side records the donors to be local worshippers. The unglazed part of the base shows a deliberate iron-brown wash, which was a classic characteristic of Dong-xi kiln workmanship.

These heirloom Dong-xi celadon wares collected and passed down in Taiwan temples are well-preserved and explicitly dated, which indicates the time of their export was around the 19th century, during the late Qing dynasty. Furthermore, the inscriptions on the wares also clearly demonstrate the context of the Taiwanese local religion, including important information regarding the specific deities worshipped, temples associated, and donors involved.