

# Ming. Emperors, Artists and Merchants in Ancient China

Amsterdam, Nieuwe kerk, 5 October 2013 - 2 February 2014



Cicada on a leaf. Gold, jade  
© Nanjing Museum/Nomad Exhibitions

*In the West, Ming China is mostly known for its porcelain vases which have been highly valued for their exquisite beauty and quality for the past five hundred years. The present exhibition of the Amsterdam's Nieuwe kerk greatly broadens the above view: we are introduced a wide range of Ming art objects; the above jewellery is one among them. This golden cicada of just two centimetres long resting on a finely polished jade leaf illustrates the great skill and gentle spirit of its creator. The altogether 118 objects borrowed from the Nanjing Museum (silk paintings, calligraphy, furniture, jewellery, and everyday utensils), supplemented by loans from Gemeentemuseum of The Hague (20 porcelain objects) and the Bertholet collection (erotic paintings) help us to relive the unique spirit of late imperial China. A further merit of the show is that it places the exhibits in a broad socio-historical context and refers to the emerging global trade which foreshadowed the modern world economy and China's present-day economic dominance.*

## Historical perspective

Various philosophical historians, such as Vico, Toynbee and Spengler<sup>1</sup> described the cyclicity in the life and death of civilizations. In the case of the (at least) five thousand years old Chinese history periodical changes can be more easily observed. Lin Yutang, in his engaging book, *My Country and My People* explains how the Chinese civilization survived upon the recurring ‘sinolization’ of Mongolian peoples who on regular intervals invaded the country and gave an infusion of “new blood”. “...For the striking fact is that Chinese history can be conveniently divided into cycles of eight hundred years. Each cycle begins with a short-lived and militarily strong dynasty, which unified China after centuries of internal strife. Then follow four or five hundred years of peace, with one change of dynasty, succeeded by successive waves of wars, resulting soon in the removal of the capital from the North to the South. Then came secession and rivalry between North and South with increasing intensity, followed by subjugation under a foreign rule, which ended the cycle. History then repeats itself and with the unification of China again under Chinese rule there is a new bloom of culture.”

In good accordance with the above described cyclicity, the “modern cycle” of China has begun in 1368, with the ascending to the throne of Zhu Yuanzhang, a man of humble peasant origins, who restituted the native rule over all of China. Zhu Yuanzhang and his descendants ruled uninterruptedly for 276 years, until 1644. Their rule is named Ming, meaning ‘brilliant’ and ‘enlightenment’. Indeed, this period is considered one of the three golden ages of China.

### *Early Ming*

The early Ming is characterized by strong central power and a strong army relying on a system of self-supervising rural communities. Enormous construction projects took place, including the completion of the Great Wall and the building of the imperial palace complex (first in Nanking and later in Beijing). In a general sense, there was a return to indigenous cultural heritage and mistrust towards foreigners.

Trade had no place in this social system. The government’s policy concerning foreign trade was annulling. Zhu Yuanzhang defeated the Japanese *wako* pirates and anti-Ming forces that threatened the eastern coasts of China and forbade maritime trade (but established a tribute system in an attempt to transform the smuggling trade into a trade nexus controlled by the Ming government – with limited success). The Silk Road, the main trade route which connected different regions of the East with each other and with the West, and had been operating from ca. 500 BC, began to decline. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century the secrets of silk production were no secrets anymore and the Silk Road produced much less revenue than in previous centuries. Trade along the Silk Road was first restricted and later shut down altogether by the Ming emperors. The Silk Road's lively trading towns gradually disappeared.

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<sup>1</sup> Giambattista Vico (1668 – 1744) is a precursor of systemic thinking and philosophical history. Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889 – 1975) extensively described in *A Study of History* the rise and fall of 26 civilizations in the course of human history. Oswald Spengler (1880 – 1936) made a similar proposition in *The Decline of the West*, such as various other authors who contributed to the development of ‘social cycle theories’. A considerable number of related mathematical models are presently available (e.g. by Chu, Lee and Malkov).

However, the idea that China at any moment absolutely isolated was, is a false image. In early Ming times (between 1405 to 1433) *Zheng He* commanded expeditions to as far as Persia, India, East-Africa en Ceylon, voyaging on board of wooden ships which were several times larger than any other wooden ship ever built in history. The purpose of his voyages was not “discovery” since he knew where he was going; he had a map and followed long-established trade routes between China and the Arabian peninsula, which were employed since at least the Han Dynasty<sup>2,3</sup>. The purpose of these expeditions was to indicate the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean basin, impose imperial control over trade, and to extend the empire's tributary system. Whatever grandiose and successful, these voyages were stopped and their memory sank into oblivion for quite a long time.

Yet the change was inevitable. In the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century China switched to a bimetallic system based on copper coins and silver taels since paper money (a Chinese invention from the 8<sup>th</sup> century) lost its value due to overprinting. It created a silver demand which could not be satisfied with the output of Chinese silver mines. Japan, however, was producing lots of silver; so by bringing copper cash to Japan and changing it for silver, one could attain immense profits. And not just with copper: silk, porcelain, paper and cotton thread sold equally well in Japan<sup>4</sup>. Just by sailing back and forth, one could get rich. It is not surprising, that a massive smuggling took place at the Eastern coasts. In the meantime, the Portuguese arrived to China, and got permission in 1542 to trade with China at one port (Macao, near Hong Kong). The Portuguese soon discovered that the best trade was the carriage way between China and Japan instead of China and Europe and became the main carriers of Japanese silver to China, next to the Chinese pirates.

### *The Impossible Black Tulip*

Portuguese trade was also accompanied by Jesuit missions. Some Jesuits became influential and highly valued advisors to the emperor. *Matteo Ricci*, an Italian Jesuit, was one of the first Western scholars to master the Chinese script and language. Ricci was deeply impressed by Chinese culture and built up an increasingly close connection with the Chinese literati circle<sup>5</sup>. Ricci composed several European-style world-maps in Chinese, the first one appearing in 1584. He wrote about his cartographical work: “This was the most useful work that could be done at that time to dispose China to give credence to the things of our holy Faith. ... Their conception of the greatness of their country and of the insignificance of all other lands made them so proud that the whole world seemed to them savage and barbarous compared with themselves.” The refined version of the 1584 map was printed in 1602. It is one of the most celebrated maps in cartography, nicknamed the *Impossible Black Tulip of Cartography*. Only six original copies are known to exist today, one of which changed hands for US\$ 1 million in 2010, making it the second most expensive map purchase in history. The map exhibited in the

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<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia ‘Zheng He’

<sup>3</sup> There is a theory, proposed in 2013 by Gavin Menzies, that Zheng He reached the New World some seventy years before Columbus.

<sup>4</sup> Maddison, 2002

<sup>5</sup> Canis, 2008

*Nieuwe kerk* is a slightly different version of the 1602 map, originating from 1608, of which just a dozen re-copied versions are known to exist today.

Standing in front of the map, we are impressed by its size and beauty. We see mountain ranges, rivers, seas, and indications in Chinese: names and descriptions of ethnic groups and main commercial products. In contrast with the *Impossible Black Tulip* decorative elements are added to the 1608 version: images of ships, existent and mythological animals. China is positioned in the middle, allowing the ruler to see the greatness of his realm but also to grasp the dimensions of other powers on the globe.

### *Trade and society in late Ming*

The prohibition on private trade was ended in 1567. Now the way became free to the development of commerce. Since the value of silver was constantly higher in China than in the rest of the world and because the Chinese economy was so huge that it could absorb silver in extraordinary amounts, a silver-based global trade evolved. The Spanish opened fabulously rich silver mines in The Americas whose output was shipped mainly to China. 30 to 40% of the world's silver (some 100.000 kg annually) ended up in China, travelling on boards of Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese and Dutch<sup>6</sup> ships. Many New World crops such as maize, potato, pepper, sweet potato, peanut and tobacco were also introduced to China at this time. In return to the silver silk, porcelain, and tea<sup>7</sup> was shipped from China to Europe.

Social change was unfolding, blurring the lines between the traditional classes. Chinese society knew four classes: on top were the *shi* (gentry scholars), below the *nong* (peasant farmers), still below the *gong* (artisans and craftsmen), and on the lowest grade the *shang* (merchants and traders). The merchants, who were traditionally considered to promote luxury goods only (that is, goods that were unnecessary and decadent) and sold for profit, adding nothing of value to society, ranked the lowest on the social scale. However, as they grew increasingly rich, some of them growing wealthier than the emperor self, the gentry scholar and merchant classes started to fuse, and the merchants gained power at the expense of the state.<sup>8</sup> Merchants could now buy culture and education for their money and they became the patrons of arts and literary men. Merchants could even buy the possibility to take a state exam and become government official. Wealth was rivalling education, and the elite constituted no more of the 'learned' but of 'the richest'. In parallel with the rising of the merchant class, the scholars' distinct social position was fading. Social change affected the farmer class as well which constituted the bulk of the population. Farmers moved gradually from regional self-sufficiency and a system of self-supervising local communities (characterizing the early Ming period), towards market economy. Many farmers got specialized on certain crops which were

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<sup>6</sup> The Dutch joined the Portuguese in the Far East at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. They conquered Taiwan in the 1620s with the aim of creating a base for trade with China. They became the most profitable European traders in Asia for long times.

<sup>7</sup> By the 18th century tea became the national drink in England and in The Americas. It meant a massive exchange of silver to tea. When the treasury was losing too much of its silver reserves, the English decided to put a tax on tea. Objections to the tax led to the Boston Tea Party which was the immediate antecedent of the American Revolution – from a certain angle; it was all due to the Chinese demand on silver...

<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia: The Economy of the Ming Dynasty

intended for the market. They had to plan in advance and had a prospect of higher gain at the cost of greater risk. In parallel with money accumulation in the merchant class, there appeared an interest in buying land which meant that land prices went higher and many farmers lost their lands which triggered a downward mobility among farmers.

### *End of the Ming*

As a consequence of the booming economy, a silver-based taxation system was introduced<sup>9</sup> and became common throughout the empire by the end of 16<sup>th</sup> century. It allowed the government to budget and understand its expenses in monetary sense. Taxation was in theory based on the number of population and the amount of cultivated land, but, since the government failed to hold a cadaster survey, and the prefectures and individuals were not interested in reporting the correct data, there was no clear administration on either the amount of arable land, or the number of people living in a household. The government administration could not keep up with the dramatic demographic changes that began in the Ming dynasty (and continue to the present). Furthermore, tax rates were extremely low in China, encouraging trade but weakening the government.

The “silverization” of China inevitably had global consequences as well, considering that China contained perhaps one-fourth of the earth’s population by the seventeenth century.<sup>10</sup> Once silver supply started to exceed demand, the purchasing power of silver diminished and inflation set in. The fall of silver price in China seriously affected Spain’s economy<sup>11</sup> and the economic and political processes that she was involved in. As a response, the flow of New World silver to China diminished. Simultaneously, the Tokugawa regime of Japan cut off the supply of Japanese silver. Silver became scarce in China and the government officials started stockpiling it creating silver deflation. The problem became acute when a series of natural disasters happened. In 1641 a great epidemic ravaged China and there was a steep decline in temperature in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>12</sup>. People were starving and could not pay the taxes; various rebellions broke out and the government was too weak to defend itself. Finally, the Manchus, a former tributary of China, took the capital and became the founders of the last imperial dynasty in China.

It is interesting to consider that China is and has been a larger political unit than any other. Already in the tenth century, it was the world’s leading economy in terms of per capita income and this leadership lasted until the fifteenth century<sup>13</sup>. After the economic boom in the Ming and Qing periods, China’s performance declined in the nineteenth and first half of the

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<sup>9</sup> This was the so-called Single Whip Law

<sup>10</sup> Flynn & Giráldez, 1995

<sup>11</sup> The same gold and silver that contributed to the wealth of Spain, also caused its fate: the silver flooding into the country led to serious inflation and did not encourage industrialization; it was rather used to finance endless wars in Europe. By the mid-1600s supply and demand costs equalized and profits diminished. The decline in silver profits meant that Spain ceased to be a serious world power and consequently lowered the amount of silver shipped to China.

<sup>12</sup> Between 1550 and 1850 the Earth experienced a global cooling, the so-called Little Ice Age, with three particularly cold intervals (around 1650, 1770 and 1850), separated by intervals of slight warming.

<sup>13</sup> Maddison, 2002

twentieth century. The 21<sup>st</sup> century sees a changing trend: China is likely to resume its role as the world's largest economy by 2015<sup>14</sup>.

### *The Imperial Court and the Scholar Elite*

“...it seems to be quite remarkable when we stop to consider it, that in a kingdom of almost limitless expanse and innumerable population and abounding in copious supplies of every description, though they have a well-equipped army and navy that could easily conquer the neighboring nations, neither the King nor his people ever think of waging a war of aggression. They are quite content with what they have and are not ambitious of conquest. In this respect they are much different from the people of Europe, who are frequently discontent with their own governments and covetous of what others enjoy. While the nations of the West seem to be entirely consumed with the idea of supreme domination, they cannot even preserve what their ancestors have bequeathed them, as the Chinese have done through a period of some thousands of years...” with these words expressed Matteo Ricci his astonishment about the way the Chinese emperor ruled his country.<sup>15</sup>

The main concern of the Chinese from ancient times has been *harmony*; harmonious relationship with nature, harmony within the (usually extended) family, harmony between the peoples of China and harmony with other nations. Harmony was the key word that China communicated to the world during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. ‘Harmony with nature’ is the idea that we see reflected in the Chinese architecture.

The three main characteristics of Chinese architecture are: emphasis on horizontality, hierarchy and symbolic nature. Buildings are rather broad than high; the overflowing, highly curved roof receives more emphasis than the vertical walls. Lin Yutang says over the Chinese roof: “unlike the Gothic spires, his spirit does not aspire to heaven but broods over the earth”. The roof, symbolic mediator between the world of the living and the spiritual world, is often decorated with ornaments intended to keep off evil spirits. During the Ming roof tiles and ornaments were extremely popular and their production advanced. Several nice examples of glazed roof ornaments are presented at the exhibition, from the sparse remains of the Nanjing palaces.

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<sup>14</sup> Maddison, 2006

<sup>15</sup> Excerpt from the diary of Matteo Ricci



The Beijing Forbidden City. Silk, c. 1400-50 (?)  
© Nanjing Museum/Nomad Exhibitions

This colourful silk painting of impressive size (184\*156 cm) shows the rigorous and highly hierarchical plan of the Beijing Forbidden City. In front of the hall of Supreme Harmony, the largest and the most imposing of all buildings, we see the chief architect, Kuai Xiang, who is likely to be the author of the painting.

The Forbidden City in Beijing is the world's largest palace complex. It is built according to a strictly geometrical order with all its 980 buildings arranged symmetrically, along a linear axis. The palaces are at the centre of the imperial city which is itself placed at the centrum of the inner city. Each building had a precise place and function. The imperial household was also organized according to a strict hierarchical order, down to the smallest detail.

Government administration was carried out by scholar officials selected through a three-stage imperial state exam. The institution of state exams was introduced at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and got increasingly complicated over the centuries (especially, under the Ming and Qing dynasties). At the exhibition we can see some pages from state exam papers. About 5% of those who attempted the examinations actually passed them and even fewer received titles<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, the state exam system was a path for upward social mobility and those, who passed it, were the most highly revered class of the society. In the account of Matteo Ricci: "Another remarkable fact and quite worthy of note as marking a difference from the West, is that the entire kingdom is administered by the Order of the Learned, commonly known as The Philosophers. The responsibility for the orderly management of the entire realm is wholly and completely committed to their charge and care. The army, both officers and soldiers, hold them in high respect and show them the promptest obedience and deference, and not

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<sup>16</sup> Wikipedia: Imperial examination

infrequently the military are disciplined by them as a schoolboy might be punished by his master.”<sup>17</sup>

The exhibition shows a collection of life-size portraits of seven members of Ming’s educated elite. These portraits served as “passport photographs”; they are surprisingly real and expressive. There is an accompanying text to the portrait describing the name, family origin, date of birth (sometimes, of death) and the level of education of the portrayed. The high quality of the portraits let us think that they were created by a master-painter.



Portrait of He Bin. Paper, 16th century  
© Nanjing Museum/Nomad Exhibitions

The most gripping portrait exhibited is certainly that of *He Bin*. Very little is known about this man whose facial expression exudes intelligence, good humor and rigor.

Many scholars, who did not get into the government administration, turned to the arts, the study of which was considered a path to the cultivation of the moral self. Xu Wei, whose portrait is figured below, passed the first grade of the civil examination but was never able to pass the middle grade, even after attempting it eight times. He was, however, mastering all the three artistic perfections (poetry, calligraphy and painting) what is considered the ultimate in artistic achievement and is indeed very rare. He is recognized as the forerunner of modern ink painting in China.

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<sup>17</sup> Excerpt from the diary of Matteo Ricci





Portrait of Xu Wei. Paper, 16th century. © Nanjing Museum/Nomad Exhibitions

## Arts

“If you do not run away from the raindrops, you will find them most beautiful,” said Hsiao Shihwei at the end of the Ming Dynasty. Indeed the Chinese mind is as keen to detect the beauty in a common pebble as it is anxious to squeeze the last ounce of happiness from an insecure and fate-ruled world - states Lin Yutang. “Even in painting and poetry there is a sheer, whole-hearted, instinctive delight in commonplace life, and imagination is used to throw a veil of charm and beauty over this earthly life, rather than to escape from it. There is no doubt that the Chinese are in love with life, in love with this earth, and will not forsake it for an invisible heaven. They are in love with life, which is so sad and yet so beautiful, and in which moments of happiness are so precious because they are so transient.”<sup>18</sup>

The Ming period roughly coincided with the renaissance in Europe. Similarly to the European renaissance, which brought the revival of classical culture, a restoration of national Chinese culture took place in the Ming era. Confucianism was blooming again, and traditional motives dominated in the arts, ensured by a special court-based Bureau of Design. It established uniform standards of decoration for imperial production in ceramics, textiles, metalwork, and lacquer, part of which was produced in manufacturing industries, particularly in southern China.

<sup>18</sup> Lin, 1936

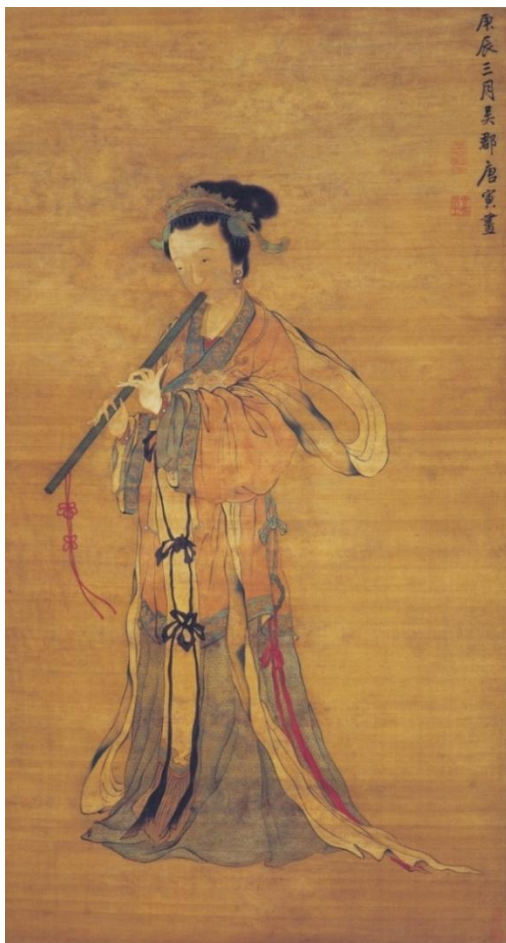


Jar with two handles. Glazed yellow porcelain, 1488-1505

© Nanjing Museum/Nomad Exhibitions

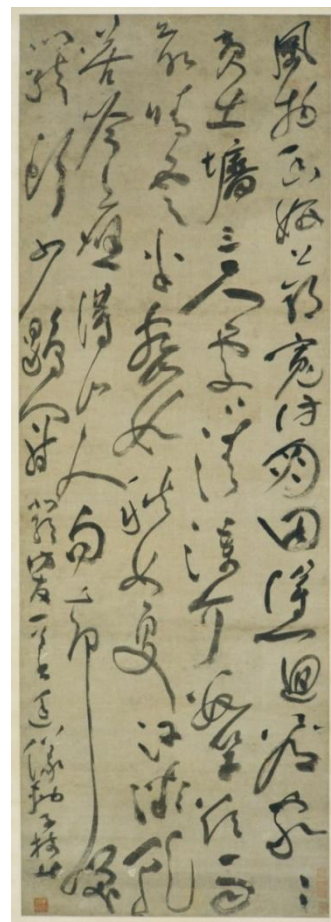
The yellow color, corresponding to the element of earth, and held as the symbolic color of the five legendary emperors of ancient China, was reserved to the emperor and his circle. Yellow porcelain could only be used inside the imperial palace complex. The white color corresponds to the element of metal and symbolizes brightness and purity. From the color combination we can tell that this splendid jar served at court rituals.

In the Ming era Large-scale landscapes, flower-and-bird compositions, and figural narratives were particularly favoured. Narrative painting, with a wider color range and a much busier composition than Song paintings, was immensely popular. The present exhibition presents us with many beautiful examples in either genre.



Tang Yin, Lady Playing the Flute. Ink on silk scroll, 1470-1524

© Nanjing Museum/Nomad Exhibitions



Zhu Yunming (Zhu Zhishan), calligraphy. Ink on paper, 1460-1527

© Nanjing Museum/Nomad Exhibitions

### *Erotic paintings*

The seclusion of women, the fact that marriage was not an affair between individuals but between families, and the chastity required from women resulted that women's sexual life was often repressed. The same did not apply to men, especially to those of the richer class. Sexual life outside marriage had many legitimate forms: prostitution, courtesanship, concubinage. Same sex affairs were also accepted and frequent.

Courtesans had a special status in the society. It was the courtesan who supplied the need for courtship and romance which many men missed in their youth before marriage. Most well-known respectable scholars went to courtesans' houses, or had courtesans for their concubines, and frankly said so. In fact, to be an official and avoid dinners with female entertainers was impossible. Scholars sought for those hetaeras who could distinguish themselves from the rest either in poetry, music, painting or witty repartee. These girls had to be courted. Many a man had to court a lady of supposedly easy virtue for months and spend three or four thousand dollars before he was permitted to pass a night in her boudoir. Courtesans carried on the musical tradition of the country, which without them would have died off. Their influence over high officials often gave them a measure of political influence, for sometimes it was in their house that political appointments were interceded for and decided upon<sup>19</sup>. (Nevertheless, the philosopher Li Zhi, who taught that women were the intellectual equals of men and should be given a better education, eventually died in prison for his "dangerous ideas".)

The below painting is one of the ten pieces album (1595) of Wang Sheng. Ten silk paintings are combined in this album with ten calligraphies of poems. The poems originate from different authors thereby giving the impression that they were created by various scholars who got inspired by the paintings. It recalls the Ming-dynasty atmosphere in which all aspects of the scholar including his sexual habits were extensively discussed among literati, for example during a dinner in a friend's house or during a "study trip".

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<sup>19</sup> Lin, 1936



One of the ten paintings on silk from the album of Wang Sheng, Late Ming Dynasty  
© F. Bertholet Collection, Amsterdam

The paintings exhibited in the *Nieuwe kerk* are never crude<sup>20</sup>, they suggest beauty and harmony, and are enhanced with symbolic details, such as the big hollow rock with the cockscomb flower on the above painting. The expression of the figures is relaxed, shows hardly any emotion. We can also observe that the bound feet (a 10<sup>th</sup>-century invention which permeated all strata of the society during the Ming) of the girl had to be covered with a piece of tissue, since the distorted foot was not an appealing thing to see or smell without the nicely embroidered lotus shoe.

The painting and color printing of erotic scenes reached its highest level in late Ming. Erotic literature flourished as well, yielding such a masterpiece as the *Chin Ping Mei* (The Plum in the Golden Vase).

### *Royal Delft Porcelain*

The Royal Delft pottery with its characteristic white and “Delft blue” color is a well-known trademark in Europe. What is less well known is how this authentic Dutch product evolved through the copying of Chinese Ming porcelain which had been immensely popular in the Low Countries between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. At the exhibition we can follow the development of Delft pottery. Meanwhile the early copies from the 1600s can just be named charming (with a little generosity), we get impressed by the quality of Delft pottery from some 50 years later. Due to a steady demand, earthenware factories were established in many Dutch cities in the 17th century. The city of Delft peaked with 32 factories from which just one remained.

It is interesting to note that the blue and white color is not an original Chinese invention. It evolved by a marriage between Chinese and Iranian processes and materials<sup>21</sup>. The blue dye (cobalt oxide) is the same what was used to decorate West Asian earthenware and was

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<sup>20</sup> It is not the general rule; most erotic paintings from this period are more explicit.

<sup>21</sup> Honour & Fleming, 2005

introduced in China under the Mongol rule. In the Ming era all foreigner design elements were neglected, just the color scheme remained and got applied for traditional Chinese motifs. However, not only Westerners copied the much-sought-after Chinese porcelain, Western demand also made its impact on the Chinese production. In the exhibition we can see various examples for European influence, of which the pilgrim bottles are noteworthy. The form of these bottles shows an Islamic origin, and they got to China with Portuguese mediation.

## The exhibition

The “Ming. Emperors, Artists and Merchants in Ancient China” travelling show is jointly organized by *Nomad Exhibitions* and the *Nieuwe Kerk Amsterdam*, and will travel to the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh in 2014. The exhibition is of moderate size but of great importance. It is surprising that the exhibits are arranged in a rather traditional way: the circulation is forced to a relatively narrow ‘corridor’, where visitors ought to keep pace with the procession, peek over shoulders, or force their way to the exhibit if they are less polite and more interested. Considering that half of the available space remained empty, a more fluid spatial arrangement would have been possible. The exhibition is accompanied by a small but fine catalogue in Dutch language, and a nicely illustrated children’s book. Various lectures are offered on the subject as well as activities for children. During the three months of the exhibition a 3D model of all the 980 buildings of the Forbidden City of Beijing is being printed. Visitors can watch the two 3D printers live at work.

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