

By Tracey Yeh 葉翠華

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I am a native Chinese from Taiwan, who also lived in USA for 10 years. Half of my family live in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and another half in the USA. I have an MBA from Tulane University, which is located in the enchanting city of New Orleans in Louisiana. I have been a proud docent of the Asian Civilisations Museum for 8 years, and I also sing in a choir for Sunday Mass at my church.



Tracey at a ranch during her Tulane school days, in 2002



Tracey leading a tour through ACM's *Angkor: Exploring Cambodia's Sacred City* exhibition in 2018

I took on the challenge of ACM docent training 8 years ago because at work I led a team of professionals based in China, Hong Kong, Japan, India, Philippines, Thailand, and Australia. I needed to have a better grasp of their diverse cultural backgrounds in order to break barriers to develop the team professionally. After the training, I could relate to my diverse team on a much deeper level because I can see how their viewpoints are deriving from their cultures and how I can use my knowledge of their cultures to motivate them to excel.

The objects I'll talk about today are a pair of sky-blue glazed vessels from the Jun kilns. In order to highlight the theme of *Home, and Away*, of Singapore Heritage Festival, I want to start by sharing my personal connection with these two objects.

My family name is Yeh (葉) and in the Spring and Autumn period, the Yeh clan was given the territory of Yeh county in Henan province, so Henan province is the root and home of my ancestors. In the family tree, the Yeh clan moved to Guangdong province during the late Southern Song dynasty to escape the persecution of the Yuan army. My family's ancestor Yeh Da Jing (葉大經) was a *jinshi* (imperial scholar) in the Song dynasty, and he was a general in charge of Fujian and Guangdong provinces. He was originally from Bianjing, the

capital of the Northern Song dynasty, which is Kaifeng city now. The ancient site of the official Jun kilns was discovered in 1964 in Yuzhou, which is less than a two-hour drive from Kaifeng. Some scholars believe that during the Northern Song dynasty, the official Jun kiln made porcelains exclusively for the royal court. Additionally, my Chinese name, Tsuei Hua (翠華), is the name for imperial flags that precede the emperor's palanquin in a royal procession. I am profoundly interested in the beautiful glazes on Jun porcelain made for the emperor.



(Left) **Dish.** China, Jun kilns, 12th century. Stoneware. On loan from the Edmond Chin Collection

(Right) **Bowl with handle.** China, Jun kilns, 12th to 14th century. Stoneware. on loan from the Edmond Chin Collection

This sky-blue glazed dish and the bowl with flower-petal designs along part of the rim were both made in the Jun kilns, and are on display in the Ceramics gallery at ACM, in a display of monochrome wares from the Song and the Jin dynasties. These two pieces of Jun ware display aesthetic minimalism, with elegant clean lines, sparse decoration, simple shapes, and are characterised by light-coloured, subtly hued glazes. Chinese potters always searched for new clays and exotic glaze colours, and looked for innovative ways to create their wares.

There are five famous kilns in Chinese history: Ru (汝), Guan (官), Ge (哥), Jun (钧), and Ding (定). Jun wares stood out due to their unique flambé glaze, which created magnificent colours of sky blue, rose purple, or begonia red on the surface. The exact result is out of human control, thus the colour on each piece of Jun ware is unique. The glaze appears thick and milky when applied, and upon drying, cracks sometimes appear. These cracks were then covered up by the more molten part of the glaze which flows and fills up these crevices during the firing process, leaving a pattern of “earthworm trails along the mud” (蚯蚓走泥纹). Standing close, I can see the dark, thin trail-marks on the inner surface of the bowl.

Personally, I feel that each piece of Jun ware is a work of wonder. I find its uncontrollable multicolour flambé glaze on the surface and the variation of colour that fills up the cracks so appealing. I recall one collector sharing with me that this type of porcelain still has a pleasant tinkling sound.

Jun ware normally has a thick clay body. The glaze on the edges of these wares are thinner – that is why the rims are earthy yellow in colour. This is in contrast with the thick layer of coloured glaze on the body. In general description, this is a bowl but it may have served multiple functions, such as a wine vessel or a brush washer. There is another very similar Jun sky-blue glazed brush washer in the Beijing Palace Museum. Check out this link <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/ceramic/226995.html>

A brush washer is a typical Chinese scholar's object. As with the Four Treasures of the Study (ink brush, inkstick, paper, inkstone), it is a physical embodiment of a scholar's aesthetic taste and an essential tool in the traditional arts of Chinese calligraphy and painting. Brush washers were used to hold water for cleansing the brush or for removing excess ink from the brush so as to create different shades of ink in the Chinese painting. This functional object was often made as a beautiful work of art through exquisite design and the use of precious materials such as zitan wood, jade, or porcelain.