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Article

Production and Aesthetics of Qingbai Porcelain in the Song Dynasty: A Case Study of a Thin-Walled Yingqing Bowl Excavated from a Song-Jin Ancient Street

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Abstract: Qingbai porcelain, pioneered by kilns in Jingdezhen during the Song Dynasty, is characterized by a delicate body and a glaze harmonizing celadon and white. The exceptionally thin-walled variants, which are translucent upon illumination, have been termed "Yingqing" since the late Qing Dynasty. In this study, the aesthetic features of thin-walled Yingqing porcelain were explored by thoroughly reviewing the body-glaze formulations, manufacturing techniques, and kiln distributions, and its aesthetic features are fundamentally anchored in its distinctive glaze. Subsequently, its widespread popularity is interpreted through the lens of the literati-dominated aesthetic paradigms during the Song Dynasty. Additionally, a case study was performed on a restored Yingqing bowl excavated from the Song-Jin ancient street ruins in Dengzhou. Drawing upon restoration records and comparison with contemporaneous wares produced in Jingdezhen, we concluded that northern Yingqing porcelain tried to emulate southern stylistic models, while it was inherently constrained by the limitation of local raw materials. As a result, a uniquely mellow and celadon-tinged character was developed for northern Yingqing porcelain. The prevalence of these ceramics reflects an effective integration of advanced production technology and refined literati taste.

Keywords: Yingqing porcelain; Qingbai porcelain; thin-walled ceramics; glaze color; Song Dynasty; aesthetics

1. Introduction

Created by kilns in Jingdezhen during the early to mid-Northern Song Dynasty [1], Qingbai porcelain is a type of ceramic with a glaze color falling between celadon and white [2]. It features a thin, light body with a translucent glaze that allows the white body to be seen, while the glaze accumulation areas exhibit a celadon hue. When viewed obliquely against the light, underglaze carvings and subtle variations in the glaze tone become faintly visible. The earliest known specimen of Qingbai porcelain is a Qingbai-glazed bowl excavated from a tomb dated to the third year of the Xianping reign (1000 AD) of the Northern Song Dynasty in Jiujiang, China [1,3]. Multiple records of Qingbai ware trade in Lin'an have been reported in Southern Song literature [1]. Due to its jade-like appearance, Qingbai porcelain has been frequently compared to jade in literature since the Song and Yuan dynasties. Indeed, it has been referred to as "Rao jade" and its jade-like appearance and texture have been thoroughly described [4]. Records of such glaze color are not rare in ceramic-related literature [2]. Since the late Qing Dynasty, thin-walled products have been referred to as "Yingqing" (shadow blue), "Yingqing" (reflecting blue), and "Yinqing" (hidden blue) as they reveal shadows upon illumination [1,3,5]. In this study, the kilns, techniques, and products of this category are referred to as Qingbai porcelain to maintain terminological consistency, as in most previous studies; thin-walled,

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translucent variants of Qingbai porcelain are termed as Yingqing porcelain, to which the excavated bowl discussed in this study belongs. "Yingqing" first appeared in ceramic treatises published during the Qing Dynasty to reflect its extremely thin body and the characteristic visibility of underglaze patterns from both sides [5].

Regarding the manufacturer distribution, Jingdezhen served as the center for Qingbai porcelain, and wares from the Hutian kilns are the most representative ones. Kilns across Jiangxi, Anhui, Fujian, and Hubei, as well as northern kilns such as the Juntai kiln in Henan, subsequently imitated this product [6]. Its zenith spanned from the mid-Northern Song to the early Southern Song Dynasty, during which the ceramics were distributed across China via canal networks and commercial routes, as evidenced by frequent discoveries of these ceramics in northern urban ruins. Particularly, the maritime trade route was of great significance: Qingbai porcelain has been recovered from underwater relics such as the "Nanhai I" and the Sinan shipwreck in South Korea, as well as coastal ruins across Asia and Africa, demonstrating that its circulation extended far beyond national borders [1]. More importantly, the underlying aesthetic sensibility of Qingbai porcelain is extremely attractive. Rather than appealing through complex colors and ornate decorations, Qingbai porcelain exhibited a jade-like appearance, so that the ideology that jade is a tangible embodiment of moral virtue is perfectly grounded in these utilitarian wares in the Song Dynasty [4]. Indeed, literature in the Song Dynasty has already documented evaluations equating the glaze color of Jingdezhen ceramics with fine jade [5]. This aesthetic choice marks a significant difference from the opulent style of ceramics in the Tang Dynasty, providing a concrete entry point for the exploration of aesthetics in the Song Dynasty.

2. Production of Qingbai Porcelain in the Song Dynasty

2.1. Body-Glaze Formulation and Manufacturing Technology

The "celadon-white" (Qingbai) tone of Qingbai porcelain is fundamentally a technological outcome originating from specific body and glaze formulations combined with precise firing regimes. The body was crafted using porcelain stone with low iron content. The premium quality of the local Jingdezhen porcelain stone yielded a dense, purely white body with excellent translucency; the weathering level of the stone was optimal, and the subsequent "binary formulation" integrating porcelain stone with kaolin further enhanced the clay properties [6]. The glaze used was a low-iron lime glaze, in which iron dissolves into the glass phase under high temperatures, consequently rendering a celadon hue [1]. This high-calcium glaze easily accumulates in carved lines and structural transitions due to its strong fluidity at high temperatures, which serves as the technical foundation for the deepening celadon color in the areas of glaze accumulation [7]. The body whiteness and the glaze celadon are mutually complementary: sections with a thick glaze layer appear deep celadon, while sections with a thin glaze layer are nearly white.

The successful execution of a thin-walled vessel depends on two crucial procedures: throwing and trimming. After washing and refining, the clay was rapidly thrown on a wheel, followed by repeated shaving with carving tools, so that the walls were extremely thin, while the structural uniformity was maintained with no deformation. Glazing was predominantly applied by dipping, and the layer thickness directly affects the coloration in areas of glaze accumulation. Then, the wares were subjected to a single high-temperature firing, aiming for a mellow, glossy finish upon complete glaze vitrification. In order to maximize kiln capacity, some products in Jingdezhen were produced by inverted firing, resulting in an unglazed, rough rim known as a "Mangkou". Relying on intricate task allocation and consummate artisanal skills, the potters achieved a precise equilibrium among clay body, glaze formulation, and kiln fire, and this delicate balance is exactly the origin of the translucent, shadow-revealing characteristic of thin-walled products. By the mid-to-late Northern Song Dynasty, the Hutian kilns introduced a lathe-turning technique to further trim air-dried roughcasts, and the wall thickness was reduced

to several millimeters. A conical bowl excavated from a Hutian kiln site had a diameter of >20 cm and a wall thickness of <2 mm, which was essentially the ultimate pinnacle of thin-walled craftsmanship in that era [8].

2.2. Kiln Distributions and Representative Products

Besides kilns in Jingdezhen, the Baishe kiln in Nanfeng and the Yonghe kiln in Jizhou, alongside kilns across Anhui, Fujian, and Hubei, sequentially imitated its production [6]. Among them, the Hutian kiln site spans approximately 400,000 m^2. This kiln commenced firing during the Five Dynasties and flourished throughout the Song and Yuan Dynasties. Additionally, it boasts the most abundant artifact deposits and constitutes the central kiln of the Qingbai porcelain kiln system [8]. Kilns in Northern China, including the Juntai kiln in Yuxian, Qingliangsi in Baofeng, Yanhedian in Linru, Chengguan in Xin'an, and Shanying in Anyang, also produced this variety. Indeed, these products were frequently produced alongside Ru and Jun wares, with common everyday vessels comprising bowls, plates, boxes, ewers, and pillows [9]. Overall, southern wares excelled in thin body and lustrous glaze, while northern wares were typically utilitarian and robust, which serves as the basis for the North-South comparison in this study. During the early Northern Song Dynasty, Qingbai porcelain from the Juntai kiln was predominantly plain and unadorned with slightly thick bodies, while the bodies became thinner and featured carved or impressed floral motifs in the mid-to-late periods. Notably, a Qingbai bowl excavated from this kiln site was described as "having a fine texture, thin body, elegant shape, and bright glaze color" [9]. Regarding the market, abundant Qingbai porcelain specimens have been unearthed from urban ruins, including the ancient city of Dengzhou [10], and the Zhouqiao and Bianhe sites in Kaifeng [11]; the consumers ranged from capital officials to ordinary citizens. Ceramics excavated from the ancient city of Dengzhou primarily consist of bowls and plates, commonly featuring white, Yingqing, black, and soy-brown glazes. The identifiable kilns encompass Yaozhou kiln, Jun kiln, and Ding kiln, as well as the Hutian kiln. This provides empirical evidence of the mixed consumption of northern and southern ceramics at the grassroots level [10]. Additionally, the scale of production and circulation intrinsically demonstrates that this particular glaze color accurately captured the aesthetic sensibilities of people in the Song Dynasty.

3. Aesthetic Features of Thin-Walled Yingqing Porcelain in the Song Dynasty

3.1. The Beauty of Glaze Color

Technological conditions dictated the physical appearance of Qingbai wares. Specifically, the aesthetic features of Qingbai porcelain focus on glaze color, modeling, and decoration, especially glaze color. The virtue of the Qingbai glaze lies in the delicate balance between celadon and white. It is neither pure white nor pure celadon, but rather a white tinged with celadon and a celadon revealing white [1,3]. In areas of glaze accumulation, the celadon hue deepens, resembling the pale green lake water; in areas of thin glaze (e.g., the rim), it appears pale and nearly white. As no sharp boundary is present in the transition between these two tones, the entire glaze surface is enveloped in a clear, bright, and mellow luminescence.

In terms of texture, the Qingbai glaze takes jade as its model. Specifically, the glaze material fully melts and vitrifies under high temperatures, congealing into a mellow and deep luster distinct from any harsh, superficial glare. Since the glaze layer is translucent and the body is exceptionally thin, the glaze color does not float on the surface but is intrinsically supported by the clay body. Upon illumination, the vessel silhouette and the subtle glaze variations become distinctly visible, and it is highly similar to a translucent jade artifact. Additionally, this translucency varies with the lighting: under side illumination, the undulations and carved marks on the glaze surface become faintly visible; under back illumination, the thin walls emit a soft celadon halo; when resting on a desk, it presents a uniform, clear, and mellow hue.

The gradient distribution of the glaze color is essentially a decoration in itself. In areas of glaze accumulation, the glaze gathers into celadon bands of varying intensity,

undulating with the vessel contours and contrasting with the expansive, pale glazed surfaces. It is faintly white where the glaze is thin and deeply celadon where the glaze is thick. This specific distribution is the most representative characteristic of Qingbai porcelain [1]. The glaze surfaces of some vessels exhibit fine crazing, which are fundamentally microscopic fissures generated during cooling due to the different thermal expansion coefficients of the body and the glaze, adding a subtle texture to the otherwise pristine surface. In the Song Dynasty, crazing was not considered a flaw in terms of aesthetic appreciation of glaze colors. In contrast, crackles are deliberately utilized as decoration for products by the Guan and Ge kilns. Although the fine crackles on Qingbai porcelain were unintentional, they constitute an acceptable and appreciated texture in this context.

3.2. The Beauty of Form

Qingbai porcelain is distinguished by its elegant and lightweight characteristics. Bowls and plates typically show flared mouths and shallow bellies, with support by foot rings, while small cups are delicate in volume and exceptionally lightweight. Ewers and warming bowls were designed as sets, while boxes, incense burners, pillows, and even ceramic sculptures had distinct series. Characterized by fluid lines, harmonious proportions, and the graceful spirit typical of Jiangnan ceramics [8], these wares covered various aspects of daily life, including dining, drinking, incense burning, and sleeping, with elegance serving as the overarching design orientation for everyday utensils. The shape design of wares produced by the Hutian kilns had matured considerably by the Song Dynasty, and its proportions and linear forms were emulated by later ceramics [12]. The simple, soft forms synergized perfectly with the expression of the glaze color. Specifically, the pristine, unadorned clay body provided ample space for the glaze to unfold, while excessive decoration would have disrupted the glaze integrity.

The size of the vessels corresponded closely with their intended functions. Cups were small and thin-walled, and they can be easily held in one hand. Ewers and warming bowls were used as a set, with the ewer placed inside the bowl to warm wine; hence, the rim diameters and belly curves of the two vessels had to perfectly align. Boxes, incense burners, and pillows showed slightly larger volume and wall thickness to accommodate their storage and load-bearing functions. Consequently, shape, wall thickness, and glaze application were harmonious within the same kiln, ensuring that structural thinness was not achieved at the expense of practicality. Furthermore, the treatment of the rims and foot rings was particularly well-established. Specifically, the flared rims facilitated drinking, while the low, narrow, and flat foot rings allowed the vessels to sit stably and reduced deformation during firing. Besides serving as an ostentatious display of craftsmanship, the thin body actively dictated the weight and wall thickness allowed for different vessels that can withstand daily use.

3.3. The Beauty of Decoration

Decoration primarily consisted of carving, incising, and impressing, supplemented by comb-scratching, with motifs predominantly featuring water waves, flora, and occasionally children at play. The bowls with children-at-play motifs produced by the Hutian kilns were regular in shape and fluid in line, and their carving and incising techniques were highly representative of contemporary ceramics [13]. Additionally, the carving technique included inserting an angled blade into the clay body to create two slopes of varying depth in a single stroke. This is a method widely employed for the peony, lotus, and water wave motifs on the interior walls of bowls and plates produced by Hutian kiln [8]. Carving led to a deep, steep cut and one gentle slope; incising outlined the motifs with fine lines, while sets of parallel fine lines were drawn using a comb-like tool (denoted as comb scratching), typically to depict water waves. Impressed decoration was created by pressing a mold into the clay, and the patterns were highly regular with minimal variation since the mold could be reused. In contrast, carving and incising required individual tool application for each vessel, and the same motif can vary slightly across different pieces. This difference in processing directly affected production volume and

circulation scope [14]. The application of comb-scratching was multifaceted: it could be used independently or in combination with carving and incising, while both motifs and techniques varied across different kilns [15].

More importantly, the depth and weight of the tool marks were only apparent through the glaze color. Specifically, deep cuts corresponded to thick glaze, resulting in intensified celadon hue; shallow cuts corresponded to thin glaze, resulting in light celadon hue. The motifs remained hidden beneath the glaze, shifting dynamically with the flow of light and revealing variations in intensity and depth, which is exactly the origin of the aesthetic charm of "shadow". This decorative vocabulary was closely related to three factors: technique, consumption, and aesthetics. Comb-scratched decoration became popular at Jingdezhen kilns from the mid-Northern Song Dynasty and expanded to Qingbai porcelain kilns across various regions after the late Northern Song Dynasty, thus becoming one of the most widely disseminated decorative languages for this variety [15]. The categorization and evolution of these patterns shifted with the southward migration of the Central Plains culture and the varying preferences of consumers [14]. Eventually, the decoration always remained subordinate to the expression of the glaze color, bordering on "undecorated". This is highly consistent with the approach of the Ru kilns, which centralized the aesthetic appeal of the sky-blue glaze, reflecting the preference of glazes in the Song Dynasty. This was underpinned by the preference for simplicity and natural beauty during this period [16]. The accumulated glaze could not exhibit depth variations without a thin body, and the shape could not be light without a translucent glaze. With the synergistic interaction of all these elements, the aesthetic effect of Qingbai porcelain was achieved.

4. Thin-Walled Yingqing Porcelain and the Literati Aesthetics in the Song Dynasty

4.1. Aesthetic Shift Dominated by the Literati

The aesthetic features of Qingbai porcelain are not phenomena observed in isolated kilns; instead, they reflect a shift in the aesthetic dominance during the Song Dynasty. Specifically, aesthetics in the Tang Dynasty were dominated by the royal family and aristocrats, and they were characterized by rich, vibrant colors of gold, silver, and sancai (three-color) wares, intricate decorations, and an extroverted, opulent temperament. In the Song Dynasty, however, aesthetics shifted toward introversion and simplicity, and the tastes of the literati affected those of the grassroots. For instance, Su Shi advocated outward simplicity and inward richness, which can be regarded as a consensus among this community. The "jade pillow" mentioned in the poetry by Li Qingzhao is believed to be the Qingbai porcelain pillow with jade-like color and texture [1,3]. In terms of ceramic production, the sky blue of the Ru kilns, the powder blue of the Guan kilns, the celadon of the Longquan kilns, and Yingqing of the Jingdezhen kilns triumphed through the glaze color itself, rather than relying on carved decorations. This trend was beyond poetry, calligraphy, and painting, and it affected tea drinking, incense burning, floral arrangement, and scholarly accoutrements, thus turning utilitarian wares into carriers of refined taste. This shift also reflected the reverence for jade-like virtues (mellow and lustrous) by the literati. By imitating jade with porcelain and comparing jade to moral integrity, the vessels acquired connotations of noble character. Therefore, Qingbai porcelain was known as "Rao jade" [4], demonstrating that the concept of jade virtue had become a tangible and usable form in everyday ceramics.

4.2. Mutual Shaping of Social Trends and Ceramic Commodities

The prosperity of a commodity economy expanded channels for the dissemination of literati tastes. Driven by profit, kilns emulated prevailing trends, and renowned wares from famous kilns became symbols of a refined identity. According to literature in the Southern Song Dynasty, shops exclusively selling Qingbai porcelain were present in Lin'an, and ceramics had already become everyday commodities traded in the markets [1]. As a commodity, Qingbai porcelain succeeded for its glaze color rather than motifs, which is a stark contrast to the vibrant opulence of Tang sancai wares. In terms of

manufacturing, kilns across various regions competed to imitate and refine. Indeed, the jade-like glaze color had become a widely recognized standard of premium quality. In terms of consumption, abundant Qingbai porcelain specimens have been unearthed from the grassroots strata in urban ruins located in northern China, indicating that this aesthetic preference had been recognized by ordinary citizens. Overall, trends shaped production, while production disseminated the trends, so that commodities became the carriers of emerging aesthetic features.

4.3. Aesthetics of an Excavated Porcelain Bowl from a Song-Jin Ancient Street

The discussion on aesthetic trends must ultimately be grounded in specific artifacts. The Yingqing porcelain bowl discussed in this study was excavated from the Song-Jin ancient street ruins in Dengzhou and was restored by a team from the Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural Heritage and Archaeology. According to its tag (Temporary No. 18), this vessel was unearthed from the sixth layer of Trench T0426, registered as a bowl, and noted as fragmented. It is a utilitarian ware specimen from the Song-Jin strata deposits. Its diameter and depth are 8 cm and 2 cm, respectively, and its weight is 32 g. Additionally, this vessel features a grayish-white body with visible impurities, and the glaze layer is slightly thicker in areas of accumulation. The overall glaze exhibits a pale, duck-egg celadon color, specifically lustrous but not glaring, mellow and jade-like; it also displays excellent translucency under sunlight.

After restoration, the bowl features a slightly flared mouth, a rounded lip, and a shallow, curved belly tapering downward from the rim, and a low foot ring. This is a common form for tea and wine cups of that era (Figure 1). The body wall thickness increases from the rim to the belly bottom; the wall at the broken edges of the fragments is trimmed evenly. The foot ring is low, and its base appears to be regular as it was turned flat and narrow; the unglazed interior of the foot ring reveals a grayish-white body, scattered with iron-brown impurity spots, and wheel-turning marks remain (Figure 3). The outer base is fully glazed, presenting a smooth surface, and the glaze color pools at the junction with the foot ring to reveal a slightly deeper celadon hue (Figure 2). The entire vessel is plain and unadorned, triumphing through its glaze color and form. The duck-egg celadon glaze integrates celadon and white, which leans toward a grayer tone compared to the typical Jingdezhen Qingbai glaze; it carries the calm, steady undertone of clay from northern China. The glaze luster is soft and deep, and the celadon deepens in glaze accumulation areas, resulting in a layered contrast with the faint tone of the thin glaze sections. The grayish-white body contains impurities, indicating that the clay had a high iron content due to the absence of meticulous refining. Nevertheless, the walls are thin and even, with good translucency and a neatly turned foot ring, reflecting excellent skills in forming and trimming. While such a vessel does not represent the highest tier of products in the Yingqing porcelain produced by kilns in northern China, the mellow glaze and thin body demonstrate the potters' endeavor to emulate masterpieces produced by kilns in southern China. Additionally, the bowl was excavated as shattered fragments, while its original features (e.g., body texture and foot ring) remained distinguishable throughout the restoration process (cleaning, reassembly, filling, sanding, glaze treatment). Close-up observation during the reassembly process also provided first-hand evidence for glaze descriptions and comparison (Figures 1-3). This is exactly the value of restoration of such excavated fragments: the body and glaze texture, forming techniques, and firing traces can be thoroughly observed during cleaning, reassembling, and restoring.



Figure 1. Fragment of the Yingqing Porcelain Bowl and Its Excavation Tag (Temporary No. 18, Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural Heritage and Archaeology)



Figure 2. Glazed Surface and Body Texture on the Outer Base of the Vessel (After Restoration)

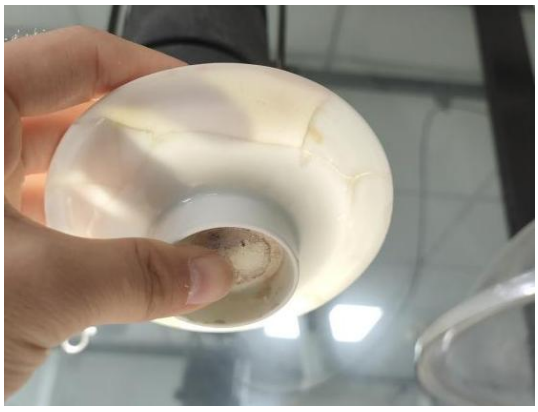


Figure 3. Details of the Foot Ring on the Vessel Base

4.4. Aesthetic Comparison with Contemporaneous Thin-Walled Yingqing Porcelain in Jingdezhen

The characteristics presented by this specific case should be compared with contemporaneous products from Jingdezhen to differentiate the common traits of this variety from specific regional features of kilns in northern China. In terms of technique, premium local porcelain stone was used for the body in the Hutian kilns in Jingdezhen, resulting in a pure white, fine, dense, and sturdy texture; the body tends to be thin and highly translucent [1], while the unglazed outer base often presents a faint unpolished-rice yellow or light gray tone [7]. In contrast, this specific bowl shows a grayish-white body with abundant impurities, and iron marks are visible in the unglazed areas. Regarding glaze color, Jingdezhen products are clear, translucent, and pristine white

flashing with celadon. This bowl shows a duck-egg celadon leaning toward a grayish-celadon with a somber celadon tone and slightly inferior whiteness. This disparity stems from two factors: (1) the clay in northern China contains abundant impurities (e.g., Fe and Ti), yielding a whiteness inferior to the stone body of Jingdezhen porcelain; (2) firing atmosphere and temperature control varied. In terms of form and decoration, Yingqing porcelain from Jingdezhen encompassed multiple vessel categories, while lines and carvings on ewers, warming bowls, boxes, pillows, and ceramic sculptures were exquisitely executed [8]. Products in Northern China typically adhered to the tradition of everyday utilitarian wares, including bowls, plates, boxes, ewers, and pillows [9]. This bowl exhibits regular and pristine form, with few motifs, perfectly reflecting the preference in northern China that highlights the glaze color by avoiding complex carved decorations. In terms of aesthetic effects, masterpieces from Jingdezhen excel in translucency, as reflected by thin bodies, lustrous glazes, and shadow revealing upon illumination; products from kilns in northern China triumph in mellowness, as reflected by somber and understated glaze color that offers a more enduring visual appeal. The fundamental distinction remains in the raw materials: the quality of the porcelain stone determined the upper limit of the body whiteness and indirectly dictated the clarity and brightness of the glaze.

The difference between Yingqing porcelain from kilns in northern and southern China is not about superiority, but rather preference: the Yingqing porcelain from Jingdezhen is characterized by clear translucency and pristine whiteness attributed to meticulous crafting, while the Yingqing porcelain from northern China embodies a natural mellow celadon tinge. They share a common origin yet present distinct differences. Even under severe constraints in clay, potters in northern China endeavored to emulate the jade-like glaze effect. Their pursuit of the prevailing trend preceded the compromise with material limitations, and this phenomenon serves as a direct intensity indicator of the trend. The aesthetic paradigm retained its core during cross-regional dissemination, while a new appearance was cultivated.

5. Conclusions

The widespread circulation of Qingbai porcelain across China during the Song Dynasty required both technological and societal conditions. The body-glaze formulation and forming/firing techniques guaranteed the distinct characteristics of this variety (a thin, translucent body and a jade-like glaze color). The celadon-white glaze, the elegant and delicate forms, and the underglaze carvings resonated with the introverted, refined aesthetics dominated by the literati. This taste was subsequently brought to the grassroots and distant lands through trading. This porcelain bowl excavated from the Song-Jin ancient street ruins serves as a concrete testament to this process: its duck-egg celadon glaze, grayish-white clay body, and lightweight, thin structure embody both the emulation of the Jingdezhen paradigm and the indelible marks left by local materials and kiln. Yingqing porcelain produced by kilns in northern and southern China share a common origin yet exhibit distinct differences: one is clear and bright, the other mellow and understated. They expanded the aesthetic frontiers of ceramics in the Song Dynasty. Additionally, Qingbai porcelain integrated the boundaries of body and glaze technologies, the demands of literati taste, and the commodity production logic, leaving behind a tangible specimen to understand the relationship between craftsmanship and aesthetics in the Song Dynasty.

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