

Distribution and Artistry of Song Dynasty Jian Kiln Sites

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ABSTRACT

The Jian Kiln originated during the late Tang Dynasty (c. 9th century CE) or the Five Dynasties period (907–960 CE), flourished throughout the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279 CE), and declined during the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 CE). It is recognized as one of China's Eight Great Kiln Systems, alongside the Cizhou, Yaozhou, Jun, Longquan, Jingdezhen, Jian, and Yue kiln systems. Jian ware is characterized by its simple yet dignified forms and clean, flowing lines, achieving widespread renown primarily for its production of black-glazed porcelain.

KEYWORDS

Song dynasty; Jian kiln sites; Black-glazed porcelain; Jian'an county; Jian ware; Distribution

1 Distribution of Song Ddynasty jian kiln porcelain sites

The term "Jian Kiln" conventionally refers to the kiln complex established during the late Tang or Five Dynasties period at Shuiji Town, Jianyang District, Nanping City. The archaeological site lies approximately 6 km north of Shuiji Town, 50 km west of Jianyang District, and 10 km east of Xiaohu Town, adjacent to the Nanpu River and proximate to National Highway 205. Its core distribution area centers on Chizhong and Houjing villages – historically administered by Chien-an County.

According to Lin Jintuan's textual research in "Jianzhan" (建盏), Chien-an County was established in the early Jian'an era of Emperor Xian of Han (196 CE). During the Wu Kingdom of the Three Kingdoms period (222 CE), it belonged to Chien-an Commandery. From the fourth year of Wude in Tang (621 CE) to the third year of Zhiping in Song (1066 CE), Shuiji remained under Chien-an County's jurisdiction. Thereafter, territories from Chien-an, Jianyang, and Pucheng counties formed Ouning County, with Houjing and Chizhong classified under its Heyi Li administrative division.

From the thirty-second year of Shaoxing in Song (1162 CE) until the late Qing Dynasty, Ouning County belonged to Jianning Prefecture (later Jianning Circuit). In 1913 (Republic Year 2), prefectural mergers consolidated Chien-an and Ouning into Jian'ou County, with both villages remaining in Heyi Li. Key administrative transitions include:

- 1938: Establishment of Shuiji Special District (directly under Fujian Province)
- 1940: Formation of Shuiji County (villages under Fuxing Town)
- 1949–1956: Villages assigned to Shuiji County's 1st and 5th Districts
- Autumn 1956: Merger of Shuiji and Jianyang into Jianyang County (villages under Zhengdun District until 1960)
- 1961–1963: Administration under Chizhong Commune
- Post-1963: Transfer to Shuiji Commune (later Shuiji Town)
- 2014: Dissolution of Jianyang City; establishment as Jianyang District, Nanping City.

1.1 Major archaeological excavations at the jian kiln site

According to extant historical records, three systematic archaeological excavations have been conducted at the Jian Kiln site:

- (1) October 1960: The inaugural excavation at Luhuping was undertaken by the Anthropological Museum of Xiamen University.
- (2) May–July 1977: A second excavation at Luhuping was jointly conducted by Fujian Provincial Museum and the Archaeology Department of Xiamen University's History Department.
- (3) May 1989 – July 1992: A comprehensive archaeological survey with targeted excavations was carried out in four phases by the Jian Kiln Archaeological Team – a joint initiative of the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Fujian Provincial Museum.

1.2 Distribution patterns of the jian kiln sites

According to the Excavation Report of the Jian Kiln at Shuiji, Jianyang, Fujian published by Xiamen University's Anthropological Museum, the primary archaeological sites are concentrated in the eastern sector of Chidun (within the Shuiji People's Commune production brigade, present-day Chizhong Village, Shuiji Town), approximately 0.5 km from Chidun Village. The core sites comprise: Luhuping, Niu Pi Lun (also Niu Pi Yu), and Dalou Houmenshan.

Subsequent second and third-phase comprehensive surveys and targeted excavations identified two additional sites: Yuantoukeng and Anweishan (alternatively termed Miaoweishan). Based on cumulative archaeological evidence, the kiln complex distribution area extends:

South: Yingzhangqian (also known as Shezhanggeng)

East: Dalou Houmenshan, Yuantoukeng, and Anweishan/Miaoweishan

North: Luhaping

West: Niu Pi Lun

The sites exhibit a linear distribution pattern across approximately 120,000 m². During 2015 field investigations, the author identified two unexcavated zones:

(1) The western periphery of Chizhong village;

(2) A locality ~1 km from Houjing Village, adjacent to Duchuantou Village;

Both areas yield surface concentrations of ceramic fragments indicative of buried kiln structures.

2 Artistic stylistic characteristics of Song Dynasty jian ware

The Song Dynasty witnessed the zenith of black-glazed ceramic production, with approximately one-third of kilns nationwide manufacturing such wares—including the Yaozhou Kiln (Shaanxi), Guangyuan Kiln (Sichuan), Jizhou Kiln (Jiangxi), Ding Kiln, and Cizhou Kiln (Hebei). Among these, the Jian Kiln of Fujian produced the most diverse range, highest quality, and culturally influential black-glazed tea bowls (Jianzhan).

Influenced by Song political economy, Neo-Confucian philosophy, literati aesthetics, and the doucha (tea competition) culture, Jian ware embodies a distinctive aesthetic synthesis of rustic simplicity (pu 朴) and minimalist elegance (su 素), interwoven with vital energy (qi 气) and **cosmic order (li 理). This philosophical duality merges with the vessels' streamlined forms and variegated glazes to create an iconically Eastern artistic expression.

Such stylistic synthesis transcends mere visual appeal: it materially manifests the Song literati's spiritual realm while crystallizing the intrinsic aesthetic values of Jianzhan.

3 The distinctive glaze characteristics of jian ware

The artistic singularity of Jian Kiln ceramics manifests primarily through its unique glaze formulations. Precise variations in raw material ratios engender diverse chromatic patterns during firing, where thermal dynamics spontaneously generate distinctive motifs across individual vessels.

Archaeological evidence from excavated Jianzhan specimens reveals a profound navy-black (ganhei 紺黑) basal hue—corroborating Cai Xiang's (蔡襄) Northern Song documentation: "Jian'an productions exhibit this characteristic navy-black streaking, akin to hare's fur." Beyond this signature tone, the glaze palette encompasses russet-orange, charcoal grey, and pine-green variants.

3.1 Contemporary scholarship classifies these glaze phenomena into six principal typologies based on crystalline formations and optical effects

(1) Yohen (曜變, iridescent variation)

(2) Yuteki (油滴, oil-spot)

(3) Kagaseki (鷓鴣斑, partridge-feather mottling)

(4) Temmoku (天目, hare's-fur)

Subtypes: Golden, Silver, Amber hare's-fur

(5) Grey Patina (灰被)

(6) Tortoiseshell (龜甲紋)

Quantitatively predominant among archaeological finds, hare's-fur bowls (temmoku) demonstrate unparalleled cultural impact. Imperial validation comes from Emperor Huizong's Treatise on Tea (大觀茶論): "Bowls in bluish-black (qinghei) with jade-like hare's-fur striations represent the supreme grade." This assessment converges with Cai Xiang's technical notes in Tea Records (茶錄): "Jian'an wares display navy-black hare's-fur patterning; their substantial body walls retain heat efficiently—making them functionally indispensable."

The literati tradition further enshrined this form, as evidenced by Su Shi's (蘇軾) poetic homage: "Sudden marvel—the noon cup's hare's-fur streaks" and "True phoenix marrow brewed in aged tribute tea, poured into hare's-fur cups." Collectively, these historical testimonies attest to temmoku's preeminent status and pervasive influence in Song material culture.

Form-Follows-Function: Teabowl Design in Song Douchá Culture, The distinctive silhouette of Jian ware – characterized by flared mouths and contracted bases – constitutes a direct material response to doucha (斗茶, tea competition) rituals.

Archaeological evidence and historical records confirm this canonical form emerged from precise functional requirements documented by Song tea connoisseurs.

Cai Xiang's Tea Records (茶錄) specifies: "For 2.5g of powdered tea, first infuse with boiling water. Whisk thoroughly until emulsified, then add more water while continuously whisking in circular motions. Cease when liquid reaches four-tenths of the bowl's height."

3.2 This elaborate whisking technique necessitated

(1) Wide mouths to accommodate vigorous bamboo whisk (chaxián 茶筴) manipulation

(2) Narrow bases to concentrate tea paste during vertical whisking, ensuring uniform frothing Emperor Huizong's Treatise on Tea (大觀茶論) corroborates this ergonomic design logic:

"The bowl's depth must be sufficient to stabilize the tea emulsion while permitting unimpeded whisk rotation. Dimensions should match tea quantity: shallow bowls obscure the brew's color; small vessels cannot contain adequate liquid. Crucially, pre-warmed bowls sustain emulsion stability."

Collectively, these accounts reveal how doucha mechanics dictated Jianzhan's signature flared profile – optimizing both hydrodynamic performance during whisking and visual assessment of tea foam (nái 乳). This symbiotic relationship between ritual praxis and ceramic morphology exemplifies the Song synthesis of utilitarian design and aesthetic intentionality....

Distinctive Technical Features and Markings of Jian Ware, Jian Kiln's black-glazed ceramics exhibit consistent structural characteristics: thin-rimmed mouths and substantially thickened bases. This inverted conical profile aligns with Cao Zhao's Ming Dynasty observation in Essential Criteria of Antiquities (格古要論): "The bodies are exceptionally thick; thinly potted specimens remain exceedingly rare."

A diagnostically unique feature emerges near the foot: glaze pearls (youzhu 釉珠) – viscous aggregations formed when molten glaze flows downward during top-firing techniques. This gravity-induced crystallization produces oil-spot like accretions rarely replicated in other black-glazed wares due to Jian Kiln's distinctive vertical stacking methods.

3.3 Epigraphic diversity in kiln markings, beyond glaze variations, jian ware displays extensive inscribed markings classified archaeologically into three categories

(1) Numerals (production batch codes)

(2) Symbols (kiln workshop identifiers)

(3) Character Inscriptions

Of particular significance are "Gong Yu" (供御) marks denoting imperial tribute ware. Paleographic analysis reveals these characters were incised with deliberate rustic spontaneity – strokes exhibit irregular spacing and unrefined execution. This aesthetic of calculated naiveté contrasts sharply with Tang Dynasty opulence, reflecting the Song literati's philosophical embrace of unadorned authenticity (pusu 樸素)....

4 Core challenges facing the contemporary jian zhan industry

4.1 Market disorder: erosion of trust and brand value

The rise of live-streaming e-commerce has opened new sales channels for Jian Zhan, yet it has simultaneously fostered severe market irregularities. In the Jianyang region, some live-streaming rooms have transformed Jian Zhan sales into "scripted performances," using various kiln-opening live streams as gimmicks. While scenario-based marketing is not inherently problematic, the core issue lies in the widespread fraudulent practices employed by numerous merchants. These include staging "fake kiln-opening ceremonies" or packaging and selling inexpensive Dehua porcelain (costing even less than ten yuan) masquerading as authentic Jian Zhan. Such practices constitute de facto fraud, rapidly depleting the brand reputation painstakingly built by Jian Zhan over decades.

Concurrently, chaotic pricing structures further exacerbate the collapse of consumer trust. A prominent issue within live-stream sales is the pervasive practice whereby practitioners deliberately misrepresent mass-produced, low-cost Jian Zhan wares fired in electric kilns as rare, high-value "wood-fired kiln" (Chai Yao) treasures. This misrepresentation serves to inflate prices significantly. This deceptive substitution and false advertising may yield substantial short-term profits, but in the long run, it amounts to quenching thirst with poison. It not only directly harms consumer rights but also severely undermines the unique cultural value and market credibility of Jian Zhan as a cultural artifact. Ultimately, this behavior jeopardizes the very foundation for the sustainable development of the entire industry.

4.2 Cultural disconnect: talent shortage and innovation bottleneck

The rapid expansion of the Jian Zhan industry has attracted a large workforce, forming a production team of considerable scale. However, in stark contrast to the ceramic industry of Jingdezhen, Jiangxi – which benefits from a robust talent echelon system and the strong institutional support of the Jingdezhen Ceramic University – the Jianyang region faces a critical structural shortage of specialized talent. There is an acute lack of a core cohort possessing advanced technical skills, profound cultural literacy, and forward-thinking cognition.

This deficiency manifests directly at the product level: The majority of practitioners possess weak foundational skills, lack systematic and professional training, and suffer from severely insufficient innovation awareness and capability. Consequently, the market is flooded with homogenized products characterized by crude craftsmanship, derivative designs, and minimal added value. The industry is mired in low-level, repetitive competition, struggling to achieve the critical transformation from traditional craftsmanship to contemporary innovative design.

A deeper-seated problem lies in the fracture of cultural transmission. Many practitioners possess only superficial knowledge of Jian Zhan's rich historical origins, unique cultural significance, and the evolution of its production techniques. They treat Jian Zhan merely as fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) to sell, lacking both the awareness and the capacity to deeply excavate, interpret, and disseminate its inherent cultural value. This short-sighted approach, prioritizing sales over culture and form over substance, results in the superficial promotion of Jian Zhan culture. It fails to generate genuine cultural influence, hindering broader recognition and appreciation of Jian Zhan's cultural heritage.

5 Conclusion

The thoughts and literary pursuits of the Song people forged the distinctive artistic style of Jian Kiln porcelain. As a unique carrier of Song Dynasty culture, research on it extends beyond mere descriptions of tangible "objects"; ultimately, it should be guided by the exploration of the intangible "Dao" (the underlying principles). The "object" is but the medium through which Jian Kiln porcelain expresses itself, while the "Dao" is the true goal—the former serving as the carrier and means, and the latter as its origin and essence. Therefore, in studying the distribution of Song Dynasty Jian Kiln sites and their artistic characteristics, we must not only address superficial issues but also delve into the reasons behind the formation of such distribution and artistic features within that specific cultural context. Such discussions and research are of great significance for our future understanding of the thoughts and culture of the Song people.

Today, imperial tribute Jianzhan have entered ordinary households, where people have endowed them with new meanings. Meanwhile, artists crafting Jianzhan have breathed new vitality into traditional culture through their art. Building on tradition, they have begun to incorporate modern design elements into traditional craftsmanship—a development we are delighted to witness.

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