

CULTURE

For many years, ancient porcelain shards were not strange to farmers in Chencun village of Huozhou city, North China's Shanxi province, where many of them believed the small, white fragments meant there had to be major kilns buried below the area.

Chinese archaeologists who have been conducting research in Chencun for nearly two years have since given the farmers a mind-blowing answer: the kilns are right under their village.

The ruins on different layers of soil date back to the Jin (1115-1234), Yuan (1271-1368) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties, according to Liu Yan, vice-president of the Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology.

"Among the archaeological findings are nine kilns, 40 ash pits, nine workshops, two ditches, one well and numerous porcelain pieces," Liu said.

The white-glazed porcelain shards including bowls, plates, dishes, vases, pots and stem-cups were retrieved from the kiln site in Chencun. The wares are for the most part plain and undecorated, with a small quantity displaying impressive designs.

Ming Dynasty records already point to white-glazed porcelain being fired in Huozhou.

Many ancient ruins and tombs were found at construction sites in various parts of China in the 1950s, with a nationwide survey of cultural relics carried out in 1956 in an attempt to learn about the conditions of immovable cultural relics.

Liu said that when Chinese ceramic specialists including Chen Wanli and Feng Xianming from the Palace Museum began searching for places where ancient porcelain wares were produced, they spurred cultural heritage authorities across the country to launch archaeological surveys of ancient kilns in the 1960s and 1970s.

The scholars located the ancient Huozhou kilns in Chencun, which lies on the western bank of the Fenhe River, the second-largest tributary of the Yellow River. Shards and kiln tools were found scattered in abundance along the banks of the Fenhe River, a sign that the ancient kilns of Huozhou were of a relatively large scale.

The Fenhe River, which originates in the north of Shanxi province, is one of the few rivers to flow from north to south in China, where rivers mostly flow from the highlands in the west to the coast in the east.

Chencun is the fief site of Huo Guo, the younger brother of King Wu of Zhou in the Western Zhou Dynasty (c.11th century-771 BC), and the descendants of later generations there take Huo as their surname, according to China News Service.

Shanxi authorities put Chencun village on the list of protected major cultural heritage sites in 1986. The multiple surveys done from the 1970s to 1990s helped give experts an idea of the Huozhou kiln complex, with bun-shaped kilns and brick caves for unburnt earthenware for drying found. The relic sites were buried underground, 1.5 meters to 5 meters deep, Liu said.

The village was put under national-level protection in 2006, the highest protection level approved by the central government for immovable cultural relics.

China decided to excavate the kilns in Chencun in 2022. Archaeologists from the Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archeology, Peking University, Fudan University and Huozhou city's cultural relics department conducted investigations and explorations of the village. They finally chose eight sites covering 600 square meters for excavation, Liu, who is in charge of the excavation team, said.

The findings of the porcelain kilns in Chencun village fill an archaeological gap, Liu said.

The Song Dynasty (960-1279) is always referred to as the golden age of Chinese ceramics. During this period, the degree of specialization at the different kiln sites increased and the demand for particular wares began to rise among specific social classes.

This is especially evident in the existence of the famous "five kilns": the Ru (Henan province), Guan (Zhejiang province), Ge (Zhejiang province), Jun (Henan province) and Ding (Hebei province).

While it had been widely believed that North China did not produce white porcelain wares when the Jin Dynasty ended, the discovery of the Huozhou kilns site in Chencun showed that white porcelain was fired in North China until the Ming Dynasty.

"Shanxi is rich in quality clay and coal for firing porcelain," Liu said. "Surrounded by famous porcelain-making regions such as Hebei, Henan



Liu Yan, vice-president of the Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, leads excavation work at Chencun village in Huozhou of Shanxi province.

Center of ceramics

Major ancient white porcelain site provides important link to past, Sun Ruisheng and Cai Hong report.



Surrounded by porcelain-making regions such as Hebei, Henan and Shaanxi, Shanxi also grew into a ceramic production powerhouse. Its porcelain production developed quickly in the Song and Yuan dynasties."

Liu Yan, vice-president of the Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology

1. A fragment of a Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) ceramic bowl decorated with iron red clouds and dragon claws. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY
2. A fine white Jin Dynasty (1115-1234) porcelain plate with decorative patterns featuring lotus and reed.
3. A fine white porcelain plate shard fired during the Jin Dynasty (1115-1234) carries a design featuring three children playing with lotus flowers.
4. A fine white porcelain cup with a dragon motif handle from the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368).
5. A black glaze Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) ceramic cup decorated with bird motifs.
6. Plain white high-end porcelain pieces from the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368).

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After the collapse of the Jin Dynasty, the importance of North China as a porcelain production center diminished rapidly. A rare exception was the fine-grained white wares produced at Huozhou in Shanxi during the Jin, Yuan and Ming dynasties, Liu said.

"Huozhou was the only source of delicately made white porcelain in the Yuan Dynasty."

Huozhou white wares are small and very thinly made. They are fired on five spurs, remains of which can be seen on the inside and base of the vessels. Common shapes include the waisted dish, stem-cup with ribbed foot, and dish with flattened rim. The decorative elements on them are waves, flora and fauna such as fish, hares and birds.

Crucial connections

Shanxi connects the east with the west of China, making it a place where different ethnic groups and cultures meet. The ancient porcelain pieces discovered in Shanxi reflect the province's unique position on the field, which helped the merchants sell the porcelain from Huozhou kilns to places far away.

Fifty-four ceramic wares, 27 of them intact, were uncovered at a construction site in Hangzhou city of East China's Zhejiang province in 1987. Several experts assumed that some of the white glazed wares were products from the Huozhou kilns of the Yuan Dynasty.

Wares produced at these Huozhou kilns were also unearthed in Khanbaliq or Yuan Dadu (the winter capital of the dynasty in what is now Beijing) and ancient Karakorum, the capital of the Mongol empire. The discoveries indicate that porcelain products fired at Huozhou kilns were traded at the "high-end market", and likely used at the court of the Yuan Dynasty, according to scholars Yu Luyang and Zhu Xinhai.

But a large quantity of poorly glazed, roughly made stoneware has also been excavated, with the items considered to be used by commoners.

The archaeological excavation at Chencun was the first time for researchers to establish a crucial point in the history of Huozhou's pottery industry. It provides basic scientific and systematic data for the study of the firing history, technology, production scale, economic form, and traditional influence and development of the Huozhou kilns, Liu said.

There are many archaeological findings of ancient porcelain kilns in China, but the discoveries at Chencun are still considered significant, with researchers placing them as one of the country's top 10 archaeological findings of 2023. At a seminar on the findings at Chencun in December, Chinese historians and scholars said that the Huozhou kilns site represents the highest level of white porcelain technology in northern China in the Yuan Dynasty, calling it the "swan song" or "last glory" of white porcelain in North China.

Many Chencun residents are well aware of the importance of cultural heritage protection. Wang Baoqing is responsible for keeping watch over the ruins in the old, empty section of the village, with local farmers moving to the new site. Wang knows the village's temples date back to the Yuan and Ming dynasties. He gets 10 yuan (\$1.38) a day for his work but he takes it seriously.

"As long as I am a keeper for this cultural heritage, I will do my best," Wang said.

In the summer of 2022, fellow Chencun villager Zheng Honghu found a pile of white ceramic pieces when he built a cistern in his courtyard.

He reported it to the archaeologists working in the village and they discovered porcelain-making ruins such as a Jin Dynasty workshop, three Yuan Dynasty kilns, Ming Dynasty house and porcelain shards, marking Zheng's place as an important excavation site.

Archaeological work at Huozhou is ongoing and surveys showed that the site of the ancient Huozhou kiln complex may cover 25,000 square meters, with Chencun serving as a focal point, Liu said.

Recognizing the increasing cultural importance of the area, archaeologists and scholars also suggested setting up a national archaeological site park or a museum where visitors will have a chance to see how Huozhou kilns work and further experience traditional Chinese porcelain culture.

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Left: An aerial view of the archaeological site in Chencun village. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Right: Archaeological findings in Chencun shed light on porcelain kilns from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).