

# On the Antique Custom of Jiangnan Literati in the Late Ming Dynasty from Li Rihua and His Diary of Weishui Xuan--An Observation Centered on Porcelain

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**ABSTRACT.** *The Diary of Weishui Xuan, written by Li Rihua, one of the representative of Jiangnan literati in the late Ming Dynasty, provides a window for us to explore the collection trend of Jiangnan literati in the late Ming Dynasty. Starting from the custom of porcelain collection in the late Ming Dynasty and taking the Diary of Weishui Xuan as the main historical data, this paper explored the antique custom of Jiangnan literati in the late Ming Dynasty.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Li rihua, Jiangnan, The late ming dynasty, Porcelain, Collection*

## 1. Introduction

Li Rihua (1565-1635), also known as Jun Shi and Zhu Lan, born in Jiaying, Zhejiang Province was Chin-Shih in the twenty years of Wanli in the Ming Dynasty (1593) and an official of Taipu Si. He built "Hemeng Xuan", "LiuyanZhai", "Zitao Xuan" and so on, for his collection of books and writings. Li Rihua had a collection of tens of thousands of volumes. He was good at painting and calligraphy and proficient in appreciation. In addition, he wrote Diary of Weishui Xuan, Auguments in Zitao Xuan, Notes on LiuyanZhai, etc.

When focusing on antique custom of Jiangnan literati in the Late Ming Dynasty, we can find that the group with Li Rihua as the typical has left abundant writings, including notes and diaries, from which we can get a glimpse of the antique custom of appreciating and collecting antiques. Among the categories of appreciating and collecting antiques, there is no doubt that the paintings and calligraphy that are most close to the literati occupy the vast majority of the time of study life, and the literati are not stingy with their ink on the historical records of this aspect. Under the background of painting and calligraphy, the activities of writing, collecting and appreciating porcelains turned bleak. Paying attention to porcelains, we made the Diary of Weishui Xuan as the entry point to observe this theme, and Li Rihua's social network enables us to connect the antique custom of this period.

## 2. The Contemporary Plaything

According to the Diary of Weishui Xuan, on August 7, thirty-seventh year of Wanli (1609), Li Rihua bought two tea cups painted with mantra produced in the kiln of the first year of Wanli and commented that they were very elegant and worth collecting. About the kiln at the first year of Wanli, Zhang Dai later than Li Rihua had the following account:

"As for porcelains produced by the official kiln of Wanli, the first batch is the best, even if the back is all delicate and treasured by the folk."

The Wanli tea cups bought by Li Rihua should be the blue and white porcelain fired in Jingdezhen kiln in Wanli of Ming dynasty, but it keeps unknown whether they were produced by the official kiln. The reason for purchase is not only because of the literati's love for their elegance, but also due to the fact recently Shanshan state has informed the Sumoluo Blue cobalt material has been depleted and they will be hard to find as the craftsmen in Jingdezhen are getting more and more careless, and the process is getting more complicated. The Sumoluo Blue mentioned here refers to the cobalt blue pigment imported from the Western Regions. The blue and white porcelain painted with this cobalt material has a distinctive blue color touched with purple. The porcelains of the first year of Wanli, more than 30 years apart from Li Rihua's time, were not only enjoyable but also practical for him. Li Rihua liked drinking tea, so he was very picky about the water to cook tea and he often got water from a distance of thousands of miles to cook tea. Such refined and elegant living requirement is also

in line with the name of his house -- Weishui. Just a few days before the purchase of the cups, people from Longjing sent him a kilo of spring tea. Even when it was raining, he still sent his servant with a jug to fetch water from the Manao Temple in order to cook the new tea with the water that was said to be from the tank of Ge Hong for washing the elixir.

This kind of utensils not far away from the time of contemporary people for enjoyment and appreciation were called “Contemporary Plaything” by them. Shen Defu wrote in the item about “Contemporary Plaything” in Wanli Yehubian·Wanju:

Playthings have always been more valuable the older they are, but this was not the case with the current dynasty. The prices of the carved lacquerware of Yongle, the bronze ware of Xuande and the porcelain of Chenghua are almost the same as those of ancient times. The Northern Song dynasty is famous for its lacquerware, which is now rare, while the number of bronzes in the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties is decreasing day by day. The products of Chai, Ru, Guan, Ge and Ding kilns from the five-dynasty to the Song dynasty are often replaced by modern porcelains for their characters of being particularly vulnerable. The trend began with some refined scholars, who appreciated and played with them, and then gradually swept among gentlemen in the south of the Yangtze River and businessmen.

Shen Defu, who wrote this, was a fellow countryman of Li Rihua and his nephew, Shen Dazhan, was taught by Li Rihua when he was young and later became his son-in-law. Inherited his family’s learning, Shen Defu, who came from a local famous aristocratic family, was knowledgeable and proficient in appreciation. Thus, it can be seen that, although literati in the late Ming Dynasty preferred to antiques, they had to give up their first preference because some early antiques could not be easily obtained. Therefore, in the late Ming Dynasty, there was a trend of “playing with contemporary plaything” that had not been seen in previous dynasties. This was a new change: both contemporary plaything and antiques were their favorite.

As for porcelains, the most respected were the products of kilns of Xuande, Chenghua and Jiajing. Shen Defu once wrote:

The blue and white colorful porcelain of this dynasty is the best in history, among which, Xuande porcelain is the most valuable at first, and later the Chenghua porcelain surpassed it. During the Jiajing Period, there are many imitations of Xuande and Chenghua porcelain, but they are somewhat inferior. Only porcelains of Cui Gong kiln are more valuable with the price about one tenth of that of Xuande and Chenghua porcelains.

The Xuan kiln here refers to multicoloured porcelains of Xuande (picture), Cheng kiln refers to Chenghua over-glaze colors (picture) and Jiajing refers to the colorful blue and white porcelains. The above three are all precious varieties of Ming Dynasty porcelain, and all are the mentioned blue and white porcelain touched with five other colors. The Cui Gong kiln mentioned above was recorded in the Jingdezhen porcelains Records written by Lan Pu, a Qing dynasty scholar.

There was a person living in the period of jiajing and Longqing, good at making porcelains. He often imitated Xuande and Chenghua porcelain and was praised by people who called his porcelains “Porcelain of Cui Gong Kiln”. Many people rushed to buy porcelains he made. Among all kinds of porcelains made by him, only the tea cups differed greatly from those of Xuande and Chenghua, but they were of the same quality. The rest blue and white porcelain and colored porcelain were the first in civilian kilns.

Chen Jiru’s Nigu Lu also highly praised the porcelains of Xuan kiln

The materials selecting, sampling, painting, and inscription of porcelains made of Smalt by Xuanmiao kiln, are all fine. When Li Rihua was seventeen, he traveled to Songjiang and learned Mao poetry from Chen Jiru who was known as a writer, calligrapher and painter with alternative names of Zhong Chun, Mei Gong and Mi Gong. Wang Shixing, a famous scholar and human geographer during the Wanli Period, wrote about the porcelain of the Ming Dynasty in his book Guangzhiyi:

“The best porcelains of the current dynasty were produced by the two kilns of Xuan and Cheng. Xuan kiln was famous for blue and white porcelains while Cheng kiln was well-known for multicoloured porcelains. Xuande porcelain was made of Smalt cobalt blue material which had been used up in Chenghua period, so Chenghua porcelain is inferior to Xuande porcelain. Xuande’s colorful porcelain is deep in color, while Chenghua’s is light, so Xuande’s is inferior to Chenghua’s. Jars used for Taoist rites during the Jiajing Period was also cherished by people, but now it is mostly made in a crude way.”

In general, Wang believed that the best porcelains of the current dynasty produced by Xuande and Chenghua, among which, the blue and white porcelain of Xuande and clashing color of Chenghua were particularly popular. What’s more, Jars used for Taoist rites during the Jiajing Period were also cherished by the whole world. The Jiajing Emperor believed in Taoism and often held Taoist rites for the gods. The Jar was set up for the rite. Based

on the records in History of the Ming Dynasty, in the thirty-seventh year of Jiaping, 30,000 pieces of porcelains like jars for Taoist rites in Inner Temple were produced. Wen Zhenheng described in his *Changwuzhi* that this kind of jars was used for Jinlu Taoist rites, as evidenced by the actual product. (Picture) The so-called “Jinlu” is one of the Taoist rites, including prayer, wishes to prolong life, releasing souls from purgatory and so on. The *Diary of Weishui Xuan* recorded that, Xiang Youxin, the son of Xiang Yuanbian who was a collector of Ming Dynasty once gave Li Rihua a volume of *Wen Zhengming’s Duleyuanji*, a piece of Chenchun’s painting of flowers and stones, an inkstone of Heilvrong and four white cups produced by Jing kiln as gifts to invite Li Rihua to write for his mother. The white cups of Jing kiln were put on the same scale with famous handwriting, which also showed their popularity among the world.

In the second year of Hongwu of the Ming Dynasty, the central government set up an “imperial ware factory” in Jingdezhen and sent officials there to supervise the porcelain firing of official kiln where the best technology, artisans and raw materials were gathered to produce products exclusively used by the imperial court, which undoubtedly represented the highest achievement of porcelain production at that time. Being imperial porcelain, its selection criteria were extremely strict, and unqualified products would be treated specially. Because of this, for folks, porcelains from official kilns were rare. Hence, Ming people were particularly fond of porcelains from official kilns of their own dynasty, especially those of Xuande, Chenghua and Jiaping, as a result of which, the competitive products produced by the folk imitating official kilns were sought after by people. Dong Qichang concluded, “The kilns of Xuan, Cheng, and Jia have surpassed their predecessors”. Some of the famous porcelains are also appeared in writings of literati in the Ming dynasty, including press-hand cup of Yongle, stem cup painted with red fish of Xuande, sacrificial red cup of Xuande, pot painted with cricket of Xuande, flat stem cup painted with grape of Chenghua, cup for drink-urging painted with grass, insect and hen, small wine cup painted with people and lotus seed, small shallow cup for sealing five things to the gods, except as mentioned above.

In the Ming Dynasty, Jingdezhen kiln was the dominant porcelain maker, while Yixing kiln was the dominant maker of dark-red sand-fired pot. Ming people also highly valued the famous dark-red sand-fired pots of the time, the most famous of which was made by Shi Dabin also named Shao Shan, who was the son of Shi Peng, one of the four masters of pot making after Gong Chun (Dong Han, Zhao Liang, Yuan Chang, Shi Peng). According to *YangxianMingtaolu*, Shi Peng initially liked to make large pots imitating Gongchun and then began to make small one after travelling to Loudong (now Taicang, Jiangsu province) where he listened to Chen Jiru discussing tea tasting with celebrities in Langya, Taiyuan. Yixing dark-red sand-fired pot is praised by the world for its close combination with the style of drinking tea in literati’s life, in addition to the craftsman’s superb porcelains. Chen Jiru was fond of drinking tea and had profound experience in the study of tea ceremony, as evidenced by his book *Chadongbu*. Shi Dabin changed from making large pots to making small pots based on the preferences and requirements of literati for tea tasting, which were more suitable for literati, greatly changing the status and nature of dark-red sand-fired pots that had risen from a single practical instrument to an elegant object with a strong flavor of literati like other instruments in the study, occupying an indispensable place in literati’s life. Therefore, people at that time spoke highly of the pot made by Dabin: “The pots made by Shi Dabin recently are cherished by the world”, “All other fine pots of the Ming Dynasty will be eclipsed by Dabin’s pot”, “The pot made by Shi Dabin, if sold in the market, is worth a piece of gold”.

As Shen Defu said above, the wind of contemporary plaything rises in response to the fondness of carved lacquerware of Yongle due to its rareness in the Northern Song Dynasty, the fondness of copper furnace of Xuande for the rareness of bronze vessel in the Xia-Shang-Zhou dynasties and the fondness of porcelains of Chenghua for the rareness of products produced by kilns of Guan, Ge, Ding, etc.

### 3. Ranking

Ming people’s porcelain collection is only one of many collections. What is the rank of porcelain among antiques?

Li Rihua once commented on the ranking of antiques in his *Diary of Weishui Xuan*.

The first is calligraphy in Jin and Tang dynasties; the second is painting in five-dynasty, Tang and Song dynasties; the third is ancient handwriting in Sui, Tang and Song; the fourth is handwriting or painting of Su, Huang, Mi and Cai; the fifth is painting in Yuan dynasty; the sixth is handwriting or painting of Xianyu, Yu and Zhao; the seventh is painting of Ma and Xia in the Southern Song dynasty; the eighth is painting of Shen and Wen of the current dynasty; the ninth is semi-cursive and cursive script of Zhu Jingzhao; the tenth is notes of other celebrities; the eleventh is the vessel before Han and Qin dynasties; the twelfth is archaic jade; the thirteenth is the inkstone in the Tang dynasty; the fourteenth is famous ancient Qin and swords; the fifteenth is

writings in the five-dynasty and Song dynasty; the sixteenth is jagged rocks of grotesque shapes; the seventeenth is potting with pines and cattails; the eighteenth is plants of fresh rhythm like plum and bamboo; the nineteenth is exotic spices; the twentieth is exotic treasures; the twenty-first is fine tea and wine; the twenty-second is delicacies; the twenty-third is the delicate porcelain; the rest is rice, cloth, cane.

Li Rihua joked that the ranking of antiques is roughly as follows: calligraphy and painting, bronze ware of Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties, ancient jade ware, inkstone of Tang dynasty, famous Qin and sword, ancient books of the five-dynasty and Song dynasty, and porcelain.

Gu Qiyuan also commented in his *KezuoZhuiyu*.

The connoisseurs considered the authentic work of painting or calligraphy the first, stone carving the second, vessels of Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties the third, penannular jade ring and cups the fourth, jadeware in the Song Dynasty the fifth, products by kilns of Chai, Ru, Ge, Ding, Xuan and Chenghua of Ming dynasty the sixth, products by kilns of Yongle and Jiajing the seventh.

The general ranking is calligraphy, painting and tablet, bronze ware of Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties, ancient jade of Han and Song dynasties, and porcelain.

In addition, some clues can be seen from the placement of objects in the paintings of Ming people with the theme of antiques. For example, as described in *Pingutuzhou* of Ming Youqiu, in the deep courtyard, there are shady sycamore trees and dense palm trees and bamboo, clear and faint. The middle of the picture is a big book case, with five refined scholars around appreciating antiques and four boys serving. The person in the middle nodded, spreading the painting, while the others pondered on it, or enjoyed it. From the perspective of placing objects, the focus is the book case with painting and calligraphy in its center, and inkstone, porcelain cup, etc. in the corner. Among the five persons appreciating antiques, three are focusing on the painting, the other two are attracted by the two vessels the boys hold. Then the two bronze vessels became secondary to calligraphy and painting. In the corner of the painting, there are another case where the porcelain cup, porcelain cup holder, porcelain vase and bronze tripod are exhibited, in response to vessels and bottles on the ground.

Another example is Dai Chouying's *ZhuyuanPingutu*. In the center of the painting are two painted screens: one is mountains-and-waters painting and the other is flower-and-bird painting. The host and one guest are looking at the album page around the case, with calligraphy and painting scrolls and letters arranged neatly. The guests on the opposite side of the case are enjoying the paintings with porcelain vases and stoves served by the boys. On another three cases in the painting are vessels like Ding, Hu, You, Lian, and Ping, among which, of particular note are three pieces of porcelain: one bottle, one vase with ears and one stove like a Ding. The above is gracked glaze. Most of the body is blocked by bronze objects. The display is clear and orderly. The third example is Du Jin's *WanguTuzhou*. Among the utensils displayed on the case in the center, the bronze Ding and Yi belong are most important, while the porcelains is the least.

It can be seen that in the Ming Dynasty, the most appreciated things by literati are calligraphy and painting. The collection of bronze ware came into being with the rise of stone study in the Song Dynasty, followed by jades and porcelains.

#### 4. Circulation

In the late Ming Dynasty, the fashion of appreciating and collecting became popular. At that time, some people diligently explored knowledge for admiring ancient artifacts, some were greedy for fame, some were knowledgeable, and some were ridiculed for hearsay. The porcelain was meant to be appreciated, but its price was driven up bought by middlemen. Besides, due to a multitude of brokers, it is difficult to distinguish the porcelain from the fake glutting in the market. Some porcelains were sold at a high price; some were collected as treasure passed down from generation to generation; some were exchanged for money; and some are used as funeral objects during the circulation. Around the people fond of antiques, there are many people who sell antiques, some of whom are professional antique dealers. Li Rihua had several records about the porcelain trade with antique dealers in his *Diary of Weishui Xuan*. The following are some examples:

On February 24, the 37th year of Wanli, I purchased a burner made by official kiln of Fangchaoyun.

On February 21, the 38th year of Wanli, a merchant surnamed Xia brought a lantern cup of Chenghua and a cup of five colors.

On April 23, the 38th year of Wanli, there is one merchant holding a big cobalt blue plate of one foot in diameter.

On May 25, the 38th year of Wanli, there are some guests holding calligraphy and paintings and other antiques to see me, among which, there are porcelains like official kiln plate of one foot in diameter, a Gulongquan Double Fish washer, a high ink tank like a Dou of Ge kiln and porcelains of Ding kiln.

On July 14, the 47th year of Wanli, Weng Suyu of She together with friends, Mi Youren, Ni Zan and other reputable people brings picture scrolls that are identified as fakes to see me. Among the porcelains, there is a small incense box of blue and east porcelain with characters on the back: "Wang's Box".

These professional antique dealers often shuttled from one scholar to another. In Li Rihua's diary, he seldom bought the antiques peddled by antique dealers and in most instances, he just took a look and commented on them. In many antiques, Li Rihua is most closely associated with calligraphy and painting. It is common in his diary to fully transcribe the postscript and title of calligraphy and painting. There are as many as 691 paintings recorded in the Diary of Weishui Xuan. As some researchers have pointed out, the circulation of paintings and calligraphy is a continuous cycle. In this process, antique dealers act as a kind of museum. It is their traveling back and forth that gives collectors the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the paintings and calligraphy circulating in the region. In the circulation of paintings and calligraphy in Li Rihua's time, trading is just a link. To possess paintings and calligraphy, you have to buy them, but to really understand their artistic value which is difficult to convert into silver, just look at them. The same is true for porcelain. The main varieties mentioned in his diary are products of Guan, Ge, Ding, Longquan and Xuande, Chenghua, Jiajing kilns in the Ming dynasty. Li Rihua is so well known for his connoisseurship that he often has friends send him porcelains for appraisals. For example, On November (the leap month) 16, the 40th year of Wanli, the servant of Gang Ji in the big family brought two censers of Ge kiln to invite him to appreciate. Li Rihua noted, one was enough. Li Rihua also visited friends frequently and saw many rare porcelain wares during this period. For example, on August 16, the 37th year of Wanli, when he was living in Hangzhou and accompanied his son to attend an examination, he once saw a tank of Chenghua at his friend, Deng Yunyan's house and commented, "It is brightly colored and cannot be copied". On the same day, he went to the place of Zhu Jinhuan to see his collected writing-brush washer.

In addition to these professional antique dealers to seek sales in the study of literati, there are many ways for porcelain circulation in the world, such as the family of Ji Bai, handing antiques down from the older generations of the family. According to the records of Wu Qizhen in the Ming dynasty, at that time, big families like Wu family of Xinan, Wang family of Congmufang, Zhu family of Xiuyi and Cheng family of Yucun in Huizhou were rich in collection, among which, the most are famous vessels. Cheng Ji Bai in Cheng family of Yucun who had long been associated with Li Rihua, amassed a large collection during his lifetime, such as Zixutie of HuaiSu, Painting of XuejiangGuizhao of Emperor Huizong, Painting of Wuniu of Han Huang, etc. After his death in connection with the case of Wu Bochang, part of his collection was inherited by his son, Cheng Mingzhao. According to Wu Qizhen's account, among the bronze vessels, there are Fangding and Fanggu; among the porcelains, there are Yi of the official kiln and Baiding kiln, and Jades of Han dynasty. In addition, among Xiang's collection, there are hundreds of stamps, and the remainders are exquisite. Once the family has fallen or changed, the collection will be dispersed. For example, in the 13th year of Shunzhi (1656), Wu Qizhen took a look at the Painting of XuejiangGuizhao in the boat of Wang Junzheng of Danyang. It was just more than thirty years before Cheng Jibai's death. The circulation of the collection is a common thing, but the vicissitudes and wanderings of them often make people sigh.

Market circulation is another way. The development of commodity economy in the late Ming dynasty also makes the antique market flourish and meet the needs of the society. The Zhaoqing Temple in Hangzhou was an antique fair in Hangzhou. Li Rihua once accompanied his son to take the Provincial Examination in Hangzhou in the 37th year of Wanli. Sun Long, once working as the weaving minister, opened more than 100 shops in the two corridors of Zhaoqing Temple, where monks operated, mainly selling some monk shoes, futon, glass beads and other things. Later, merchants from all over the world gathered to sell some rare playthings. Zhang Dai wrote in his TaoanMengyi:

"There are daily bazaars in the two corridors of the Temple, where antiques and exotic treasures are gathered for sale."

Li Rihua had recorded that on April 7, the 42th year of Wanli, he bought there a volume of Guo Xi's Painting of FusangXiaoer. In Li Rihua's works, the antique shop ran by merchant Xiang at Yue Temple in Hangzhou is also recorded. In the porcelain trading fairs, some of the paintings can be seen. The Painting of Shangyuan Lantern Festival painted by Ming people with no inscriber is famous for Xu Bangda's inscription "Shangyuan lantern". The painting shows a lively scene of the Lantern Festival in Jin Ling under the background of serried shops. According to the research, this area described should be NeiQiao of Nanjing. The antique shops here have grown to a large scale. In the painting, people are hanging around the shops, getting what they want and enjoying themselves. The antiques which can be seen here include calligraphy, painting, porcelain, Zhong, Ding, Yi and so

on. These antiques filled in the market are bought and sold by the philistines regardless of judging true from false. No wonder some people sigh, “The persons from rich families and one or two mediocrities are usually stuck up, and when appreciating the antique, their words and actions are vulgar. The artifact will be defiled even they seem to love it fondly “.

Since the porcelain became popular and had economic value, its function in circulation was not limited to itself. According to the records, there is a sacrificial red Yi stove with ears of fish made by Xuan kiln. “Except that the part on the mouth, it is red like rosy clouds, above the feet, it was white. Red and white set each other off, which makes the porcelain the best of all dynasties. It is a rare treasure as its body is decorated”. It is the thing of the palace originally, later served as monthly stipend of a duke, and finally sold by Zhu Xixiao, the governor of Nandu at the price of 300 gold. As for favor pattern, SuHongjia, Li Rihua’s friend from Jinjiang, once presented him with a Yingzhen figure of white porcelain. There were also unscrupulous men who dug graves to seek profits. In the Wu Feng Lu, Huang Sheng in the Ming Dynasty wrote, “According to the customs of the Jiangnan region, powerful families liked to collect bronze wares of the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties, jade wares, porcelain wares and calligraphy and paintings of the Tang and Song dynasties, so that some people went to dig tombs to seek these things.” During the Reign of Zhengde, tombs in the Wuzhong District, such as princess's tomb in the Liang Dynasty, the tomb of Sun outside the Panmen and the tomb of Zhang Shicheng’s mother, were all robbed for countless treasures buried with the dead and even the inner and outer coffins of folding of the garments can not be spared. What is more, it is so greedy to rob the tombs with the dead not being buried. Li Rihua once wrote that on February 23, the 38th year of Wanli, a certain Xia held a legendary dragon of green jade, which once was the thing of a large family in the county. The master cherished it very much, often saying that it should be buried with him. It is hanging near the master’s waist while he is dying, but when the master died, it had been stolen.

From the view of Li Rihua and the surrounding literati, we can see the custom of playing with antiquities in the late Ming Dynasty, which is unique for both playing with antiquities and contemporary playthings. Among antiquities, painting and calligraphy, bronze vessels of Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties are of utmost priority, while porcelains ranked last. Under the trend of commodity economic development in the late Ming Dynasty, there are both refined and popular tastes. As a kind of artwork, antique porcelain is circulated in the world like other commodities. As the price of antiques goes up, there is no telling whether they are genuine or not. They are sold and exchanged for money, or handed down from generation to generation. They are enjoyed by literati in the study with the jingle of money.

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