Reignmakers: Ming Imperial Production and Its Imitators

IFA China Project Workshop, November 11, 2011

Bruce Rusk, Asian Studies, Cornell University (brusk@cornell.edu)

My interest in reign marks on late imperial artifacts began with a category of artifact that is, depending on how you look at it, either ubiquitous or imaginary. Xuande incense burners (Xuande 革) are smallish brass vessels that come in a range of shapes and with an enormous variety of surface finishes and décors. They are named for a mark that appears on their underside, which attributes them chronologically to the Xuande reign (1426–1435) and institutionally to the imperial workshops. Since the late Ming, connoisseurs have recognized that this attribution is often false and treated such artifacts with suspicion, but have always assumed there existed real originals of which the fakes were imitations. This assumption turns out to be false. There is no reliable evidence that such vessels were produced in the Xuande era at all, let alone for court consumption. It becomes worth asking, then, under what conditions and by what means these objects could come into being and be perpetuated.

I hypothesize that the idea of Xuande incense burners (and the ding an sich) arose in the mid-to-late sixteenth century to feed a growing demand for luxury goods in the richer parts of the empire. They appealed to late-Ming taste, but more importantly for my purposes they conform with ways of thinking about imperial production, especially the function of reign marks, for which I find no evidence before the late sixteenth century. The marks—typically a stamp-like relief of four or six characters in a square or rectangle—were modeled on imperial porcelain from Jingdezhen. Anyone who has visited a museum collection of Chinese porcelain will understand the distinctions implicit in a label such as, “Chenghua mark and of the period,” implying as it does that a piece could bear a false attribution. In the same museum we might also find lacquerware, cloisonné, Tibetan-style Buddhist statues, and other items bearing similar marks, some of them truthful. The wording of these marks is often identical to that on porcelain, implying a concerted effort by some parties within the Ming court to use these marks systematically. Their use in imitations and fakes implies, in turn, that they became signs of value, authenticity, or other desirable qualities. In the case of Xuande incense burners, the appropriation of the mark allowed for the creation of a new type of object, one that in fact had never been produced for the court (though close analogues in porcelain had).
Reflection on this process suggests to me two questions, both guided by the grammatophilia of an artless historian. First, what and how did the marks mean when the first such objects were made in the early Ming? Second, how and what did they mean when knockoffs abounded in the late Ming?

To answer the first question I perform a close reading of the four or six characters of the marks, “Xuande nian zhi” 宣德年製 ("Made in a year of the Xuande era") or “Da Ming Xuande nian zhi” ("Made in a year of the Xuande era of the Great Ming"). It ties the object to a strange kind of date, an open-ended period that could last for decades, that acquires its significance through what the philosopher of language Paul Grice called implicature: its full meaning cannot be dissociated from where and how it is said. Because reign periods (nianhao 年號) in the Ming and Qing, unlike those in earlier dynasties, had a one-to-one correlation with emperors, the choice to date something only to a reign as opposed to a particular year or day highlighted the date as a property, and the object as the property, of a ruler. This distinctive use of nianhao marks may have begun in the Hongwu era (1368–1398), in the context of imperial donations to Buddhist temples. It became commonplace on imperial manufactures in the Yongle reign (1402–1424), when it appeared, most notably, on lacquer and porcelain. In that context the marks may have indicated that an item was reserved for use at court, where the dates may have been useful in identifying and grouping pieces and measuring workshop output.

Strikingly, however, there is nothing in the textual record to indicate that these marks were widely used as they were in the late Ming, to classify objects by the time of their production. Government documents about Jingdezhen do not identify porcelains with reign periods, nor do mid-sixteenth century inventories, which tend to use geographic terms even for imperial wares from Jingdezhen. Expressions like “Xuande white dish” first show up in the writings of late-sixteenth century connoisseurs such as Gao Lian 高濂, who showed great interest in marks on ceramics, lacquer, and metal, and such classifications have been taken for granted ever since. Once types of artifact were paired with eras the mark became an important determinant of value (if one that was often faked) and this was their most prominent function in the late Ming and through the Qing.

This function made possible the invention and circulation of a new type of object like the Xuande incense burners. They appealed to literati taste—they were accoutrements for the study, not implements for imperial ritual—but allowed their buyers to imagine that they owned a piece once used in the palace. Collectors did, however, have their doubts: the earliest accounts of Xuande vessels already record an abundance of forgeries and worries about being misled, along with a variety of
legends about the creation of the vessels (one involves a marvelous alloy created from Buddhist statues melted by a conflagration in a palace temple).

This uncertainty was refigured by a book purporting to detail the true origin of the censers. The bureaucratic documents collected in *Xuande dingyi pu* 宣德鼎彝谱 (and related texts) detail the imperial order to cast the vessels and inventory the raw materials, production techniques, and dimensions and appearance of the finished product. They thus seem to provide firm grounds for assessing authenticity—but the book is a fake, as Paul Pelliot argued in a 1936 article. Additional evidence bolsters this conclusion and shows that the book must date to the period between, roughly, 1650 and 1750.

Despite these problems, the book (and an illustrated version that surfaced in the twentieth century) remains the touchstone for most discussions of Xuande *lu*. Vessels created later, I hypothesize, made to conform with descriptions in the documents. Thus a textual sign, the reign mark, inspired imitation and creative reuse, including the invention of new classes of artwork. These works and the attendant anxieties over authenticity spurred the creation of longer texts that narrate the imagined imperial production implied by the four- or six-character marks. And these books, in turn, condition the ongoing production and consumption of an object that never existed.