



**DOERR DALLAS  
VALUATIONS**

# CHINESE PORCELAIN MARKS

**When valuing Chinese Porcelain, one of the main actions in assessing an item is to look at the base of an object as it can tell a thousand stories.**

Mostly, this simple action will yield information, although on the rare occasion it does not, and you might find the ashes of your client's beloved relative at your feet, or indeed the corpse of a dead mouse.

The marks on Chinese porcelain wares are generally found on the base of the pot and are made up of four or six characters or a stylised seal mark, made of geometric designs that mirror the handwritten characters.

The marks will generally refer to an Emperor's reign and confusingly are not a real indication of the age of the piece. If the age of the porcelain is considered to be of the same date as the mark in question, it is commonly described as being "of mark and period." However, Chinese potters did mark porcelain with earlier reign marks to the date of the manufacture as a mark of respect to earlier wares and Emperors.

This can cause some confusion with dating Chinese porcelain!

Only expertise and experience can assess age, although sometimes an invasive test, such as a thermoluminescence test, might assist the valuer. Invasive tests are far from ideal as they do require a sample to be removed from a pot. Commonly, ancient Chinese terracotta tomb figures are sold on the marketplace with these tests and accompanying certificates. Oxford is currently one of the centres for issuing these certificates in the UK.

The translation of the marks one finds on Chinese porcelains are well documented in books including Gerald Davison's excellent, "The Handbook of Marks on Chinese Ceramics", which includes the main reign marks for the Ming and Qing dynasty emperors and other less commonly documented marks.

With practise, comparing and reading both written and seal marks on Chinese porcelain becomes easier, especially with the correct textbooks by your side. However, with a little more knowledge of written Chinese and the method of writing Chinese characters, this can be made easier and more satisfying to understand.

Each character would have been applied with a brush; the shapes made by varying the amount of pressure applied to the brush as the stroke is made. This is also relevant to forming Chinese characters in calligraphy. Each character would have been made by performing a varied number of strokes, from three to fourteen in the characters below. Understanding the order in which the strokes are written (generally left to right), their proportion and the formation of the character can help one to appreciate the character more precisely, and if one could understand the components of each character more fully, one would be able to consult a Chinese dictionary to find the meaning. Mostly marks used on Chinese porcelain appear as commonly used words in today's modern Chinese language. For example, the character for year has not changed in hundreds of years, and can be found on Ming porcelain, and in an e mail today.

The first mark below is a Ming blue and white porcelain bowl that sold for \$7,470,000 (£733,927) at Christie's Hong Kong in May 2013 and next to that, a pair of Yongzheng doucai conical Dragon bowls and covers, that sold for £212,000 at Christie's London in November 2019.

The mark shows from the top right down to left down, the characters for Da Ming Xuan, De Nian li, which translates as Great Ming Xuan De Year produced (in) or effectively, "this piece was produced in the reign of the Ming Emperor Xuan De."

The second mark below shows from top right down and across to the left, the characters Da Qing Yong Zheng Nian li, with translates as Great Qing Yong Zheng Year produced (in), or effectively, "this piece was produced in the reign of the Qing Emperor Yong Zheng."



Ming porcelain mark.  
Image courtesy of Christie's



Yongzheng porcelain mark.  
Image courtesy of Christie's

Call us today to enquire about an appointment on **01883 722736** or email **enquiries@doerrvaluations.co.uk** or visit our website **www.doerrvaluations.co.uk**