

# Daoist symbols of immortality and longevity : on late Ming Dynasty porcelain

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# DAOIST SYMBOLS OF IMMORTALITY AND LONGEVITY ON LATE MING DYNASTY PORCELAIN

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## *Abstract*

This paper explores aspects of Daoist symbolism as found on the ceramics produced during the Jiajing 嘉靖 reign (1522–1566) of the late Ming dynasty. In particular, it focuses on the Jiajing Emperor's fascination with religious Daoism as a means of prolonging his life, and how this interest was reflected in the decoration of the ceramics manufactured in his reign. Ceramics with Daoist symbols – for example those bearing the Eight Trigrams – were especially commissioned and used in elaborate Daoist rituals, which had the principal purpose of communicating with the gods who represented the *dao* 道, or “The Way”. Vases in the shape of double-gourds will be discussed in more detail, and their significance explored. This was a particularly popular form during the Jiajing reign, and played an important part in Daoist beliefs. Double-gourds also have interesting connotations in other cultures, and aspects of their appearance in Western art during approximately the same period will also be examined.

## 1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore certain aspects of Daoist symbolism on Chinese porcelain of the late Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Specifically, the discussion in the first half of this paper will focus on the reign of the Jiajing 嘉靖 Emperor, who ruled China from 1522 to 1566. A major feature of the reign was the emperor's fascination, even obsession, with religious Daoism. The latter was a branch of Chinese philosophy that had emerged out of the writings of the Daoist sage *Laozi* 老子 (who lived ca. 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC) and the author of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (compiled ca. 130 BC). Both philosophers essentially advocated inner contemplation, mystical union with nature, and letting things take their own course by “non-action”.<sup>1</sup> Early Daoism had already propagated certain techniques for the prolongation of one's life, a notion which was later taken up

1 See for example LIU, 1984a:117–147; detailed references regarding the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* in LOEWE, 1993:269–292 and 56–66.

by Daoists seeking the Elixir of Immortality.<sup>2</sup> To later Daoist adherents, such as the Jiajing emperor, this quest became an obsession which is well-reflected in the decorative motifs applied to the ceramics produced during his reign.

The second half of this paper will deal in more depth with a particularly popular shape in Jiajing ceramics – the double-gourd shape. It will also suggest parallels with the significance of the double-gourd and its symbolism in the arts of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

## 2 Political and Economic Background

Before dealing with the notion of religious Daoism in more depth, it may be helpful to give a brief overview of the political and economic situation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and an introduction to the Jiajing Emperor himself.

The early 16<sup>th</sup> century saw the beginning of the slow but certain end of the Ming Dynasty, a trend that accelerated during the reign of the Jiajing Emperor. Despite a growth in trade, the general economic situation steadily worsened, with the wealthy, corrupt officials becoming richer, while the poor and the farming population grew poorer – a situation which was not improved by the imperial court's general disinterest in trade.<sup>3</sup>

What role did the Jiajing Emperor's character play in this decline? In the early years after his enthronement in 1521, the young emperor managed to implement a string of useful reforms. These included some limitation of the palace eunuchs' political power, and cutting the number of superfluous officials (such as 30,000 members of the so-called brocade-uniforms). The emperor even reduced the land lease charge by half in the first year of his reign, and waived certain taxes which had been levied on commoners under his predecessor's reign.<sup>4</sup> In addition, he attempted to reduce the corruption at court by executing a number of his predecessor's sycophantic servants.

2 LIU, 1984a:121ff.

3 See BROOK, 1998:154ff.

4 HERZER, 1995:45ff.

Unfortunately, despite having initially tried to curb the power of the eunuchs at court, later in his reign the Jiajing Emperor lost all personal control over the empire, as the court descended into a power struggle between palace-eunuchs and scholars. This was accompanied by a tremendous amount of corruption within the bureaucracy, which further damaged the economy. However, the power struggles at the court were not the only reason for the disastrous economic state. The emperor's retreat from virtually all official court matters and his increasing fixation on the idea of Daoist immortality were important contributors to the decline. Already in 1523, the Jiajing emperor started to hold Daoist rituals under the guidance of his chief eunuch. Thus the eunuchs began to re-establish their power base at court.<sup>5</sup> Imperial interest in rites and ritual music had also been fuelled by the emperor's bestowal of ever more honours and titles on his deceased parents. The reason for these demonstrations of filial piety was that the direct line of succession had been broken. As the previous emperor had died without a son or brother, the Jiajing emperor (who was only a cousin) was brought in to take the throne.<sup>6</sup>

Despite being warned by more able ministers, such as Yang Tinghe 楊廷和 (1459–1529), against the potential dangers of getting too deeply involved with Daoist rituals and neglecting matters of state, the emperor ignored their counsel and the situation escalated into a conflict between two hostile camps at court. One group centred around the more sensible ministers, while the other centred around a group of opportunists who saw flattering the emperor and supporting him in his superstitious beliefs as their best hope of attaining wealth and power.

The voices of reason did not prevail, and in the following years of the Jiajing emperor's long reign, many able officials were demoted, while the empire suffered the consequences in terms of loss of wealth, continuous attacks by Mongols from the north, and Japanese pirates threatening the empire from the east coast of China. In spite of all this, the emperor would brook no challenges to his authority, and continued to indulge in ever more bizarre Daoist rituals in his quest for immortality. Such practices would often border on the edge of reason. On one occasion, for example, the emperor was provided with 300 young girls (some sources even mention 800!) who were selected for the purpose of strengthening the *yang* 陽, thus the male, life element.<sup>7</sup>

5 HERZER, 1995:46.

6 GOODRICH and FANG, 1976:315ff.

7 Compare for example GEISS, 1954:481.

### 3 The Role of Jiaging Ceramics in the Daoist Context: Decoration and Related Symbolism

#### 3.1 *Nature of Rituals: An Introduction*

As is often the case in Chinese history, the ceramics of the Jiaging reign closely reflected the interests of the emperor. While the majority of the porcelain vessels made for the court were those used in association with the consumption of food and drink, and other everyday activities, an additional usage for some imperial porcelain from the Hongwu reign (1368–98) onwards was in rituals. During the Jiaging reign these were often elaborate and hugely expensive Daoist rituals, where especially commissioned and decorated porcelain vessels were used. These will be described in more detail below.<sup>8</sup>

Such rituals had the principal purpose of communicating with the Gods who personalised the Dao 道, or “The Way”. These were referred to as the Three Pure Ones (*sanqing* 三清), and included The Supreme Lord Lao, or Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Being, The Heavenly Worthy of Numinous Treasure (from the Tang dynasty onwards), and The Deified Laozi, author of the *Daodejing* 道德經 (deified about end 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD). The earliest documentary evidence of these so-called *Three Pure Ones* dates to the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>9</sup>

Another god, the “Perfected Warrior” (i.e. the god of war), was also very important in Ming dynasty Daoism. He was the ancient deity of the north, and is often depicted with a tortoise and snake entwined. The anthropomorphic transformation of this god came about in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, after which he also became associated with healing. In the Ming dynasty, this god was particularly influential and popular. His popularity is reflected in the fact that the Jiaging emperor had a temple rebuilt specifically for the worship of the Perfected Warrior. This temple called the “Hall of Imperial Peace”, which still stands today at the northernmost part of the Forbidden City, served as the location for important Daoist rituals.

During rituals performed within the palace compounds, the Daoist priest (*daoshi* 道士) who would petition the Gods on behalf of the emperor, was the central figure. The two most important Daoist priests and most trusted counselors in charge of rituals during the Jiaging reign were Shao Yuanjie 邵元節

8 The subsequent summary of Daoist rituals is informed by the following sources: GOODRICH and FANG, 1976; LIU, 1984b:169–183; and WAN, 2003, vol. 2:191–221.

9 For a detailed account, see LITTLE, 2000b:616ff.

(1459–1539), and his successor Tao Zhongwen 陶仲文 (ca. 1481–1560).<sup>10</sup> The rituals, attended by the emperor himself, incorporated words, music, and dance, and were closely linked to Chinese theatre – during the Jiajing reign, such rituals could last from anything from a few hours to several weeks, going on day and night. Two major types of Daoist ritual were those for the living, and those for the dead – the goal of both being the reaffirmation of humanity’s source in the *dao* (“The Way”), and the celebration of the human covenant with the divine powers of the world.<sup>11</sup>

The general appearance of such rituals can be seen in paintings such as those by Jiao Bingzhen 焦秉真 (ca. 1689–1726) from the succeeding Qing dynasty, whose hanging scroll depicts a ritual that would not have been too different from the rituals during the Jiajing reign, where special structures and buildings for each ritual were created.<sup>12</sup> The many materials required included special incense, pearls, ambergris, gold, and others. Gold dust for example was used to write literary decorations on tablets, and the calligraphers often changed their brushes on purpose to take them home and thus make money.<sup>13</sup> Although the ceramics used for Daoist rituals at the court were only of the finest quality, the fact that relatively few of them survive today may be explained by the suggestion that each vessel was only used once. It was claimed that they would no longer be pure after the rituals, and so they were apparently discarded.<sup>14</sup>

### 3.2 *Thunder Rituals and Related Symbols on Porcelain*

A number of pieces are decorated with what are usually known as the “Eight Trigrams”, symbols which are constituted by eight combinations of three horizontal lines, each either solid or broken. Such signs were the primary symbols used in the ancient *Yijing* 易經, an enigmatic text which in its earliest form was used as a manual of divination and was compiled during the later 9<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>15</sup> Chinese legend says that the *Zhou yi* 周易 hexagrams were

10 See LIU, 1984b:169–183.

11 LITTLE, 2000a:189.

12 Illustrated in LITTLE, 2000a:190.

13 GOODRICH and FANG, 1976:318.

14 See LIU, 1984b:171.

15 See SHAUGHNESSY, 1993:216, who notes that care is necessary in speaking of the *Book of Changes* as a single text, and that it may be more convenient to use the title *Zhou yi* 周易 to refer to the original parts (i.e. the hexagram and line statements), specifically referring to the original context in which they were composed; the title *Yijing* on the other hand should be

created by Fuxi 伏羲, and played an important part in Daoist alchemy, where they were relevant with regard to the ingredients, the rhythm of alchemical practices, and the cosmic process.<sup>16</sup> They have also been described as a model of the cosmos, manifesting the perpetual cosmic order, as well as a way through which man could understand all things in the world.<sup>17</sup>

As the contemporary scholar Maggie Wan, an expert in this field, explains in her comprehensive study on this phenomenon, a number of Jiajing imperial ceramics are decorated with the eight trigrams arranged in a particular order, which leads her to the assumption that this particular group of ceramics was designed for so-called Daoist thunder-rituals, a type of worship that the Jiajing emperor was particularly committed to. This is also suggested by the fact that the emperor went as far as proclaiming himself the “Great Realized Being in Complete Control of the Five Thunders in the Jade Void”.<sup>18</sup>

Ming contemporary sources confirm that the emperor offered Daoist prayers for rain and snow on numerous occasions. According to a ritual corpus regarding such practices, thunder prayers could produce either rain, sunshine, or snow once the practising person was in harmony with the *dao*, or “The Way”. This state was to be achieved by techniques combining meditation and breath control in order to “visualise the creation of the elixir of the adept’s own body“, a procedure also described as “internal alchemy”.<sup>19</sup>

On the saucer dish in Plate A, two trigrams – the top one standing for heaven (*qian* 乾), the bottom one for earth (*kun* 坤), can be seen on the inside of the well (the other six are depicted on the exterior of the dish). The inscription on the base indicates that the presiding official of a Daoist temple had commissioned this vessel. Other pieces with similar inscriptions are known, such

used to refer to the complete canonical text (including the commentaries), with the entire text being understood as one of the Classics.

16 See SHAUGHNESSY, 1993:216–28. Regarding the *Yijing*’s importance in the visual culture and the education of the elite during the late Ming dynasty, see also CLUNAS, 1997:102ff; as Clunas points out, for Ming readers the trigrams and hexagrams were doubtlessly primary representations not only by virtue of their antiquity, but also due to their comprehensive power, and the *Yijing* also provides a theoretical justification of the inadequacy of the solely verbal in the realm of representation (ibid:103).

17 WAN, 2003:193–194.

18 WAN, 2003:198 and 200. Just how other arrangements may have been embedded into contemporary rituals or uses, and how these may have been viewed as primary representations by the elite of the late Ming, is a question that remains beyond the scope of the present paper, but which may reveal additional insight into an interesting topic.

19 LITTLE, 2000a:337; and WAN, 2003:199.

as a fragment of a cup that was excavated at the ceramic kiln site of Jingdezhen in 1987 and bears an inscription on the base which reads “For use on the Daoist altar”, indicating that it was especially commissioned for Daoist ritual purposes.<sup>20</sup> The central medallion of the dish here is decorated with the “Three friends” (pine, prunus, and bamboo), as well as a stylized *lu* 祿 in the shape of a twisted pine tree trunk, the character symbolizing “happiness and prosperity”.

Trigrams are also depicted on other shapes which may have been used for Daoist ritual purposes, another example being a necklace box decorated in underglaze blue from the Beijing Palace Museum, which may have been used to hold ritual adornments.<sup>21</sup> A vase from the Baur collection in Geneva is also decorated with trigrams. The trigram visible in published illustrations of the vase is accompanied by dragons, traditionally an auspicious symbol and since about 200 BC also the symbol of the emperor.<sup>22</sup> This piece additionally illustrates the occurrence of archaic bronze shapes in the Jiajing reign, since the vase is in the shape of an archaic bronze called *zun* 尊 (a shape popular in the Zhou 周 dynasty, 1100–256 BC).

Often, the trigrams on ceramics are accompanied by other designs, most frequently by cranes such as those on the dish in Plate A, and on the double-gourd shaped vase in Plate B, where the cranes are depicted among stylized clouds. The crane is one of the many Chinese symbols of longevity, and is also often depicted together with pines and rocks, in which case it stands for the three-fold image of longevity. Cranes in combination with deer also have a similar meaning. At the same time, the crane also stands for wisdom, and the death of a Daoist priest is referred to as “the transformation to a feathered [crane]”. In combination with the Eight Trigrams, the appearance of cranes is perceived as Heaven’s blessing for the practice of internal alchemy.<sup>23</sup> The crane was also prominent on court robes of the Jiajing reign, where it was granted as a symbol to officials for their involvement in Daoist rituals. The chief grand secretary Yang Tinghe 楊廷和, a famous politician during the early Jiajing reign, and Hai Rui 海瑞, a famously tough yet upright minister of the middle Jiajing reign, have both been depicted in woodblock prints wearing court robes with this particular design.<sup>24</sup>

20 See for example the cup illustrated in FUNG PING SHAN, 1992:138.

21 WAN, 2003:217.

22 See the image in IDEMITSU MUSEUM OF ART, 1994:plate 22.

23 EBERHARD, 1994:163; and WAN, 2003:216.

24 See LIN 林, 1993:8.



Depictions of cranes were also popular on ceramic items other than those used in Daoist ritual. An example can be found in the shape of a rare, blue-ground dish, decorated in reserve with cranes, peaches, *lingzhi* 靈芝 fungus, and a *shou* 壽 longevity character at the top.<sup>25</sup> The peach is also a symbol for longevity, and supposedly grew in the gardens of the “Queen Mother of the West”, a deity of the Daoist Pantheon residing in the Kunlun mountains. The *lingzhi* fungus is also a symbol of immortality.

Examples such as these reflect the importance of Daoist imagery during the Jiajing reign, in part reflecting the involvement of the Jiajing emperor in Daoist rituals. His fascination with religious Daoism and what scholars have referred to as “its weird theories, and strange practices in search for a life without death” appear to support the belief that the area from which the emperor came (Huguang 湖廣 in central China), tended to be inhabited by superstitious people.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.3 *More “Strange Practices”: The Issue of Male Offspring and Elixirs of Immortality*

A rather peculiar example regarding Daoist rites had to do with the emperor’s successor to the imperial throne. Since the emperor had not produced an heir in the first ten years of his reign, it was suggested to him by certain high officials that Daoist rituals might help – a suggestion which further increased the frequency with which such rites were performed.<sup>27</sup> In 1531 for example, the emperor’s first chief Daoist adviser, Shao Yuanjie, saw to it that large-scale Daoist services were performed before the Three Pure Ones, praying especially for the birth of a male heir to the throne.<sup>28</sup>

By 1540, the emperor had decided to sequester himself – in part because a Daoist adept claimed that he could transform base substances into silver, and promised that if the emperor secluded himself and ate from vessels of such silver, he would be transformed into an immortal. Even though that man was revealed as a fraud and executed, the emperor’s adherence to Daoist beliefs was not shaken, and he continued to rely on the advice of his second chief Daoist adviser, Tao Zhongwen.

25 Cf. CHRISTIE’S HONG KONG CATALOGUE, 1999:lot 653.

26 GOODRICH and FANG, 1976:317.

27 GOODRICH and FANG, 1976:317.

28 LIU, 1984b:171.

The Jiajing emperor also continued to consume “elixirs of immortality” and aphrodisiacs, which were concocted by his Daoist adviser. Such elixirs were generally made of red lead and white arsenic, compounded with other substances and made into pills or granules – by taking them, one was supposed to feel light and strong, increase one’s appetite, and become sexually aroused. In the Autumn of 1540, the emperor declared his wish to withdraw for several years to pursue immortality, and stubbornly refused to accept any petitions by the more sensible court officials who reminded him that the ingestion of such aphrodisiacs was highly dangerous – said officials were arrested and tortured to death. Not surprisingly, the unwise practice of ingesting aphrodisiacs containing lead and arsenic resulted in the emperor gradually poisoning himself to death. The symptoms of his addictions manifested themselves in skin problems and stomach pains, irrational rages, and dementia – all of these in his late fifties.<sup>29</sup>

Around 1550, new techniques for the attainment of longevity were suggested to the emperor by his Daoist advisor. Daoist belief held that physical immortality was attainable through the preparation and refinement of the so-called inner and outer elixirs. While the so-called outer elixir involved plant and mineral compounds loosely known as “elixir of immortality”, the inner elixir had to be refined through the strengthening of the *yang*, or life, element. The belief was that this was achievable by having relations with young girls, more precisely at the point that the *yang* 陽 or life force in the *yin* 陰 or dark force was said to be the most intense, and when it could be absorbed.

To this purpose, in 1552 the emperor’s Daoist adviser had between 300 and 800 young girls gathered for palace service, and in 1555 another 180 were selected for use in refining the elixir. This practise was already criticised during the Ming,<sup>30</sup> and again not unsurprisingly, does not seem to have produced the desired result. Also, in an attempted palace coup in 1542, eighteen palace girls tried to strangle the emperor, but unfortunately they tied the wrong type of knot, and the emperor survived after one of the girls warned the empress.<sup>31</sup>

The wish for male offspring is also reflected in the motifs on the finest blue and white wares of the Jiajing period, such as that seen on the vase in Plate C, which is in the shape of a double-gourd and is decorated in the beautiful jewel-blue tone typical for the highest quality Jiajing pieces. The shape will be discussed in more detail in the next section, but in regard to the issue of male

29 GEISS, 1954:480.

30 GEISS, 1954:481.

31 GOODRICH and FANG, 1976:318.

offspring, the combination here of the double-gourd's symbolism for fertility and the children painted in the four cartouches on the lower part, puts particular emphasis on the wish for male descendants. Such designs of children may have been influenced by paintings of the 12<sup>th</sup> century court artist Su Hanchen 蘇漢臣 (ca. 1101–60), who was well-known for his depictions of children.<sup>32</sup> Another four roundels containing fruiting peach trees which grow in the form of stylized longevity characters are depicted on the upper part of the vase. The background decoration of both upper and lower body consists of stylized longevity characters, and the upper part of the neck is inscribed with four characters meaning “Happiness and Long Life on Earth and in Heaven” (*fu shou di tian* 福壽地天).

### 3.4 *The Double-Gourd and the Eight Immortals*

In this section, vases in the shape of double-gourds and the significance of that shape will be explored, since this was a particularly popular form during the Jiajing reign. As the double-gourd also appears particularly rich in symbolic connotations outside the realm of Chinese art, aspects of its appearance in Western Art during roughly the same period will also be examined in the final section.

The plant on which the ceramic shape is based is usually referred to as the bottle gourd (lat. *Lagenaria siceraria*), a climbing vine of the gourd family that is native to the Old World tropics, yet has been cultivated in warm climates for centuries for its hard-shelled, ornamental, fruits.<sup>33</sup> In a recent article on the origins and spread of this plant, which is indigenous to Africa, the authors reach the conclusion that it appears reasonable to date the domestication for the bottle gourd in Asia as early as 10,000–11,000 BC. In that case, it would join the dog as a second “utilitarian species” domesticated by humans long before any plants

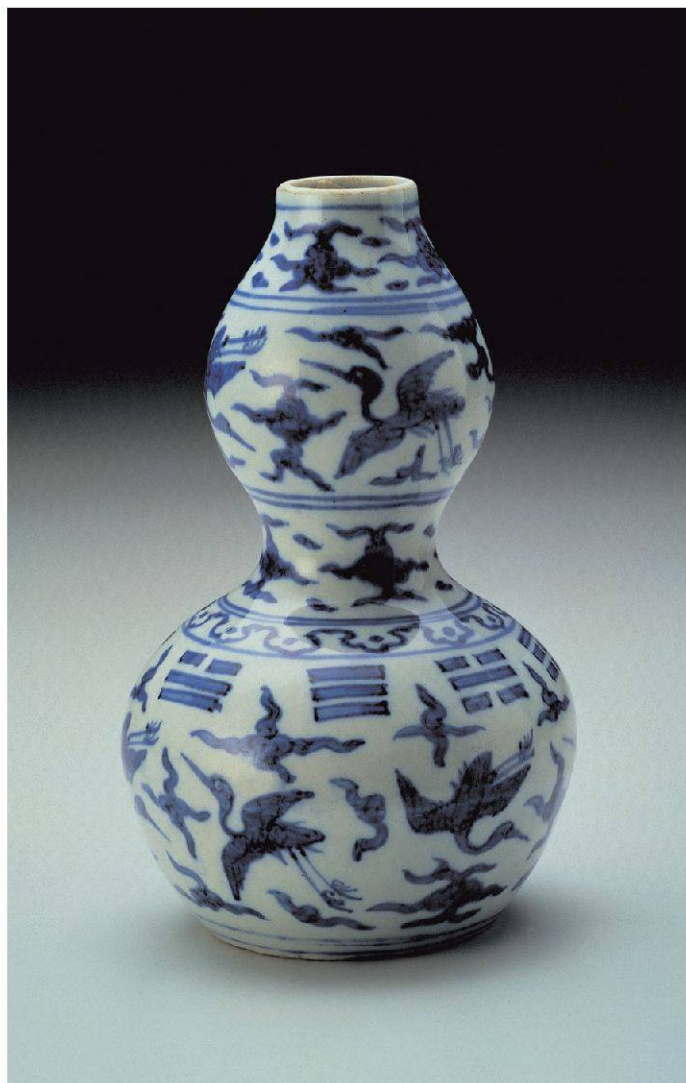
32 See for example Su Hanchen's *Playing Children* in the National Palace Museum Beijing, illustrated in YANG 楊, 2003, vol. 2:119.

33 The bottle gourd is also known as white-flowered gourd or calabash gourd; see *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* (BENTON, 1974, vol. II:185). The genus name *lagenaria* derives from *lagena*, the Latin for a Florence flask, while the species name *siceraria* also refers to the fruit's usefulness when mature and dry, i.e. Latin *siccus* (cf. GLARE, 1982:997 and 1754). Regarding a comprehensive description in Chinese, see CHEN 陳 and CHENG 程, 1992:534; on its uses in traditional Chinese medicine, see also the famous late Ming collection of *materia medica* by Li Shizhen 李時珍 (LI, 1959, *juan* 17:55–58).

## Illustrations



*Plate A:* A small blue and white saucer dish. Jiajing period (1522–1566), 13.5 cm diam. Inscription on the base reading “Shen Liang, Presiding Official of Guang Lu Temple, Office of the Primary Attendant, commissioned this dish”. © Christie’s Images Ltd. 2001.



*Plate B:* A blue and white double-gourd vase decorated with cranes and Eight Trigrams. Jiajing six-character mark and of the period (1522–1566), height 15.5 cm. Photograph courtesy of the National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan, R.O.C.



*Plate C:* A blue and white double-gourd vase decorated with *shou* 壽 characters and playing children. Jiajing period (1522–1566), height 62.2 cm. © Christie’s Images Ltd. 1996.



*Plate D:* A blue and white double-gourd vase decorated with the Eight Immortals and winged dragons. Jiajing six-character mark and of the period (1522–1566), height 32 cm. © Christie’s Images Ltd. 2001.



*Plate E:* Cosmé Tura, *Saint George and the Princess* (detail), 1469. Tempera on canvas, 349×305 cm. Ferrara, Museo del Duomo. Courtesy of Il Museo della Cattedrale di Ferrara.



*Plate F:* Raphael (1483–1520) and Giovanni da Udine (1487–1561). *Amor with the attributes of Mars*, in the Loggia of Cupid and Psyche (Vault, 1518). Rome, Villa Farnesina. Courtesy of the Villa Farnesina, Rome.

or animals worldwide became objects for domestication as food sources.<sup>34</sup> The bottle gourd has been grown over vast areas of the world for thousands of years not primarily as a food source, but for the use of its strong, hard-shelled, and buoyant fruits, which were made into containers, musical instruments, fishing floats, and later also works of art. As Erickson et al. mention, this lightweight “container crop” was of particular importance to human societies before the advent of pottery and settled village life.<sup>35</sup>

In Chinese, the bottle gourd is referred to as *hulu* 葫蘆 (also *hulu* 壺蘆) or *paogua* 瓠瓜.<sup>36</sup> As Jan Stuart has noted, there are references to gourds in Chinese mythology. For example, several minority groups in southern China believed that humanity was born from a gourd, and Han 漢 Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) depictions show paradise hidden inside its bulbous shape. As will become clear in discussion of Jiaging vases in the shape of double-gourds, gourds were also associated with the immortals, i.e. Daoist beliefs, as they were symbols of the unity of heaven and earth (i.e. the upper and lower spheres of the shape).<sup>37</sup> As Terese Tse Bartholomew explains in her meticulously researched *Hidden Meanings in Chinese Art*, the bottle gourd is an important auspicious symbol with a wide array of meanings.<sup>38</sup> Because of its many seeds, it is a natural symbol of fertility in China and thus an auspicious sign for male offspring (*hulu baizi* 葫蘆百子); in addition, the plant’s ability to produce large (*gua* 瓜) and small gourds (*die* 瓟) essentially also alludes to “ceaseless generations of descendants” (Chinese *guadie mianmian* 瓜瓞綿綿 or *zisun wandai* 子孫萬代). Its dense network of vines and tendrils (*mandai* 蔓帶) is suggestive of continuity and may be used as a pun for “ten thousand generations” (*wandai* 萬代). The function of hollowed-out gourds as vessels for storing food, liquor, or medicine, further adds to their symbolism as objects of abundance and good

34 See ERICKSON, 2005, vol. 102, no. 51:18320. For a detailed overview of the bottle gourd’s properties and uses throughout various cultures, see also HANELT, 2001, vol. 3:1532–1533.

35 ERICKSON, 2005, vol. 102, no. 51:18315.

36 Standard dictionaries of the Chinese language only contain relatively little information with regard to its nature as a plant. As is often common in such sources, much more space is devoted to its many occurrences in important classical works of Chinese literature. An example with several quotes from classical literature regarding the double-gourd can be found in the *Hanyu dacidian* 漢語大詞典 (HANYU DACIDIAN 漢語大詞典, 1997, vol. 9:457).

37 See the entry by Jan Stuart in *The Dictionary of Art* (Stuart, 1996, vol. 13:229); in addition to ceramics, Stuart further mentions gourd-shaped bronzes from the Zhou (ca. 1100–256 BC). The shape was also used for objects made out of materials such as lacquer, jade, cloisonné, glass, etc.

38 The following overview of meanings is informed by BARTHOLOMEW, 2006:61.



luck, as well as symbols of healing and the traditional motif for doctors. From a philosophical point of view, bottle gourds are believed to be useful only once their internal flesh and seeds have been removed, similar to human beings, which are only useful to others when they have been emptied of delusions and desires.

Such characteristics attributed to the bottle gourd are also reflected in classical Chinese literary sources, some of the more important of which will be mentioned here. There are plenty of classical quotations in standard Chinese dictionaries, but many of them amount to little more than the line in which the word in question is contained, i.e. they appear out of context, and do little to enhance our understanding of early Chinese beliefs regarding bottle gourds.

Even before the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, poems contained in the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經), refer to the bottle gourd's cultivation for food, and more often to its use as a container for holding liquids such as wine. The *Songs of Chu* (*Chuci* 楚辭), a poetic corpus compiled and annotated in the early second century AD, also points out its use both for food and for utensils such as ladles.<sup>39</sup> Several poems in the famous *Three Hundred Tang Poems* (*Tangshi sanbai shou* 唐詩三百首) also contain references to gourds, again often in connection with their function as food and drink utensils.<sup>40</sup>

In a story set in the Song Dynasty (960–1279) written by the great scholar and antiquarian Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072), a bottle gourd serves as an object to demonstrate how dexterity may apply to more than one skill.<sup>41</sup> When an old oil seller called Maiyou Weng 賣油翁 encountered Duke Chen Yaozi 陳堯咨 practising archery in his garden – a skill at which he was without equal – the old man simply watched him with a slight nod of his head. This annoyed Chen Yaozi, who asked him whether his skill as an archer was not unequalled? The old man simply replied that there was nothing to it, as his skill was but a “mere familiarity with one's hands” (無他，但手熟爾). Upon being questioned as to how he could possibly belittle the Duke's skill, the old man replied that his knowledge derived from the fact that this principle also applied to the ladling of oil; this he demonstrated by placing a bottle gourd on the ground, covering its small mouth opening with a metal coin, and using a ladle poured oil through the coin's tiny rectangular opening – without spilling a drop. He concluded by

39 Several lines from the *Shijing* are contained in PAN 潘, 2002a:64; Pan also cites an example from the *Chuci* 楚辭 (ibid:65).

40 Compare PAN 潘, 2002b:60–61.

41 For the original text, see WANG 王 and OUYANG 歐陽, 1997:9–10.

saying that “My task is also nothing but mere familiarity with my hand”, upon which Duke Chen laughed and sent him off. Although the bottle gourd’s characteristics – other than as a container – are not specifically pointed out, one may assume that the educated reader may also have associated it with a Daoist context. Although the bottle gourd served the old man simply as a tool to carry out his business, one is also reminded of its function as an attribute of Daoist immortals, a characteristic which will be discussed below.

In a late Ming compilation by Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) entitled *Stories to Caution the World* (*Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言), a gourd is also introduced as a vessel for wine, but at the same time carries additional Daoist connotations, as it belongs to the immortal Liu Bendao 劉本道, who had been an official in the Division of Longevity in the realm of the immortals. As he liked to play with the crane, deer, and turtle, Liu was temporarily demoted and banished to the world of mortals, where he became a poor scholar. At the end of his term of banishment, Shoulao 壽老, God of Longevity (usually recognisable in paintings by his high forehead), led Liu back to heaven.<sup>42</sup>

The association of bottle gourds with immortals, and the use of gourds as auspicious objects (*hulu daji* 葫蘆大吉), is a very prominent feature of imperial ceramics of the Jiajing period. In addition to the pieces in Plates B and C, a rather interesting example is illustrated in Plate D. This is not only a successful piece from a technical point of view – such a shape would have been difficult to fire successfully – but it is also rich in symbolic allusions. It has a globular upper section, and a square lower one, which is a feature relating to the traditional representation of heaven as a circle, and earth as a square. Such traditional views of Heaven and Earth were also reflected in Daoist rituals during the Jiajing reign, where dances were performed on specially erected mounds: the dances worshipping the Earth God on a square mound, and the dances worshipping the God of Heaven on a circular one. Such structures were built on the express orders of the Jiajing emperor, who according to Ming dynasty records personally oversaw the conduct of the rituals and the building of their structures.<sup>43</sup> The double-gourd shape itself is also seen as a symbol representing a microcosm of Heaven and Earth, as it joins the two elements in the adept’s own body. It is thus a typical object for Daoists and magicians, and also of “Iron-Crutch Li” or Li Tiegua 李鐵拐, who was one of the most popular of all Daoist adepts.<sup>44</sup>

42 FENG, 2005, chapter 39:663–672; for the original text, see FENG 馮, 1992:621–631.

43 HERZER, 1995:53–60.

44 EBERHARD, 1994:87.

On the lower section of the vase in Plate D are depicted four of the so-called Eight Daoist Immortals, who are the best known figures in Chinese mythology, and also the most popular ones in religious Daoism. They were believed to have lived during different centuries, and it has never been precisely determined by Chinese sources when they became a formal group.<sup>45</sup>

Apparently it was only in the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) that the term “Eight Immortals” or *baxian* 八仙 was first applied to a specific group of immortals.<sup>46</sup> The eight include Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓, who is depicted with a fly-whisk and his demon-slaying sword. Zhongli Quan 鐘離權 is often represented with a bare stomach and carrying a fan that resurrects the dead; he became immortalised in the Han Dynasty, and in turn brought the aforementioned Lü Dongbin to immortality. Cao Guojiu 曹國舅 is dressed as an official carrying the insignia of office. He Xianggu 何香姑, in the shape of a young woman, carries either a ladle or a lotus flower, and was once seduced by Lü Dongbin. Han Xiangzi 韓湘子, supposedly the nephew of the famous Tang writer and Confucian Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), usually carries a flute. Zhang Guolao 張果老, who carries a drum, is usually depicted as an old man riding a donkey – sometimes backwards – which he apparently folded up like a piece of paper upon reaching his destination. Lan Caihe 藍采和, depicted either as male or female, carries a basket of fruit or flowers, and sometimes a flute. The eighth of the immortals, Li Tieguai, or Iron-Crutch Li, has an iron crutch and a gourd from which bats fly. Li Tieguai is one of the more popular figures and can also be seen on another double-gourd vase with two spherical parts from the Jingguangtang Collection.<sup>47</sup> On this are depicted all the Eight Immortals, plus the figure of another important God in the middle, who is the God of Immortality (Chinese *Shoulao*). On the left side of the top half of the vase is a figure who looks like a beggar, but who is “Iron-Crutch Li”.

Li supposedly lived at the turn of the sixth to the seventh century AD, and attained the *Dao*, or The Way, at an early age.<sup>48</sup> One day, Li Tieguai was about to attend a meeting with the deified Laozi, in order to be instructed in Daoist teachings. As he was leaving, he told his disciple that his physical body would remain, while his soul would depart in order to attend the meeting. Should his

45 LAI, 1972:3.

46 See PENNY, 2000:109–133.

47 See the vase from the Jingguangtang Collection in CHRISTIE'S NEW YORK CATALOGUE, 1997:lot 85.

48 This brief summary of Li Tieguai's background is informed by LITTLE, 2000a:331–33, and EBERHARD, 1994:177.

soul not return within seven days, then the disciple was instructed to cremate Li's body. The inevitable happened – the disciple *did* cremate his master's body, but he did so early, on the sixth day, because he had to rush home to help his mother who had fallen ill. When Li's spirit returned on the seventh day, he was understandably distraught at failing to find his body, and had no other choice but to enter the corpse of a beggar who had just starved to death, thus taking on the shape of a crippled man with an iron crutch.

Other than those decorated with the Eight Immortals, there are of course also double-gourd shapes bearing other motifs related to Daoist immortality. One of those is the previously mentioned vase decorated with a combination of flying cranes, auspicious characters, peaches, and *lingzhi* fungus from the Baur collection in Geneva.<sup>49</sup> Another example of a double-gourd vase is decorated with the “Three Friends”, separated by scenes of cranes and deer below peach plants, as well as a stylized longevity character and again, *lingzhi* fungus. A further is also highly auspicious in the choice of its decorative motifs – the motifs such as cranes and *lingzhi* fungus reflecting the popularity of Daoism during the time.<sup>50</sup>

### 3.5 *The Double-Gourd in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Western Art*

While vases in the shape of double-gourds and their many symbolic connotations were particularly popular in China during the Jiajing reign, the double-gourd also carried symbolic meaning in contemporary Europe, with characteristics that on the one hand reflect, but also supplement, the Chinese symbolism discussed above.

One finds detailed entries on gourds in English dictionaries, the earliest dating from 1303.<sup>51</sup> As pointed out by the English scholar Sir Thomas Elyot (ca. 1490–1546) in his *Castle of Helthe* in 1533, gourds were used as food in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, although apparently “rawe be vnpleasant in eatinge”.<sup>52</sup> In travel

49 IDEMITSU MUSEUM OF ART, 1994:plate 22.

50 See these two vases contained in the CHRISTIE'S NEW YORK CATALOGUE, 1999:lots 316–317.

51 See the entry in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (SIMPSON, 1989, vol. VI:705–706; henceforth *OED*); while, as pointed out above, many dictionaries refer to the bottle gourd as the Latin *lagenaria siceraria*, the *OED* also notes that *lagenaria vulgaris* often refers to the bottle gourd (SIMPSON, 1989, vol. VI:706/2a). See also Robert K. Barnhart, who notes in the *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* that the word “gourd” ultimately derives from the Latin *cucurbita*, and is of uncertain origin (BARNHART, 2000:443).

52 SIMPSON, 1989, vol. VI:706/1a.

instructions from 1500, the reader is reminded to “forgete not to have gourdes y-comfete, whiche ben good and fressh ayenst the hete”.<sup>53</sup> Just as in the *Materia Medica* by Li Shizhen of the late Ming Dynasty, the bottle gourd is also contained in several European works that describe its medicinal uses. These include the late 14<sup>th</sup> century *Tacuinum Sanitatis* (originally an 11<sup>th</sup> century work by Ibn Bôtlan from Baghdad), and Leonhart Fuchs’s *New Kreüterbuch* (*The New Herbal*) of 1543.<sup>54</sup> Just as in late Ming China, in the West the gourd also signified fertility because of its many seeds.<sup>55</sup>

Its useful qualities as a bottle or flask of some kind are reflected in many references, while the sturdy nature of its dried and hard shell was also popular in religious citations. As early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the hermit and author of religious texts Richard Rolle de Hampole (ca. 1300–1349) used it in his 1340 Psalter: “For i am made as gourde in ryme froste”.<sup>56</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes the Geneva Bible from 1560, where a gourd plant is mentioned with regard to the story of Jonah. This story is also depicted in a fresco painted by Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) in the Vatican’s Sistine Chapel, showing Jonah resting beneath the gourd plant.<sup>57</sup> Through this story, the gourd also became a symbol of resurrection and salvation often depicted in religious paintings, a notion that is reinforced by the fact that it was sometimes depicted as having been given to Christ, who, after his resurrection and dressed as a pilgrim, joined two apostles on their way to Emmaus.<sup>58</sup> Pilgrims also used the gourd as a flask to carry water, which is why it became an attribute of pilgrims. It stood as a special attribute of St. James the Great, St. John the Baptist, and the French pilgrim St. Roch (1295–1327), to name but a few.

The depiction of gourds in Western art – notably in paintings, but also in other media such as book illustrations – is surprisingly abundant. A list of exclusively religious paintings contained in Mirela Levi d’Ancona’s work on

53 KUHN, 1963:272/1d.

54 UNTERKIRCHER, F., 2004; and FUCHS, 2001, chapter CXXXVIII; on the gourd’s medicinal properties in the middle ages, see also BLIMOFF, 2001:92.

55 LEVI D’ANCONA, 1997:157.

56 For this and further examples, see KUHN, 1963:272.

57 “And the Lord God prepared a gourde, and made it to come vp ouer Ionah” (SIMPSON, 1989, vol. VI:706/2a). As pointed out in Jon 4:6, the gourd, which shaded Jonah from the heat of the sun, had whitered the following day. God thereupon reproached Jonah, because he pitied himself and the death of the gourd which had shaded him from the sun’s heat, but at the same time criticized God for having shown compassion to the citizens of Nineveh.

58 LEVI D’ANCONA, 1977:157.

botanical symbolism during the Italian Renaissance (all dating from the mid-15<sup>th</sup> to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century) illustrates the symbolic importance of the gourd. In Cosmè Tura's (1430–1495) *St. George and the Dragon* (Plate E), a bottle gourd hanging from a vine on the branches of an oak tree, symbolizes salvation through the Cross of Christ.<sup>59</sup> One is also reminded that in a European Renaissance context, the gourd occasionally pointed to unfavourable symbolisms in connection with other items; in the early Renaissance painter Carlo Crivelli's (ca. 1430–1495) *Annunciation with St. Emidius*, an apple and a gourd are placed side by side on the ledge at the bottom of the painting. When painted together with an apple, the gourd – symbol of resurrection and salvation of man through Christ – was used in contrast to the apple, which symbolized damnation and death, because it was connected with the fall of man.<sup>60</sup> In a handbook on symbolism of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, one finds other negative aspects reflected, although in a different context. In a woodblock print from the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, a flourishing vine with bottle gourds is depicted next to a pine tree, accompanied by a Latin and German poem pointing out the fleetingness of fame – the pine telling the gourd that its splendid growth will not be long lasting, as the cold winter will destroy it soon.<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, the pine tree equally figures here as a symbol of immortality, although for different reasons than in Chinese mythology.<sup>62</sup>

The same handbook also contains a medallion painted with two water vessels placed on a plinth below a trellis with gourd vines growing in rows; a brief Latin and German caption entitled *Taught by No Master* explains that while the plant will absorb useful liquid, it will reject any harmful fluid – yet will man be wise enough to stay out of harm's way?<sup>63</sup>

When examining the many Renaissance paintings containing *lagenaria siceraria*, it becomes clear that it is an extremely polymorphic fruit shape. Nowhere is this characteristic more prominently displayed than in the sumptuous frescoes of the Villa Farnesina in Rome, which was commissioned by the extremely wealthy Sienese banker Agostino Chigi (1466–1520), and decorated

59 The 1469 painting from the Museo dell'Opera in Ferrara is also illustrated in LEVI D'ANCONA, 1977:156.

60 On negative aspects of the gourd's symbolism, see LEVI D'ANCONA, 1977:157.

61 "Zu dem sprach die Thann / heb gsell gut Diß dein hoffart vnd stoltzer mut Wirt nit lang wären / dann gar bald Dich auffreibn wirt der Winter kalt", in HENKEL, 1967:331.

62 For an extensive list of examples and explanations concerning the pine tree, see LEVI D'ANCONA, 1977:304–307.

63 "[...] Werden Menschen sich dagegen ins eigene Unglück stürzen?" (HENKEL, 1967:332).

by the painter Giovanni Martini da Udine (1487–1564).<sup>64</sup> Giorgio Vasari greatly praised these horticultural portraits, referring to them as “painted with such art that they completely resemble the living detached fruit”; as such, they have also been considered as the prototype of Western still life painting. Janick and Paris have pointed out that instead of being associated with the symbolic meanings of Christianity, the flower, fruit and vegetable images here are closer to the pagan traditions associated with the Greek fertility God Priapus.<sup>65</sup> In his article on Priapus and the festoons of the Villa Farnesina, the French scholar Philippe Morel demonstrates the relevance of such pagan traditions, which are evident in the symbolic meanings contained in these images, such as seen in the erotic imagery of a gourd impregnating a fig.<sup>66</sup> It appears that both Agostino Chigi, who was a deeply religious catholic, as well as his close friend Pope Julius II and Pope Leo X, did not mind such allusions to Paganism. The personal secretary of Leo X was actually known for his particular interest in literature pertaining to Priapus, and is noted for the publication of an anthology on the topic.<sup>67</sup>

Interestingly, the most frequently depicted cucurbits in the festoons are bottle gourds; three distinct morphological variants are depicted (of a total exceeding 38), all belonging to *lagenaria siceraria*. Plate F shows a large bottle gourd in the Loggia of Psyche, just above Amor, with a smaller one to the left. In addition to their decorative qualities, the depiction of such cucurbits in the festoons was functional and symbolic in that they served as an intermediary between the garden, and the loggia through which one accessed the villa. As Morel notes, such a relationship is corroborated here by the immediate reference to the fable of Psyche by Nicolò da Correggio (d. 1506), where Amor’s trophies stand for the virgilian theme of *omnia vincit amor*. The fresco is thus reminiscent of the enamoured god’s prison, i.e. the garden where Amor himself

64 In addition to bottle gourds, the villa contains frescoes with thousands of images of fruits, vegetables, and ornamentals from over 170 species; see JANICK and PARIS, 2006, vol. 97:165–176.

65 JANICK and PARIS, 2006, vol. 97:165.

66 MOREL, 1985, vol. 69:13–28.

67 MOREL, 1985, vol. 69:14. See also the excellent article by Ingrid D. Rowland on humanism and the arts in the patronage of Agostino Chigi (ROWLAND, 1986, vol. XXXIX:673–730). Rowland notes that Chigi’s and Julius II’s close relationship is illustrated by the fact that Chigi became adopted by Julius in 1509, permitting him to quarter the arms with his (ibid:685); for all his economic and political power, Chigi’s persona however had at its root a strong faith in the essential piety of his actions (ibid:693).

– whom Venus had sent to arouse Psyche’s love – fell prey to her beauty. With its open structure towards the garden, the Loggia of Psyche absorbs its contents, as well as the garden’s divine protector, i.e. Priapus, and thus the fertility associated with him. This arrangement of various elements therefore creates both a figurative and material relationship, as well as an inseparability at the level of symbolic values, in that the richness and fertility of nature also becomes part of the villa itself.<sup>68</sup> As the Loggia of Psyche was executed between 1517 and 1518, Morel draws attention to the fact that there is little doubt that the theme of Priapus – and the corresponding plants related to him – also refers to either the announcement or the actual birth of one of Agostino Chigi’s sons, which in turn is reminiscent of the bottle gourd’s symbolism as a portent for male offspring both in Western and Chinese mythology.<sup>69</sup>

As seen in the case of Agostino Chigi’s Villa, the theme of the bottle gourd in Western Art provides an interesting insight into the various issues relating to its depiction, the associated symbolism, and how these were used by the patrons who commissioned such works of art. Just how such symbolism was embedded into a wider context – for example, the light that such symbols cast on the patrons behind these works – may be a further interesting field of inquiry. The bottle gourds in the Villa Farnesina also form part of what is considered the prototype of Western still life painting, and their function as such could be further researched for example in relation to the bottle gourds depicted in later still life paintings, such as those by the famous Caravaggio (1571–1610).<sup>70</sup> As the article by Philippe Morel illustrates, the subject of mythology may also be further explored and lead to interesting conclusions.

As indicated in this paper, a wealth of symbolic meanings relating to double-gourds in both Chinese and Western thought exists, although these also need to be seen in the context of the respective cultures in which they are embedded. Nevertheless, issues such as the notion of longevity, as well as fertility, appear to be consistent features in both cultures. While, true to the analogy of the gourd knowing the difference between good and bad water – and thus staying out of harm’s way – Agostino Chigi knew how to balance the various important elements of his life, the Jiajing emperor unfortunately did not, and failed to attain immortality as he would have wished. It appears however safe to say that in both cases, these powerful individuals of the middle ages

68 MOREL, 1985, vol. 69:18.

69 MOREL, 1985, vol. 69:24.

70 Cf. also JANICK, 2004, vol. 44, no. 4:9–15.



manage to live on through the works of art they commissioned and left to posterity – in Chigi's case through the artistic wealth at the Villa Farnesina, and in the Jiajing emperor's, through the Daoist imagery on the ceramics and other art objects made during his reign.

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