

Zhadou: An Elegant Form Lost to Time

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Fig. 1. Tang Dynasty, 8th to 10th Century, Gongyi Ware, Henan Province
H. 6.4cm Dia. 9.7cm

Some ceramic forms function like a bridge through time, remaining virtually unchanged for a millennium. In form, our contemporary plates and bowls remain virtually identical to those our ancestors dined with thousands of years ago. Yet there are other ceramic forms that have no contemporary counterparts. The physical objects remain but their forms have, so to speak, become extinct. The piece in this essay is of the latter type.

This piece is called a *zhadou* (渣斗). The term covers a broad range of forms that were produced over the span of many centuries. In this essay I will focus on the form prevalent during the Tang (618-906) and Liao (907-1125) dynasties, using this small scholar's object as a focal point to explore the unusual form and its probable function(s) during this period.

Characterization of the Piece

Measuring only 6.4cm (2 ½ in) in height and 9.7cm (3 ¾ in) in diameter this *zhadou* is of unusual size compared to many of its contemporaries and is likely a scholar's object rather than a traditional *zhadou* for daily use—the typical size being closer to 10-13cm in height and 15-20cm in diameter. The body clay is white, soft, slightly granular, and non-translucent. Lightly tapping the edge gives a high pitched though not particularly sonorous sound suggesting it is *ciqu* (high fired) but not quite reaching the level of what in the West would be called traditional white porcelain (e.g. translucent sonorous Jingdezhen type ceramics).¹

Resting on its small foot, the body has a squat oval shape. Bridging the body and the mouth is a moderately narrowing neck. The conical bowl-shaped mouth has four subtle indentations on the rim aligning with four slightly raised interior ridges extending towards the small central opening, thus giving a discrete foliate pattern. Robert Mowery suggests that for *zhadou* of this style, the trumpet mouth and base would be produced separately and luted together to form a unified piece.² This is particularly likely for the above piece because it is so small.

The glaze in many sections can be seen to have originally been of a creamy white hue with a slight yellow tinge but has (likely) degraded to a darker hue in many places, giving its current

¹ In this essay I will use the terms *ciqu* (high fired) and *baici* (high fired white ware), reserving the English term “white porcelain” to exclusively denote ceramics of the typical western concept of porcelain (e.g. white, translucent, sonorous, using high fired kaolin rich clay). The generic term “white ware” will be used to cover both *baici* and white porcelain inclusively.

² Robert Mowry, *Hare's Fur, Tortoiseshell, and Partridge Feathers: Chinese Brown- and Black-Glazed Ceramics, 400-1400* (Harvard University Art Museum 1996), 92.

state a mottled/speckled appearance. The glaze covers the upper half of the belly with the lower unglazed belly revealing the white, slip-less clay body underneath. The pancake foot, typical in the Tang Dynasty, is also unglazed. Based on the shape, clay body, and glaze, this piece was likely produced in the mid-to-late Tang dynasty. During this period many kilns were known to have produced *zhadou*, including Gongyi (Gongxian), Xing, Yaozhou, and Changsha.³

Kiln Attribution

In the Tang dynasty, *baici* were still relatively novel, though immensely popular commodities emanating from kilns in Northern China. The origins of this grand (and lucrative) achievement are unclear, but it is generally agreed that by the Sui Dynasty (581-618) multiple northern kilns were actively experimenting towards, and succeeding in, producing high quality *baici* and white porcelain—including many small kilns that are only now being rediscovered (e.g. the recently discovered Yiyongjie kiln near Luoyang).⁴ Of the northern kilns producing white ware, both the Gongyi and Xing kilns are known to have produced high quality *baici zhadou*. Examples include the Xing *zhadou* in the Royal Ontario Museum and the Gongyi *zhadou* in the Beijing Palace Museum.⁵

Gongyi and Xing *baici* share many similarities that make distinguishing between the two difficult. Indeed, due to an increase in research and archeological excavations, many pieces that were originally attributed to the Xing kiln are now being re-attributed to Gongyi.⁶ Gongyi *baici* tend towards a softer clay body, more granular and less dense than their Xing counterparts. These are generalities and there are certainly many counterexamples that can blur an easy distinction.⁷

³ For Yaozhou, see Mowry, *Hare's Fur*, 92. For Changsha, see Timothy See-Yiu Lam, *Tang Ceramics: Changsha Kilns* (Lammett Arts, Hong Kong 1990), 97, Plate 95.

⁴ Shan Huang et. al, “The Path to Porcelain: Innovation in Experimental White Stoneware from Luoyang” *Journal of Archaeological Science* Vol 158 (2023), 12.

⁵ For Gongyi, see Lili Fang, *The History of Chinese Ceramics*, trans. Lin, Ma. (Springer Singapore 2023), 285 (fig. 7.42) For Xing, see <https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/308299/xing-ware-zha-dou-vessel;jsessionid=796A0F69A2330A0124C1FF2C7015005D?ctx=213cd640-63d4-4aae-87ce-a9a6a07758db&idx=24>

⁶ Nigel Wood, *Chinese Glazes: Their Origins, Chemistry, and Recreation* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1999), 98.

⁷ Indeed, even the use of archeometric analysis to attempt to distinguish between Gongyi and Xing has not led to clear distinctions. For example, reports conflict regarding if Gongyi potters added feldspar as a fluxing agent (as was done at the Xing kilns) or just used kaolin clay as is. For kaolin only, see Ying Ma, et.al. “Comparative study of compositions of porcelains from

Additionally, the clay bodies of Gongyi pieces often have higher levels of impurities which give the clay body a greyish/buff or beige tint. To mask these impurities Gongyi potters would often use a white slip, a technique thought to have originated at the Gongyi kiln and later adopted by other northern kilns.⁸

Compared to Xing ware, *baici* pieces from the Gongyi kilns have a greater tendency towards partially glazed bodies and more frequent crackling.⁹ The glaze of Gongyi *baici* also tend towards a warmer yellow color due to the oxidating kiln atmosphere, whereas Xing kiln *baici* tend towards a cooler, blueish tint due to a more reducing kiln atmosphere. Taken overall, the softer, slightly granular white clay body, partially covered in a warm yellowish slightly crackled glaze, the lower firing temperature and similarity to the Gongyi piece in the Palace Museum, all suggest this piece is likely to have been produced at the Gongyi kiln complex.

The Gongyi Kiln complex

The Gongyi kiln complex is situated near the Luo River in Henan province, a region with ample kaolinic clay deposits and abundant kiln fuel. The plentiful natural resources, coupled with river access for transportation of goods to the Tang capital, Chang'an, and the kiln's proximity to Luoyang (the first and third largest cities in the world at that time), made this location ideal to foster a commercial dynamism that propelled the Gongyi complex into one of the major ceramic producers of the Tang Dynasty.¹⁰ The kiln complex itself is divided into two main areas, Huangye and Baihe about 4km away from each other. This area has a long history of ceramic production starting at least as early as the Han Dynasty. Beyond its long production history, the discovery of

Gongyi and Xing Kilns" *Sciences of Conservation and Archeology* Issue 5 (2018), 97 (English Abstract). For addition of feldspar, see C.T. Yap, et. Al, "A Study of Chinese Porcelain Raw Materials for Ding, Xing, Gongxian and Dehua Wares," *Archaeometry* vol 36 Issue 1 (1994), 74.

⁸ Regina Krahl, *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds*, ed. Krahl, Regina; Guy, John; Wilson, J. Keith, and Raby Julian (Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, the National Heritage Board, Singapore, 2011), 206.

⁹ Fang, *The History of Chinese Ceramics*, 285.

¹⁰ Chang'an (~800,000 people) and Luoyang (~300,000) ranked first and third respectively around 800 C.E. From: John Haywood, *The New Atlas of World History: Global Events at a Glance* (Princeton University Press), 80.

the kiln site by Feng Xianming in 1956 had added significance as it was the first kiln site discovered that produced *baici* in the North, giving insight into the origin of this important ware.¹¹

As mentioned earlier, the origin of *baici* production is unclear and currently disputed with some scholars saying production began as early as the Northern Wei dynasty (386-534), others saying production only began in the Sui Dynasty (581-618).¹² However, all agree that evidence from dated tombs demonstrates that certainly by the Sui dynasty, the Gongyi kilns were producing high quality *baici*.¹³ That this newly created ware rapidly gained immense popularity can be seen in the tremendous increase in production; by the Tang Dynasty Gongyi *baici* wares were already widespread throughout the country as well as being exported to the furthest reaches of the existing trade routes. Within this mass production, one of the products created for both domestic use and export was the *zhadou*.

What is a *Zhadou*?

Zhadou of this form were made in metal, ceramics, and glass.¹⁴ Nothing we use in modern society resembles this form and so any function currently attributed to the *zhadou* is speculation, though evidence suggest some likely uses.

The word *zhadou* is typically translated into English as “spittoon”, and although this is one of the uses somewhat attributable to *zhadou* (see below), it should be emphasized that this

¹¹ Wendong Li, et.al. “Tracing the Origin and Evolution of White Porcelain in Ancient China” Recent Advances in the Scientific Research on Ancient Glass and Glaze. ed. Gan Fuxi. (World Century Publishing Corp. 2016), 334.

¹² For theories of earlier creation of *baici* see Li: *Tracing the origin and evolution of white porcelain in ancient China*, 334. For counter-arguments, see Shan Huang, *The Origin of White Porcelain: Transformation of ceramic technology in sixth north China* (Bar Publishing 2022), 14, 123.

¹³ Excavation reports at Huangye kiln complex at Gongyi divides production into four periods: The first period (Sui dynasty) consisted primarily of green glazed wares with few white and black glazed wares. The second period (Early Tang) appears to have been a period of technical development, with Sancai, *baici*, and black glazed pottery being the main products. The third period (Mid Tang) was a period of tremendous production followed by the fourth period (Late Tang), which was a period of decline. See Excavation Report: Gongyi Huangye Kiln. (http://www.kaogu.cn/en/Publication/New_books/2016/0725/54768.html)

¹⁴ For an example in metal, see Ye Yingting, “Spittoon: Reexamining and Rectifying the Term ‘渣斗.’” from: <https://celadoner.com/blogs/learn-with-celadoner/spittoon-reexamining-and-rectifying-the-term-%E6%B8%A3%E6%96%97>. For an example in glass, see <https://shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US/treasures?id=0000011993&index=9>

translation erroneously shapes the view of its likely function. There are three terms in Chinese often used to describe pieces of this form: *zhadou* (渣斗), *tuoyu* (唾盂), and *tuohu* (唾壺).¹⁵ In English, the character *zha* (渣) typically is translated as dregs or slag and the character *tuo* (唾) is translated as spit or saliva.¹⁶ Yet *zhadou*, *tuoyu* and *tuohu* are all typically translated into English as “spittoon”. This translation is particularly problematic (and risible) given the culturally anachronistic ‘wild west saloon’ conception of the spittoon in America. As is frequently pointed out, commonsense suggests this *zhadou* shape is not functionally suited for use as a spittoon—not to mention it would be a rather graceless use for such elegant pieces.

Other uses attributed to this form include leys jar/slop bucket/slag bucket (for food waste) and in later forms, a flowerpot.¹⁷ The often-suggested uses of the *zhadou* as a food waste receptacle (particularly fish bones) is also often judged unlikely from the narrow opening and the near impossibility of removing the waste once inside. The ambiguity partly arises because the three terms (*zhadou*, *tuoyu*, *tuohu*) are used interchangeably in describing not only this form, but also related forms.¹⁸ For example, the terms *zhadou* and *tuoyu* are used for a form with a dish mouth rather than a trumpet mouth (fig. 2).

¹⁵ For use of the term *tuoyu* (唾盂) to describe the same shape see Mowery *Hare’s Fur, Tortoiseshell, and Partridge Feathers: Chinese Brown-and Black-Glazed Ceramics, 400-1400*. pp. 92-93. Also, the term *tuoyu* is frequently used in place of *zhadou* throughout all volumes of Mo Zhang (ed) *The Complete Collection of Ceramic Art Unearthed in China vol 1-16* (Brill 2008), where *tuoyu* is additionally used for dish mouthed jars of near similar form- (e.g. Vol. 12: pp. 26,62)

¹⁶ The other characters *dou* (斗), *yu* (盂) and *hu* (壺) all refer to jar or container.

¹⁷ For flowerpot, see Jane Sze, “Some Forms and Uses of Jun Ware”, *Arts of Asia*, Vol. 5 no. 6, (2020): 117.

¹⁸ For examples of different shapes termed *zhadou*, compare the flared jar (pp.134-35) with the typical *zhadou* (pp.142-43) in Regina Krahl, *Bright as Silver White as Snow- Chinese White Ceramics from Late Tang to Yuan Dynasty*, ed. Kai-Yin Lo, (Yungmingtang 1988)



Fig. 2 *Tuoyu* shape from Sui-Tang Dynasty¹⁹

Some speculate this shape may have been a precursor to the trumpet mouth *zhadou* form, likely reflecting that the same terms have been used for objects as the form evolved. As can be seen in fig. 3, the term *zhadou* is applied to objects of fairly different shapes from different time periods. For example, the term *zhadou* is often used to describe two Song Dynasty forms, both the trumpet mouth (fig. 3b), and concurrently, a somewhat dissimilar wide mouth form (fig. 3c).²⁰

¹⁹ Source: ColBase: Integrated Collections Database of the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, Japan: (https://colbase.nich.go.jp/collection_items/tnm/TG-352?locale=en)

²⁰ Of this later form (3c), Mowry states that it is “variously termed *wan*, *pen* [low, wide bowl or basin], *zhadou* [waste receptacle], *gu*, and *zun* in Chinese, the last two terms both referring to vases in the shape of archaic bronze wine vessels”. The function of this shape is also widely disputed. Mowry, *Hare’s Fur*, 173.



a.



b.



c.

Fig. 3 Three forms of “Zhadou”
a. Sui-Tang b. Mid-Late Tang/Liao/Song c. Song²¹

²¹ (a) Source: ColBase: Integrated Collections Database of the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, Japan: (https://colbase.nich.go.jp/collection_items/tmm/TG-352?locale=en)

Multiple strands of evidence taken from the Tang, Liao, and Song Dynasties suggest a more defined usage for the trumpet mouth form. As Jessica Rawson of the British Museum points out, contrary to our tendency to view each Chinese ceramic as an individual work of art, Chinese ceramics “were neither made nor used one by one. They were produced in batches and used in sets. Single unique objects were rare.”²² Viewed in this light, I will summarize evidence pointing to the use of the trumpet mouth *zhadou* in relation to other sets of objects, either for tea drinking or (ritual) ablutions.

The discovery in 1998 of a sunken Arabian ship off the coast of the Belitung Island near Indonesia uncovered an enormous amount of Tang dynasty Chinese export ceramics destined for trade ports as far as the Abbasid Empire. The shipwreck has been dated to around 830 C.E. and reveals the wide range of late Tang Dynasty export ceramics. Among the cargo was a large *zhadou* produced at the Yue kiln along with other implements that Regina Krahl posits could all have been used for the preparation and drinking of tea.²³

Bolstering this idea, excavations of kilns and dated tombs suggest the trumpet mouth form likely began being mass produced during the Tang Dynasty—paralleling the time period in which tea drinking became a popular pastime throughout China. In the middle of the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763) the famed *Classic of Tea* by Lu Yu was circulated, cementing the popularity of tea drinking and bringing in an aesthetic appreciation of tea ware. Differing from today’s tea preparation, tea leaves during this period were processed into solid tea cakes which would then be roasted, ground into powder, sifted and put into boiling water. Concurrent with this practice, another style of tea drinking was popular as well, consisting of making a ‘soup’ by adding numerous things such as “spring onion, ginger, jujube, tangerine peel, cornel (dogwood) berries, peppermint, and so on.”²⁴ One can imagine that with both types of preparation, a receptacle would

(b) <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6220426> (c) <https://www.artnet.com/artists/a-longquan-celadon-zhadousong-dynasty-c-aaALJeWDQpc9SJCiiH11kg2>.

²² Jessica Rawson, “Sets or Singletons? Uses of Chinese Ceramics: 10th-14th centuries,” *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* No. 23, 93.

²³ Krahl, *Shipwrecked*, 69 (fig.54 legend); 256-7 (fig. 245).

²⁴ Erling Hoh and Victor H. Mair, *The True History of Tea* (Thames & Hudson, 2009), 49. Lu Yu’s commentary on such practices however left little to the imagination: “...the swill of gutters and ditches, and a common custom no end!” (ibid. quoted on pg. 49)

be necessary for the tea waste and the *zhadou* would have been a very practical shape for this purpose—the trumpet mouth holding the waste to dry while the receptacle holds the draining liquid.

Though the *zhadou* is not mentioned in Lu Yu’s *Classic of Tea* as one of the 24 essential tea utensils, further evidence pointing to the use of *zhadou* in tea preparation/consumption came from tomb murals excavated between 1972 and 1993 in Xuanhua Hebei. The 11 tombs of the Zhang family, dating from the later Liao Dynasty (916-1125 C.E.), contained well preserved tomb murals depicting the tea rituals of this Liao upper-class and devout Buddhist family.²⁵ In many of the murals, the *zhadou* is seen in the context of tea drinking. For example, the tomb mural of the west wall of Zhang Shiqing’s tomb depicts the preparation of tea, and in the center is a man holding a fairly large *zhadou* (fig. 4). Hsueh-Ma Shen points out that the west wall shows tea preparation while the south wall shows alcohol preparation so that there can be little doubt about the *zhadou*’s role in tea preparation in this instance.²⁶



Fig. 4. West wall of the rear room of tomb Imi showing man carrying a *zhadou* in the context of tea preparation.²⁷

²⁵ Hsueh-Man Shen, “Body Matters: Manikin Burials in the Liao Tombs of Xuanhua, Hebei Province,” *Artibus Asiae* (2005), 99. The connection between Buddhism and tea drinking had begun as far back as the Northern/Southern dynasties.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 133. In footnote 64, Shen notes that the *tuohu* may have also been used as a spittoon in other ritual practices as well.

²⁷ Image from: <https://www.myhistory.com/b001/b0013/kg0027>



Fig. 5. Tomb Mural from tomb of Zhang Shigu, Xuanhua, clearly shows a female holding a large *zhadou* while others are preparing tea.²⁹

²⁹ The shape of the body of the *zhadou* in this mural is almost identical to the one recovered from the Belitung shipwreck. Image from https://www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/site/downloads/crn/files/General_Tea_Introduction_2010.pdf

Additionally, in the tomb of Zhang Wenzao a large *zhadou* was excavated that is similar to the ones in the murals (fig. 6).



Fig. 6 *Zhadou* in Zhang Wenzao's Tomb (seen inverted in the lower right-hand corner)³⁰

³⁰ Image from <https://inf.news/en/culture/8e3e5af1415be457db04c03c8a5c2fe5.html>

Not quite as clear is the function of the *zhadou* in the Song Dynasty era tomb mural (fig. 7) discovered in Yu County Henan which also shows a servant in the background (front right) carrying a *zhadou*, though it is difficult to ascertain if the couple is drinking tea or alcohol.



Fig. 7 Song Dynasty mural showing *zhadou*³¹

Aside from its use in tea preparation, another use of the *zhadou* has been suggested, this one closer to the idea of the cuspidor but more in fitting with the aristocracy that would be using it. This theory suggests that it was part of a set of hygiene utensils.

Again, in a mural of the Zhang family tomb, we see a man holding a *zhadou*, but in a very different setting: that of a Daoist ritual. In keeping with a number of Daoist ritual objects uncovered in the tomb Hsueh-Man Sen points out that this scene also contains a box of sutras and an incense

³¹ Image from <https://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/painting/4ptgdoms.htm#4pmb1ser>

burner. In this practice, the practitioner must rinse their mouth prior to entering the meditation room and therefore the use of the *zhadou* in this case would likely serve a ritual ablution function.³²

Ye Yingting reaffirms this possible use, suggesting that, although originally thinking the *zhadou* was used for tea preparation after examining an excavation site and seeing a *zhadou* with remnants of tea leaves still on it, a change of mind occurred after seeing a matched set of metal *zhadou*, basin and ‘silo drum’ (斝) used for washing the hands. In this context, the *zhadou* would be used as part of daily washing habits, in this case holding mouth rinsings. Pictorial evidence of this pairing in a non-tea related scene is in the famous (and famously fantastical) Song Dynasty album leaf painting by Li Song ‘Skeleton Fantasy’ where Ye Yingting states a *zhadou* and a ‘silo drum’ are seen in the bag of the itinerant skeletal puppet master (fig. 8).³³



Fig. 8. Song Dynasty album leaf painting by Li Song ‘Skeleton Fantasy’³⁴

³² Shen “Body Matters,” 134 and fig. 22

³³ Ye Yingting, “Spittoon: Reexamining and Rectifying the Term ‘渣斗’.” from: <https://celadoner.com/blogs/learn-with-celadoner/spittoon-reexamining-and-rectifying-the-term-%E6%B8%A3%E6%96%97>. This article focuses mainly on *zhadou* and *tuoyu* in the Five Dynasty and Song Dynasty period.

³⁴ Image from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li_Song_\(painter\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li_Song_(painter))



Detail from Li Song ‘Skeleton Fantasy’ showing the *Zhadou* and “silo drum”.

As suggested by the tomb murals of the Zhang family, it is certainly possible that the *zhadou* could be used for multiple purposes, both within the tea ritual and within the context of ablutions or hygienic practices in general and therefore the two ideas presented here are not mutually exclusive.

The origin of this form also uncertain. Some scholars have posited the shape itself originated in Persia and migrated to China along the Silk Road. The Persian origin of the *zhadou* is based on a glass *zhadou* stored in the Shōsō-in, the warehouse of the Tōdai-ji temple in Nara Japan that is purported to have come from Persia.³⁵ However, the attribution of this piece is unclear, and some suggest that this particular glass *zhadou* was produced in China.³⁶

Returning for the moment to the Belitung shipwreck: the vessel was bound for the Abbasid Empire, would the *zhadou* be used in the same way in Persia or in ports along the route? Since evidence of tea drinking “in Persia, Mesopotamia or the Levant is scanty before the 17th century”, if the *zhadou* had made it that far, or if the form indeed originated there, it is likely the inhabitants of Persia would have used it for other purposes as well.³⁷ Alternatively, given the similarity of the *zhadou* form to the earlier dish mouth form (fig.3), which has been found in Yue ware excavations

³⁵ <https://shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US/treasures?id=0000011993&index=9>

³⁶ Mowry, *Hare’s Fur*, 94 footnote 1.

³⁷ Hoh and Mair, *The True History of Tea*, 152.

as early as the Western Jin (256-316), it has also been suggested that the trumpet mouth form of the *zhadou* was derived from this earlier form prevalent.³⁸

The *zhadou* of this essay is perhaps another good argument against the use of the *zhadou* as a spittoon and for its use in tea rituals. The unique aspect of this particular *zhadou* is that its size not one for daily use ware, but rather a scholar's object to be put on desk of an educated elite (*shi*) as a sort of object of contemplation. Given the remarkable level of sophistication of the Tang scholars, the suggested usage of the *zhadou* as an implement in tea preparation is far more likely than any of the other proposed ideas if it is to be used as a scholar's object. This is not to say that it was not potentially used in other ways, rather, that its most typical association would be one of tea drinking. Regardless, a millennium later, this particular piece still remains an object of contemplation and enjoyment. As the *zhadou* travelled through various lands and through different times, the function of the *zhadou* may have changed, and though its use still remains somewhat obscure, the elegance of the piece itself is of lasting beauty.

³⁸ Mowry, *Hare's Fur*, 92. For an example of a Western Jin *tuoyu*, see Complete Collection of Ceramic Art Unearthed in China Vol. 8 pg. 21.