Our knowledge of Chinese ceramics has significantly improved since the 1950s and particularly in the past twenty years, thanks to innumerable excavations carried out by Chinese archaeologists and to a considerable number of scientific tests executed both in the West and the Far East.

But whereas many questions have been answered, others have not found a solution and have actually become more complex. Even the specialist sometimes feels that whilst fifty years ago the history of Chinese ceramics resembled a thousand piece jigsaw, it now appears like a five thousand piece jigsaw with many pieces still missing.

The discovery of the kiln site at Qingliangsi, Baofeng county, Henan province, in 1986 is a case in point.

Ru is one of the most celebrated wares in the entire history of Chinese ceramics. This is due to its undeniable beauty, to the fact that it was always included among the so-called imperial wares of the Song dynasty and partly to its, until recently, unidentified place of origin.

Unlike Chai ware, which has never been identified, the aspect of Ru ware has always been known thanks to the stunning vessels collected by Song emperors since they ordered certain factories to make them. But the location of these factories remained a mystery until a worker of the Baofeng Ceramic Factory found a few shards which were later identified as official Ru ware\(^1\). It was exultation in the academic world: at last, after several frustrated attempts carried out in

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Linru county, Henan, the kiln site which produced imperial Ru, was discovered.

From excavated evidence it appeared that Qingliangsi kilns manufactured a type of Ru ware that matches the examples in the National Palace Museum in Taibei and in the Percival David Foundation in London (plates 1 and 2). However, the amount of shards of so-called “Ru guan yao” (imperial Ru) is rather limited. Therefore, after the initial euphoria of the unexpected discovery, some scholars have questioned whether Qingliangsi really was the kiln centre producing the superior items of the imperial collection. Moreover, the issue of Northern Guan or Bianliang, sometimes Bianjing, ware is still unsolved.

From literary documents, if they are reliable, we know that Ru kilns were ordered to supply the court and that between 1111 and 1125 capital officials established their own factories which were called “official kilns”.

The fact that Ru kilns were ordered to make ceramics for the court indicates that the kiln centre already existed as a min yao (popular or common or private kiln). This is consistent with the finds at Qingliangsi which show that the factories had been established at the beginning of the Northern Song, that their trade mark was a sky-blue ware fired on spurs (plate 3), and that they also made Yaozhou-type (plate 4), Jun-type (plate 5), Cizhou-type (plate 6), black (plate 7) and sancai (plate 8) wares.

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2 For a history of the surveys and excavations carried out in Linru in search of Ru kilns see Feng Xianming, “Henan sheng Linru xian Song dai Ru yao yizhi diaocha” (Investigation of Song dynasty Ru kilns site in Linru county, Henan province), Wenwu, n. 8, 1964, pp. 15-26. For an explanation of the reason why Ru kilns had been searched in Linru county, see Wang, The discovery of Ru kilns, cit., pp. 85, 99-100.

3 Li Minju, “Song guan yao lun yao” (Sketch theories on Song official wares), Wenwu, n. 8, 1994, pp. 17-18; Xie Mingliang (Taiwan National University) in a private conversation.


5 This piece of information is reported in the Fu xuan za lu (Random Jottings while Basking in the Sunshine), written by Gu Wenjian and published between 1260 and 1279, but surviving only in the form of excerpts included in the Shuo fu (Suburb Talks) written by Tao Zongyi in the second half of the fourteenth century. For the original text, see David, “A commentary on Ru ware”, cit., plate 10, or Zhang Zongxiang, Shuo fu, Shanghai, Commercial Press, 1927 and 1930.
Plate 1: Shards of official Ru quality excavated at Qingliangsi, Baofeng, Henan.
Plate 2: Zun wine vessel, Ru ware (h. 12.9, d. 18), Palace Museum, Beijing.
Plate 3: Washer, Ru ware (h. 3.2, md. 12.6, fd. 9), Shanghai Museum.
Plate 4: Shards of Yaozhou type excavated at Qingliangsi.
Plate 5: Shards of Jun type excavated at Qingliangsi.
Plate 6: Shards of Cizhou type excavated at Qingliangsi.
From this archaeological evidence, it is plausible to believe that the Qingliangsi kiln centre, like other contemporary factories, started imitating Yaozhou ware, so fashionable and appreciated in the eleventh century, and then created its own unmistakable style: Ru ware. But this is only a conjecture, as it is impossible to prove whether Yaozhou-type ware excavated at Qingliangsi is earlier than Ru samples.

Whatever the case, it seems that when the court was no longer satisfied with either Ding or Yaozhou wares, accepted as a tribute, and the palace finally recognised the beauty and value of ceramics as imperial ware, the Qingliangsi factories were ordered to supply the court. But why were Qingliangsi kilns, a relative new ceramic centre, chosen? The answer must be sought in the unique style of Ru ware which combined simplicity of forms with colour and depth of glaze. Somehow emperor Huizong (r. 1101-1125) must have noticed the sky-blue ware that distinguished Qingliangsi kilns (plate 9) and the enchanting features of the glaze must have appealed to him, to the point of dismissing Ding and Yaozhou wares and commanding a supply of Ru ware.

In my opinion, this occurrence is never stressed enough. Ru was not a tribute ware kindly accepted by the court; it was expressly ordered by the palace, a circumstance which had not occurred before. The significance of emperor Huizong’s decision is crucial: ceramics finally achieved imperial status, a position until then reserved solely to precious metals and jade.

It is possible that either immediately or soon after ordering sky-blue ware, emperor Huizong also dictated specific

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6 For a study on the formation of the imperial taste in the Song dynasty see Rogers Mary Ann, "The mechanics of change: the creation of a Song imperial ceramic style", in George Kuwumara (ed.), New perspectives on the art of ceramics in China, Los Angeles, Far Eastern Art Council and Los Angeles County Museum, 1992, pp. 64-77.

7 Ding is usually included among the five imperial wares of the Song dynasty, but from the Song Shi we know that Ding and Yaozhou wares were simply tribute wares. Because they were accepted by the court, they implicitly became imperial wares, but in comparison with ceramics explicitly ordered by the palace, they are “second grade” imperial wares.

Some scholars consider mîse ware from Yue kiln centre as imperial ware and explain that it was called “secret colour” (mîse) because it was exclusively reserved for the court. But there is no prove that mîse ware was ordered by the palace and made in factories directly controlled by the government, although its beauty and appreciation are undeniable.
Plate 7: Shards of black ware type excavated at Qingliangsi.
Plate 8: Shards of sancai ware type excavated at Qingliangsi.
Plate 9: Shards of Ru ware excavated at Qingliangsi.
Plate 10: Shards of common (as opposed to official) Ru ware excavated at Qingliangsi.

qualities that the items had to match, or that Qingliangsi potters made a special effort not to disappoint the imperial order. This is probably why during the investigation of Qingliangsi kiln centre, archaeologists distinguished a limited amount of superior quality shards among the sky-blue ware (plate 10)\(^8\).

From reports in ancient Chinese documents, one can assume that not long after placing the order at Qingliangsi, the palace decided to establish its own factories, probably to control production more closely and to make sure that no-

\(^8\) The 46 samples of superior Ru ware recovered during the investigation of Qingliangsi kiln site are described and listed in Wang, *The discovery of Ru kilns*, cit., pp. 96-98, 113-114.
body outside the palace obtained this special type of ceramic then known as guan yao (or official ware).

But the location of the official kilns is far from clear in literary records.

The Fu xuan za lu reports that capital officials activated a kiln centre, although it does not specify where.

This passage has been interpreted as the factories were established in the capital Bianliang (modern Kaifeng). However, the extract from the Fu xuan za lu does not refer to the capital as the location of the imperial kilns and, as Li Huibing has pointed out, to produce ceramics in Bianliang would have been impossible, as clay deposits and fuel supplies were not readily available in or nearby the capital. This is a significant remark, but the shortage of raw materials is not a good enough reason to exclude the existence of a kiln centre close to or in the palace. Clay and glaze ingredients could have been prepared at Qingliangsi and then transported to the imperial factories where skilled potters, possibly from Qingliangsi itself, shaped, glazed and fired the vessels that we now admire in the National Palace Museum in Taipei or in the Percival David Foundation in London.

Of course, this is not proposed as a substantiated theory, rather it is only an attempt by the author to fit literary and archaeological evidence together, including the issue of Bianliang ware.

However, if one considers the passage in the Fu xuan za lu, the question of Northern Guan ware can be readily solved by inferring that the imperial kilns were established by officials from the capital in Qingliangsi, or, as Li Huibing has suggested, by concluding that Qingliangsi kilns were the very imperial factories.

Both theories are plausible, albeit the author believes that Qingliangsi was not the site of the imperial kilns; the reason being that if Qingliangsi was the imperial kiln centre it would have not manufactured other wares such as Yaozhou-type, Cizhou-type, Jun-type, black and sancai. This theory can be criticized by pointing out that the manufacturing of so-called “popular” wares could have been interrupted when Qinglians


10 Ibidem.
kilns were ordered to supply the imperial palace. But I believe that if that were the case, the amount of superior Ru shards collected during the archaeological surveys would have been larger. Therefore, the imperial factories producing Ru ware are still to be discovered either in Kaifeng or around Qingliangsi.

The lack of raw materials in the capital is a relevant drawback, which seems to point at Baofeng county as the more probable location for the imperial kiln centre, but if one considers that the output of these factories was destined to the palace only and was rather limited, it is not impossible to suppose that transport of materials and potters could be organized. The fact that for the first time in history the court had specifically ordered a special type of ceramic ware to be used exclusively in the palace, in contrast with tribute wares which were also available to the general public, is highly convincing that the emperor wanted direct and absolute control on the manufacture and therefore had the factories established at close distance.

Ru ware from the imperial factories, wherever they were set, must have been very similar to the previously produced Qingliangsi official ware and they must be so similar that they cannot be distinguished. Some, if not most, of the Ru vessels in the imperial collection come from the imperial factories and some are very likely to be at least a portion of the order placed at Qingliangsi. This means that part of the items labeled “Ru” in museums around the world is actually Northern Guan.

At present one of the very few scholars to have ventured a classification of Northern Guan is Liu Liangyu. As Mr. Liu himself explains, the criteria followed in singling out Northern Guan specimens are the dark colour of the body.

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11 Regina Krahl has also made this remark; Regina Krahl, “The Alexander bowl and the question of Northern Guan ware”, Orientations, November 1993, p. 73.


13 As a matter of fact, the description of the body of Northern Guan ware by Mr. Liu is much more complex and unclear: “Northern Sung Kuan ware is distinguished by a greyish-blue interior to the clay body, a parplish-red body surface and a similarity to the body of Ju official ware. Southern Sung Kuan ware is characterized by greyish-black or a greyish-brown colour in the interior of the body.”
the firing on tiny spurs usually placed by the inner edge of the ring foot, the rich, thick, crackled, sky-blue or light greenish-blue glaze.

Not having personally handled the chosen items, it is difficult to form a definitive opinion, nonetheless, from the photographs published by Mr. Liu it appears that the selected items were singled out from the Southern Guan, rather than from the Ru family. This emerges from the fact that all the so-called "Kuan ware, Northern Song dynasty" samples seem to have a dark body in contrast to the often pale grey body of Ru ware, and that they were indeed fired on spurred setters of a different type. Ru vessels fired on spurs show three, five or six (only on oval narcissus bowls) scars, whilst the samples selected by Mr. Liu as Northern Guan ware display seven or a double circle of dark blemishes.

Another attempt at singling out Northern Guan specimens from Ru and Southern Guan has been made by He Zhengguang and Xu Liping\textsuperscript{14}, who have supplied a much greater number of illustrations of Ru, Bianjing and Southern Guan wares, but do not explain in detail the criteria adopted in their selection. Not all the items singled out by Liu Liangyu were chosen by He Zhengguang and Xu Liping.

In the West, the only scholar to have raised the question of Bianjing ware is Regina Krahl\textsuperscript{15}, who approaches the issue in a cautious yet systematic way.

To sum up, in the eleventh century potters at Qingliangsi kiln centre created a new type of ware characterized by plain vessels coated with a sky-blue, deep and crackled glaze and fired standing on tiny spurs placed on the base. This new style caught the interest of emperor Huizong who ordered the Qingliangsi kilns to supply the court. Not long after that, a kiln centre directly controlled by the palace was established.

\textsuperscript{14} He Zhengguang, Xu Liping, Song Yuan taoci daquan (A complete collection of Song and Yuan ceramics), Taipei, Yishujia publishings, 1993 (first published in 1988), pp. 63-64, 479, 482, 483, 501-503, 508, 512, 517, 520, 522-524, 528, 534, 565.

The volume by He Zhengguang and Xu Liping was first published in 1988 and then again in 1993. My copy is from the second edition, so it is difficult to establish who had first the idea of selecting Northern Guan specimens.

\textsuperscript{15} Krahl, "The Alexander bowl", cit., pp.72-75.
Its product was known as guan yao, now called Northern Guan to distinguish it from the Guan ware produced in Hangzhou during the Southern Song. The Qingliangsi kilns were imperial only in the sense that for a short period they were required to produce vessels for the court, but they never became government-owned factories. Qingliangsi official ware and Northern Guan were virtually identical, as they were made with the same materials and by the same potters, therefore it has been impossible to differentiate them and they are all labeled “Ru ware”. Hopefully, the discovery of the kiln site manufacturing Northern Guan ware will one day allow to distinguish the two.

ABSTRACT
When, after decades of frustrated attempts, Ru kilns, one, if not the most celebrated in the entire history of Chinese ceramics, were finally located in 1986 in Baofeng county, Henan province, new problems arose.

Ancient records report that between 1111 and 1125 capital officials established a kiln centre which was called “official kilns”, but where the factories were located is not specified. Because the kilns in question were operated by government officials, some scholars have assumed that the factories were in the Song capital, Bianliang (modern Kaifeng), but because the kiln centre has never been identified and Bianliang totally lacks raw materials, other scholars believe that the only kiln producing Ru ware was that at Qingliangsi which, therefore, must be considered as the “official kiln” mentioned in literature.

However, the author believes that Qingliangsi was the kiln which received the order to supply the court with Ru ware, but was not the guan yao of ancient records, as it also manufactured a variety of

Acknowledgments
popular wares. The lack of raw materials in or nearby Bianliang is a strong point in favour of Qingliangsi kilns, but if one considers that Ru ware made for a very short period of time, was not mass-produced and Bianliang was not far from the kiln area in Henan province, it seems safe to assume that Northern Guan ware was made under direct government control at factories planted in the capital.

KEY WORDS
Ceramics. Ru. Guan.