

CULTURAL HERITAGE



In the hushed light of the Shanxi Museum's special exhibition hall, a single artifact from the Liao Dynasty (916-1125) poses a silent, profound riddle.

It is a *pi'nang hu* (leather-bag-shaped pot) — a white porcelain vessel of flawless craftsmanship, its surface smooth as polished jade, its silhouette an unmistakable replica of a nomadic leather flask.

Every functional and decorative detail is meticulously rendered in clay: the raised ridges imitating stitched seams, loops suggesting carrying a cord, even the supple, bulging curvature of a hide bag designed to hold liquid.

Yet, beneath this visual mimicry lies a material truth that confounds the eye: to the touch, it is uncomprehensibly ceramic — cool, hard, and resonant with the fired permanence of the Central Plains kiln.

This object is a paradox in porcelain. Is it a Khitan nomadic tribe leather flask frozen in time, or a Central Plains potter's ingenious tribute? This captivating dissonance lies at the heart of the ongoing exhibition, *Northern White Porcelain: White Porcelain and Ethnic Fusion*, in Taiyuan, Shanxi province.

By bringing together over 200 objects from 14 institutions across China, the exhibition, on display until May 5, uses these silent witnesses not merely to chart stylistic change, but to investigate a central, dynamic engine of Chinese history: How did this most demanding type of art become one of its most potent mediums for continuous ethnic and cultural synthesis?

"The birth of white porcelain itself is a result of ethnic fusion and technological innovation," says Zhao Fanqi, the exhibition's curator.

To understand white porcelain's role as a fusion medium, one must first recognize its own hybrid genesis. Its emergence was not an isolated northern breakthrough but a direct product of the great upheavals and population movements over the long course of history.

"White porcelain germinated under the macro-background of the great ethnic fusion," Zhao explains.

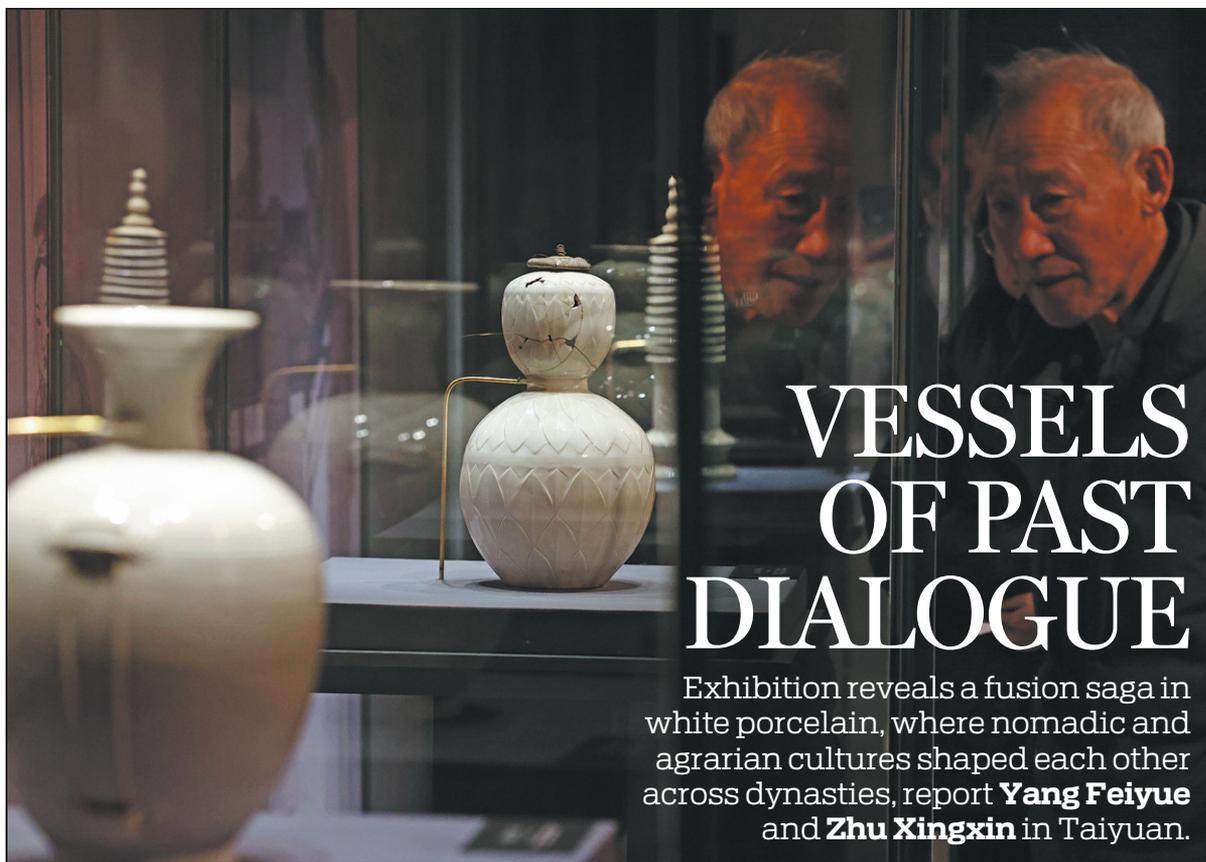
"It amalgamated the porcelain-making techniques of the south, the clay resources and the social aesthetics of the north, while absorbing some foreign cultural elements along the way," he adds.

Before this synthesis, northern ceramic production, exemplified by early celadon, largely followed southern blueprints.

"The north initially produced celadon, which largely represented a continuation of southern traditions," Zhao notes.

The quest for white required a radical technological departure: a relentless campaign to purify the local clay and glaze, meticulously controlling the iron content to below 1 percent through a painstaking process of trial and error in northern kilns like those in Hebei and Henan provinces.

The triumph of this struggle is showcased in a humble yet breath-



VESSELS OF PAST DIALOGUE

Exhibition reveals a fusion saga in white porcelain, where nomadic and agrarian cultures shaped each other across dynasties, report **Yang Feiyue** and **Zhu Xingxin** in Taiyuan.

taking exhibit: a shard of Sui Dynasty's (581-618) translucent white porcelain.

The porcelain body is so exquisitely thin it appears semi-transparent, the glaze luminous and creamy, almost ethereal.

"The emergence of white porcelain was epoch-making in the history of Chinese ceramics," states Zhao Zhiming, deputy director of the Shanxi Museum.

"It immensely enriched Chinese porcelain varieties, ended celadon's dominance, and initiated the new kiln pattern of 'southern celadon, northern white porcelain.'"

The exhibition's true power lies in moving beyond a simple chronology to reveal the distinct patterns of fusion that played out across different political and cultural landscapes.

A Tang Dynasty (618-907) white porcelain molded-flattened flask perfectly illustrates the confident, synthetic spirit of the Tang Dynasty, when white porcelain ascended to luxury status, becoming a "lingua franca" among elites across Eurasia.

Its flattened body and rounded contours borrow directly from the leather flasks used by nomadic people for transport on horseback.

The piece was likely custom-made for high-ranking nobility within the Central Plains, Zhao Fanqi points out.

It absorbed the vessel forms of nomadic people and the decorative elements of foreign cultures, such as the honeysuckle (*rendong*) pattern on its belly, he adds.

During the era of concurrent dynasties, such as Song (960-1279),



From top: White ceramics on show at an ongoing exhibition in Taiyuan, Shanxi province; ceramic monkeys from the Liao Dynasty (916-1125); an elevated pillow from the Jin Dynasty (1115-1234). PHOTOS BY ZHU XINGXIN / CHINA DAILY

Liao, and Xixia (1038-1227), political borders hardened, but cultural currents grew more intricate.

Rival courts shared an unexpected reverence for white.

"Various dynasties at that time held a kind of reverence for the color white... They aesthetically accepted it, and therefore, continuously developed resources," Zhao Fanqi notes.

Within this shared idiom, different peoples performed distinct acts of cultural translation.

The Liao Dynasty white porcelain leather-bag-shaped vessel from the opening is the quintessential example. The Khitan nomadic ethnic tribe nobility deliberately chose the most iconic vessel of their nomadic lifestyle but recreated it in the most prestigious medium available: high-fired white porcelain.

"The *pi'nang hu*... closely resembles the traditional leather containers of the Khitan people... and later evolved into the common chicken-crested pot (*jiguan hu*) of the Khitan people," Zhao Fanqi interprets.

"This reflects how the Khitan people absorbed Central Plains culture and carried it forward."

Simultaneously, the Xixia Dynasty pursued fusion at a more fundamental, industrial level.

A Xixia Dynasty white porcelain dish-mouthed vase from the Suyukou kiln site in northwestern Ningxia Hui autonomous region exhibits a serene, even glaze. Excavations there revealed a startling technological transfer.

"Some saggars unearthed at the kiln site were sealed with porcelain glaze, a technique found only at Shanglin Lake (a southern celadon

center) in Zhejiang province," Zhao Fanqi reveals.

"It suggests southern technology, and even southern craftsmen, directly coming to Suyukou for kiln production."

The Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) created a contiguous time of unprecedented scale, forcibly mingling peoples, goods, and ideas.

This catalyzed the final, mature phase of fusion, where synthesis became systemic.

The Huozhou kiln in Shanxi province, operating under the Yuan artisan household system, achieved a technical pinnacle with its "fine spur-mark" firing, producing porcelain of impeccable, uniform whiteness.

This technical mastery served a newly unified market. The Huozhou kiln used the same sublime clay and glaze to produce two seemingly opposite vessel types side-by-side: the scholarly, elegant Yuan Dynasty *yuhuchun* vase (a slender vessel for display and poetic inspiration), beloved by Han literati, and the pragmatic *pan'er bei* (cup with a loop handle) rooted in nomadic utility.

The latter is a hybrid in form.

"Its cup body is a multiethnic traditional form... but at the rim, a crescent-moon-shaped handle was added," describes Zhao Fanqi.

"This vessel type is essentially the traditional Central Plains form, augmented with the nomadic loop handle, creating a new form. It reflects the Huozhou kiln's absorption of grassland culture."

Walking through the exhibition, one gradually discerns a grand pattern emerging from the individual cases.

"The greatest distinction between white porcelain and other vessel types is precisely its connection to ethnic fusion," Zhao Fanqi reflects.

The exhibition aims to offer a narrative that reveals a grand, coherent pattern rather than a series of isolated incidents.

"If we regard each piece of porcelain with fused elements as a material 'fossil' of a 'fusion event', then this exhibition strings together countless such events," Zhao Fanqi explains.

White porcelain of the Sui and Tang dynasties provided the model for the Liao, Xixia and Jin (1115-1234) dynasties, while their innovations, in turn, prepared the essential elements for the extensive fusion seen in the Yuan, he adds.

Experts agree that white porcelain is the fruit of technological exchange, a vessel for aesthetic dialogue, a medium for negotiating identity, and an embodiment of political wisdom.

It demonstrates that the grand construction of the Chinese national community is not an abstract concept, but a civilizational marvel — layer upon layer, built over long centuries through countless concrete, solid, and luminous "fusion events", much like the porcelain itself.

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Sakya Monastery anchors unity through centuries of change

By **WANG KAIHAO**
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For nearly a millennium, the iconic Sakya Monastery has stood on a snowy plateau between the Himalayan Mountains and Yarlung Zangbo River, welcoming devoted pilgrims of Tibetan Buddhism.

Rising against a vast and austere landscape, the monastery has long been a spiritual beacon in what is today Shigatse, Xizang autonomous region. The legends surrounding the monastery are now unfolding through tangible historical evidence at the Meridian Gate Galleries of the Palace Museum in Beijing.

The ongoing exhibition *Beyond Time: The History, Culture, and Art of Sakya Monastery* has gathered 200 cultural relics, including statues, porcelain, ancient documents, *thangka* (a traditional style of Buddhist painting on silk and cotton), drawn from the monastery itself, the Palace Museum, and institutions across Xizang and other parts of China. The exhibition runs through May 10.

Built in 1073, the monastery was the birthplace of the Sakya school, one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. As a time-tested center for belief and fine art, it has also left an indelible mark as a witness to the formation and development of a unified Chinese nation.



In the 13th century, Sakya Pandita, a revered forefather of the school, met Godan, a grandson of Genghis Khan, in what is now Wuwei, Gansu province. Their historic encounter laid a foundation for incorporating present-day Xizang into the governance of central dynasties.

Sakya Pandita's teenage nephew Phagpa also attended the meeting. Phagpa later became the leader of the Sakya school, and served as the imperial preceptor during the reign of Kublai Khan, who established the national capital in Beijing and founded the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368).

Phagpa assisted the Yuan court in instituting administrative systems in Xizang, while the Sakya Monastery became an important hub for



From left: Detail of a *thangka* painting on show; Luo Wenhua introduces a vivid Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) bowl on show; a cobalt blue *qinghua* plate from the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). PHOTOS BY WANG KAIHAO AND JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY

regional governance under the central authority.

"It opened a new chapter in our nation's unification," says Wang Xudong, director of the Palace Museum. "These monumental moments in Sakya's history form a key thread in organizing this exhibition."

"These treasures carry rich historical meaning. They not only showcase outstanding artistic achievements, but also demonstrate exchanges among different cultures that contributed to shap-

ing a shared community," he adds.

A set of 18th-century *thangka* paintings, *Phagpa's Biography*, is presented as a highlight, narrating the leader's extraordinary life in vivid detail. A paper document dated 1629 records the meeting between Godan and Sakya Pandita, describing efforts to safeguard peace and public welfare during an era marked by warfare.

From various perspectives, many exhibits show frequent interactions and a close relationship between

cloud motifs and inscribed inside with Tibetan blessings.

"This exquisite bowl demonstrates state-of-the-art techniques of its time as the prototype of the famous *doucai* porcelain," explains Luo Wenhua, a Palace Museum researcher and exhibition curator.

According to Luo, sustained cultural exchange between the Sakya Monastery and other regions of China fostered new artistic developments.

"For example, art pieces from the monastery before the 16th century were of traditional flavor. However, a new style blending Tibetan and Han Chinese paintings then emerged," Luo says. "Their dominant influence can also be seen in architectural renovations."

As Luo points out, the Sakya Monastery not only played a key role in communication between Tibetan and Han Chinese cultures, but also connected regions beyond the Himalayas. Various artistic elements from present-day Nepal, India, Pakistan, and other neighboring regions appear in Sakya collections, reflecting vibrant exchanges across the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.

"Cultural influences from South Asia and the Central China Plains converge here in an exquisite way," Luo says. "The place thus occupies a unique place in the history of Chinese fine art."

