Chinese Ceramics: From the Paleolithic Period through the Qing Dynasty, ed. by Li Zhiyan, Virginia L. Bower, and He Li. (The culture and civilization of China). Yale University Press, December 2010. 608 p. ill. alk. ISBN 9780300112788 (cl.), $85.00.

This volume, part of the series The Culture and Civilization of China published jointly by Foreign Languages Press in China and Yale University Press in the United States, presents an in-depth overview of Chinese ceramics from their earliest beginnings in the Paleolithic period up to the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911. The book is arranged chronologically, mainly divided by imperial dynasties, and the articles were written by Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholars. Most chapters are arranged in a similar fashion, providing a brief summary of the historical background of the period and then discussing the specific technical and stylistic characteristics of the ceramics of that period as well as kiln sites and important archaeological discoveries. In many chapters, scholarly discussion, both historic and recent, is also included, which is significant in a study of this type since ceramics have been discussed and collected both in the East and the West over hundreds of years. Most valuable are the illustrations throughout the volume which are in large part dateable pieces from archaeological excavations. This is a major difference from earlier English-language studies of the history of Chinese ceramics which most often had to rely on ceramic pieces of less certain provenance in Western museum collections. Many of the chapters include very recent archaeological discoveries in China of both ceramic objects and kiln sites that have lead to reevaluations of pieces in museum collections, very notable, for example, in the article on Song dynasty ceramics by He Li. In addition to the chronological chapters, the volume also includes a chapter on Chinese export ceramics – a field of study aided greatly by recent discoveries of shipwrecks in different parts of Asia – and lastly a chapter by Li Zhiyan on the authentication of Chinese ceramics, which should be of value not only to scholars of Chinese ceramics but to collectors as well.

Copious notes, a bibliography, chronology with emperor's posthumous temple names and reign titles, index, and detailed maps of kiln and archaeological sites will be of much use to students and scholars. A surprising omission is a character list for Chinese terms and locations usually found in studies of this kind. As mentioned before, the many full-color illustrations of dateable pieces in Chinese collections as well as the very recent scholarship included in the discussions are what will make this book a most valuable addition to any library collection on Chinese art and very likely a standard work for years to come.

Daniela Yew, Librarian, Chinatown Branch, San Francisco Public Library, daniyew@yahoo.com