

# A Comparative Analysis of Texts on French Research of Chinese Ceramics Since the 19th Century

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**Abstract:** In 1856, the French sinologist Stanislas Julien translated and compiled the Chinese ceramic classic *History and Manufacturing of Chinese Porcelain* into *Histoire et fabrication de la porcelaine chinoise*, opening a door for France and the wider Western world to explore the secrets of Chinese ceramics. Henceforth, French academia produced a number of scholarly works on Chinese ceramics. This paper selects three typical works that were written in the earlier era: *La porcelaine de Chine* (1881) by O. Du Sartel, *Histoire de la céramique* (1884) by Albert Jacquemart, as well as *La céramique chinoise* (1894) by Ernest Grandidier. What's more, it will conduct a contrastive analysis of their text content, research methodologies, and characteristics, while also examining their respective strengths and limitations.

**Keywords:** Chinese Ceramics Research, France, Text, Contrastive Analysis

## 1. Introduction

Since the 16th century, Europeans have been captivated by exquisite Chinese porcelains. During the 17th and 18th centuries, their people at all levels of society rode an enthusiastic trend of "Love Chinese porcelains". In 1856, the French sinologist Stanislas Aignan Julien translated the English name of *Jingdezhen Tao Lu* into *History and Manufacturing of Chinese Porcelain* (*Histoire et fabrication de la porcelaine chinoise*). This translation provided valuable insights for Western societies, which were captivated by the charm of Chinese ceramics but had few understandings of their manufacturing techniques. It also provided a profound influence on the advancement of France's ceramic industry [1]. Sino-French cultural exchanges in ceramics embarked on a new period.

By the mid-19th century, academic research on Chinese ceramics had begun to flourish within French scholar world. Notably, examples include *La porcelaine de Chine* (1881) by O. Du Sartel, *Histoire de la céramique* (1884) by Albert Jacquemart, *La céramique chinoise* (1894) by Ernest Grandidier, *Petite histoire de la porcelaine de Chine* (1920) by Marie-Juliette Ballot, as well as *La céramique chinoise* (2005) by Michel Beurdeley. These French-language publications from different periods examine and interpret Chinese ceramic culture from various perspectives, serving as strong evidence of the gradually expanding global influence of Chinese ceramic culture [2].

This paper selects three groundbreaking works on Chinese ceramics research from the late 19th century that is featured in French-language: *La porcelaine de Chine* (1881), *Histoire de la céramique* (1884), and *La céramique chinoise* (1894), and then conducts a contrastive analysis of them. Due to being published within a very short time span, and these all emerged at a critical turning stage when Western's understanding has shifted from "curious" about Chinese ceramics to "scholarly research." on that, together, they laid the foundation for European research on Chinese ceramics, yet each differs in its focus, methodology, and influence. The more detailed contrastive analyses of these three works are provided as follows.

## 2. Overview of the Works

The work of O. Du Sartel, published in Paris in 1881, stands as a significant product of the late 19th-century European "Japonisme" trend and the rising interest in Eastern art studies. Far from a simple catalog, this work represents the ambition of Western scholars and collectors of the time to understand

Chinese porcelain through a systematic and academic lens. The author not only meticulously delineates the technical evolution and aesthetic progression of Chinese ceramics from the Tang and Song to the Ming and Qing dynasties but also focuses on specific details such as glaze colors, decorations, and reign marks, establishing a preliminary classification and dating system for European appreciation and collection. Importantly, the book emerged during a period when the European porcelain industry, after imitating Chinese techniques, was seeking its own breakthroughs. Thus, it indirectly highlights how Chinese art, as a source of inspiration, continually nourished and challenged Western aesthetics and craftsmanship. Although some of its viewpoints may seem limited by today's academic standards, as an early bridge connecting Eastern and Western ceramic cultures, it remains a valuable document of historical significance, thanks to its rich firsthand observations and period perspective.

The work of Albert Jacquemart, published in 1884, is a monumental and landmark study that surpassed most contemporary studies limited to specific regions or categories. For the first time, it examined the art of ceramics within the grand narrative of human civilization through a truly global perspective. With his profound erudition and refined connoisseurship, Jacquemart systematically traces the entire development of ceramics, from ancient Egypt, Greece, and Persia, to the Far East including China and Japan, and onward through the European Renaissance to the modern era. With its encyclopedic inclusiveness, rigorous scholarship, and a wealth of exquisite, engraved illustrations, the work constructed an unprecedented and comprehensive knowledge framework for scholars, collectors, and art enthusiasts of the time. It laid the cornerstone for Western ceramic historiography, and its profound influence endures, making it an indispensable classic for tracing the global evolution of ceramics to this day.

The work of Ernest Grandidier, published in 1894, marked the entry of European research on Chinese ceramics into an entirely new and systematic phase. The authority of this work stems primarily from the author himself being a key founder of the Far Eastern ceramic collection at the Musée du Louvre—his generously donated personal collection formed the core of the museum's holdings. Thus, this book was not merely a product of scholarly speculation but was built upon the most outstanding and reliable physical specimens available in the Western world at the time. In this work, Grandidier pioneered a profoundly influential classification system. This scientific classification method fundamentally transformed the previously fragmented and vague understanding among Western connoisseurs, setting a benchmark for future academic research and collection practices. Although subsequent archaeological discoveries have revised some of its dating, this book with its grand vision, analysis based on top-tier objects, and groundbreaking methodology, rightfully stands as a foundational work in the history of Western scholarship on Chinese ceramics. Its intellectual legacy has long influenced the connoisseurship of the Louvre and indeed the entire Western world.

### 3. Characteristics of Content

O. Du Sartel, a French collector and ceramics enthusiast, authored *La porcelaine de Chine*, which can be considered a groundbreaking monograph. For one thing, as one of the earliest French-language works focusing on Chinese ceramics, it provided a preliminary systematic overview. For another thing, as a pioneering effort, the work attempted an initial classification and chronology of Chinese pottery and porcelain wares. It covers the history of Chinese ceramics from the earliest periods to the Qing Dynasty, introducing major kilns, glaze types, and techniques. To some extent, the descriptions in this work largely relied on the limited literature and extant wares available at the time, resulting in research that was not yet precise and contained many errors typical of the period (such as misattributing lots of Ming and Qing dynasty porcelains to earlier dates) [3].

Albert Jacquemart, a well-informed, renowned historian of decorative arts and a collector, authored *Histoire de la céramique*, which serves as an encyclopedic and comprehensive historical masterpiece that situates Chinese ceramics within the broad framework of global ceramic development. The work boasts a grand and expansive perspective, encompassing nearly all major ceramic traditions worldwide—including Islamic, European, and Japanese—treating Chinese ceramics as its most significant component. It establishes a classification system based on material, glaze, and decorative techniques (for example, categorizing “Chinese porcelain” into “hard porcelain,” “blue and white,” “underglaze red,” “famille rose,” etc.). The text is rich with detailed descriptions of ware body, such as “the glaze as smooth as velvet” or “the blue as crisp as autumn skies, reflecting the typical style of 19th-century art criticism. This work is imbued with a comparative art history perspective, adept at analyzing the evolution of patterns and forms, as well as their transmission and influence across different cultures. The author's elegant prose ensures high readability, and the volume is complemented by numerous exquisite, engraved illustrations, making the work itself a piece of art [4].

Ernest Grandidier was a top-tier collector and scholar whose personal collection forms the core of the Asian collections at the Guimet Museum. His work, *La Céramique Chinoise*, is a systematic and scholarly foundational study built upon his unparalleled private collection. The book uses the most systematic and relevant classification (the “Grandidier Classification”), which has had a profound influence and possesses the character of a museum catalogue. Highly systematic and specialized, the work’s core contribution lies in its taxonomic framework. The author was the first to attempt a numbered classification system based on glaze, decoration, and technique (e.g. “Category I: Celadon” “Category XIII:Wucai (polychrome)” etc.) to categorize Chinese ceramics. Many Western ceramic terms now in common use were established or popularized by him. For instance, he named a series of Ming and Qing dynasty overglaze enameled wares “famille verte”, “famille rose” and “famille noire”. These terms remain standard in Western ceramic world to today. The content is extremely detailed, describing the characteristics of a vast number of specific wares, similar to a catalogue of his extensive collection. The work heavily draws on Chinese and Japanese literature (via translation), intending to understand ceramics from an Eastern perspective, demonstrating greater scholarly ambition [5].

#### 4. Research Methodologies

The work of O. Du Sartel is primarily characterized by empirical and connoisseurship-based descriptions, relying more on personal observation and consensus within collector circles than on rigorous archaeological or material research. Its classification logic is relatively loose and does not yet form a rigorous system.

Albert Jacquemart’s work adopts an art history and style analysis approach. The author focuses more on ceramics as art, tracing their evolution through aesthetic, pattern, and technical perspectives. Although there is also the classification, it serves a grand historical narrative rather than precise periodization.

The work of Ernest Grandidier utilizes typological and museological methods. His approach is relevant and analytical, aiming to establish order and standards for the chaotic world of collecting. This methodology was directly inherited and developed by later scholars (such as R.L. Hobson and R.A. Pope).

#### 5. Strengths and Limitations

The strength of O. Du Sartel’s work lies in its groundbreaking. It provided French readers with the first specialized monograph on Chinese ceramics, spurring on broader research interest. On the other hand, its limitations are reflected in its weak academy; much of the information and viewpoints it contained were soon surpassed and revised by the more in-depth research of Jacquemart and Grandidier. From a contemporary perspective, its historical value outweighs its academic value.

Albert Jacquemart’s work stands as an enduring classic, whose global perspective and art-historical depth are still praised today. It shaped the overall framework through which Western audiences view decorative arts. Its limitations, however, lie in the fact that due to its exceptionally broad scope, its depth and precision regarding Chinese ceramics are not equal to those of Grandidier’s specialized monograph. Some specific conclusions have inevitably become outdated. Firstly, the dynasties and periods are often identified vague and mostly inaccurate, frequently misattributing Ming and Qing dynasty porcelains to the earlier Song or Yuan periods. Secondly, the ability to authenticate was limited, with insufficient awareness of the imitations and fates that had already begun to appear at the time. Additionally, the cultural understanding remains somewhat superficial, focusing more on aesthetic appreciation while not deeply exploring the influence of Chinese culture, religion, and social context on ceramics.

The strength of Ernest Grandidier’s work lies in its superior academic and its profound, lasting influence. His classification system is a direct precursor to modern categorized research on Chinese ceramics and dominated Western scholarship for over half a century. His work functions as a genuine academic handbook. Its limitation is that it also suffers from issues of dating and attribution. Judged by contemporary standards, a significant number of its period and origin determinations are incorrect. For instance, the classification system, based on surface characteristics, contains numerous inaccuracies in correlating pieces to specific kilns and periods (e.g. misattributing many Ming and Qing dynasty archaize porcelains to the Song dynasty). As his framework has been significantly revised in light of 20th-century archaeological discoveries, yet its pioneering and foundational significance remains not replaced at all. A comparative analysis of these three works can be presented more clearly in tabular form, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: A tabular comparison of these three works provides greater clarity

Works	<i>La porcelaine de Chine</i> , 1881	<i>Histoire de la céramique</i> , 1884	<i>La céramique chinoise</i> , 1894
Author	O. Du Sartel, collector and ceramics enthusiast	Albert Jacquemart, historian of decorative arts and a collector	Ernest Grandidier, a top-tier collector and scholar
Content	It covers the history of Chinese ceramics from the earliest periods to the Qing Dynasty, introducing major kilns, glaze types, and techniques; attempted an initial classification and chronology of Chinese pottery and porcelain wares.	The work boasts a grand and expansive perspective, encompassing nearly all major ceramic traditions worldwide—including Islamic, European, and Japanese—treating Chinese ceramics as its most significant component.	The content is extremely detailed, describing the characteristics of a vast number of specific wares, similar to a catalogue of his extensive collection; The work heavily draws on Chinese and Japanese literature (via translation), intending to understand ceramics from an Eastern perspective, demonstrating greater scholarly ambition.
Characteristics	a groundbreaking monograph, as one of the earliest French-language works focusing on Chinese ceramics, it provided a preliminary systematic overview; the descriptions in this work largely relied on the limited literature and extant wares available at the time, resulting in research that was not yet precise and contained many errors typical of the period.	serves as an encyclopedic and comprehensive historical masterpiece that situates Chinese ceramics within the broad framework of global ceramic development; This work is imbued with a comparative art history perspective, adept at analyzing the evolution of patterns and forms, as well as their transmission and influence across different cultures.	is a systematic and scholarly foundational study built upon his unparalleled private collection; The book uses the most systematic and relevant classification (the “Grandidier Classification”), which has had a profound influence and possesses the character of a museum catalogue.
Research Methodologies	is primarily characterized by empirical and connoisseurship-based descriptions, relying more on personal observation and consensus within collector circles	adopts an art history and style analysis approach, focuses more on ceramics as “art”, tracing their evolution through aesthetic, pattern, and technical perspectives	utilizes typological and museological methods
Strengths	lies in its groundbreaking	stands as an enduring classic, whose global perspective and art-historical depth are still praised today	its superior academic and its profound, lasting influence
Limitations	its limitations are reflected in its weak academy	lie in the fact that due to its exceptionally broad scope, its depth and precision regarding Chinese ceramics are not equal to those of Grandidier’s specialized monograph	issues of dating and attribution

As evidenced by the content characteristics, research methodologies, strengths, and limitations of these three works, their publication represents a process of progression and development. Du Sartel was the pioneer who charted the initial path, demonstrating the value and necessity of exclusive research on Chinese ceramics and paving the way for subsequent studies. Jacquemart was a master narrator who improved Chinese ceramics to the level of world art history. Through his grand narrative and elegant exposition, he significantly enhanced the status of Chinese ceramics in Western academy and collecting world. He provided breadth. Grandidier was the scientific founder, who, inspired by his predecessors, adopted a more rigorous and systematic approach. He dedicated himself to constructing a scientific framework that could be used, tested, and refined by future generations. Therefore, he provided depth and precision (by the standards of his time).

These three French works hold great historical importance. Collectively, they represent the beginning of genuine academic research into Chinese material culture in Europe, following the waning of the 19th-century “Chinoiserie” trend. They moved beyond mere fascination with exotic allure and instead attempted to understand, classify, and analyze Chinese ceramics using the most advanced art historical and typological methods of their time, among which, Grandidier’s work undoubtedly stands as the crowning touch, directly laying the cornerstone for the golden age of Western research on Chinese ceramics in the early 20th century. While Jacquemart’s work, with its unparalleled artistic value and grand vision, has become an eternal classic. Du Sartel’s work serves as an important historical benchmark, reminding us of the step-by-step progression of scholarly inquiry. For today’s readers and researchers: one reads Jacquemart’s book to appreciate the charm of classical art history. One reads Grandidier’s to

understand the origins of the Western scholarly lineage in Chinese ceramics research. And one reads Du Sartel's to trace the history of the academic research itself [6].

In summary, the French research texts on Chinese ceramics from the 19th century perfectly mirror a miniature of the progress of European Orientalism: beginning with curiosity, leveraging the material foundation provided by colonialism and trade, and evolving through the efforts of generations of scholars toward more specialized and scientific, ultimately providing a solid foundation for the intensive research of the 20th century [7].

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