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NEW EXPORT CHINA: TRANSLATIONS ACROSS TIME AND PLACE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE
PORCELAIN ART (1996-2016)

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Declaration of Originality

I, **Alexander Thomas Burchmore 2018**, hereby declare that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations and paraphrases attributable to other authors.

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Abstract

Porcelain has long been a global medium, exported from China to markets around the world. Over the past two decades this historical prestige has been enhanced by the work of contemporary Chinese artists for whom china, the material, is emblematic of China, the country, and an ideal means to interrogate such identification. Taking Ah Xian, Singing Ho, Liu Jianhua and Ai Weiwei as case-studies, this dissertation analyses the reasons for their shared decision to use porcelain, proposing an original interpretive paradigm for their work as a form of “New Export China”.

Works by these artists are analysed in five chapters, each dedicated to a defining feature and artistic motivation. The first chapter analyses the tension between artists’ attraction to the historic and cultural aura of porcelain, and their desire to question this authority. The second examines the tension between their use of mass-production technologies, and their need to distinguish their work from that of the artisans they employ to produce it. The third chapter traces the tension between a desire to reconnect with a lost sense of Chineseness and the realisation that cultural identity is a composite fabrication. The fourth exposes the tension between the superficial appeal of porcelain and the depths of meaning that can be concealed beneath an attractive façade. Finally, the fifth chapter analyses the tension between an isolating exoticism and the bodily desires that express our shared humanity.

Underlying each of these tensions is an enduring awareness of the mobility and flexibility associated with porcelain, as a medium long exported around the world. These artists and their work exist in an interstitial space of artistic practice, in between cultural and historic contexts, yet they are grounded not only by their specific life experiences but by a fascination with the locality of Jingdezhen, China’s “Porcelain City”. In addition to the much-needed attention given to a material that has yet to receive sustained analysis as a medium for contemporary artistic expression, the innovation of this thesis is therefore to propose an art-historical model in which the assumption that works by Chinese artists are solely derived from or reflective of a Chinese context is displaced by a recognition of the multiple contexts and frames of reference in which they gain meaning, across both space and time.

Note on use and translation of Chinese terms, names and titles

Chinese (Mandarin) terms, names and titles (of works of art and literature) are written in *pinyin* throughout this dissertation, followed by Simplified characters in parentheses. Translated terms are written first in English, with *pinyin* and characters in parentheses, e.g. “Reform and Opening” (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放). Names that are commonly used and widely recognised are given only in *pinyin*, e.g. Mao Zedong, or in the Wade-Giles system where this is appropriate, e.g. Sun Yat-sen. When first mentioned, artists’ names are given in English with *pinyin* and characters following in parentheses, and thereafter only in English.

Titles of works of art are given only in English throughout. Where multiple translations of a title exist, the most widely-used version is preferred, e.g. *Regular-Fragile* rather than *Daily-Fragile*, *Games* rather than *Play*. Titles of works of literature are written in English followed by *pinyin* and characters in parentheses when first cited, and thereafter only in English. All translations of cited Chinese-language texts are the author’s own, unless otherwise noted.

A glossary of Chinese terms and names used is provided at the end of the dissertation, while full details for cited Chinese-language texts are given in the Bibliography.

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Introduction

In 2011, for an installation titled *Discard*, Chinese contemporary artist Liu Jianhua (刘建华, b. 1962) excavated one of the lawns outside the Sino-Italia Design Exchange Centre in Shanghai and filled the ensuing cavity with a dense accumulation of household items, all meticulously reproduced in porcelain (fig. 1). In a shallow pool of water facing this excavation, he installed a similar deposit of primarily blue-and-white ceramic fragments, reproductions in this case of historic jars, vases and other vessels. The installation was commissioned for the 2011 Shanghai Pujiang Overseas Chinese Town Public Art Project (OCT-PAP), for which Dutch conceptual artist Edwin Zwakman (b. 1969) also created a large-scale installation, and so was intended for a primarily international audience. It seems appropriate, then, that both groups of objects in *Discard* were created in a city long associated with the production and global distribution of ceramics – Jingdezhen, the “Porcelain Capital” (*cidu* 瓷都) of the world.¹ The first group of replica household items were created by Liu with help from friends and colleagues, while the second group of historic reproductions were created by the many professional replica-makers who now comprise a large part of the working population of Jingdezhen. *Discard* therefore encapsulates the field of contemporary ceramics practice that forms the subject of this thesis: the creation by Liu Jianhua and other Chinese contemporary artists of a “New Export China” that blurs the distinctions between past and present, the artistic and the

¹ Jingdezhen has been acknowledged as the “Porcelain Capital” of China since the founding of the first Imperial administrative centre for ceramics production in the city during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). Feng Guoping, Hu Yinjiao, and Shao Jimei, *Jingdezhen: A City with Kiln-Fire Burning a Thousand Years*, ed. Jingdezhen People’s Government News Office (Beijing: Intercontinental Press, 2006), 8. In 2004, however, the Central Communist Party transferred the title to Chaozhou, Guangdong province, in recognition of the more significant scale of the ceramics industry in that city, though Jingdezhen remains the most popular destination for both Chinese and overseas ceramicists. Maris Boyd Gillette, *China’s Porcelain Capital: The Rise, Fall and Reinvention of Ceramics in Jingdezhen* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 95–96; Na Lan, “Jingdezhen, Still China’s Porcelain Capital?” CRI Online, August 7, 2004, <http://english.cri.cn/1174/2004-8-7/103@139250.htm>.



Figure 1: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), Discard, 2011, porcelain, variable dimensions.

artisanal, China's history of porcelain export and the circuitous passage of artists and works of art between cultural contexts in the global contemporary artistic community.

The term "New Export China" indicates both the principal aim and context for this research. It is used here to refer to a certain type of work in porcelain created by Chinese contemporary artists between 1996 and 2016, with the aim being to establish a cohesive identity for such work as a distinctive genre with clear defining characteristics.² Three of these characteristics are indicated by the words "New", "Export", "China": this work is embedded in artists' experiences of the global contemporary, and so is inherently new in form and conception; at the same time, it is indebted to historic currents of global export and exchange; finally, it is intimately tied to the parallel in the English language between china, the material and China, the country, so in addition to being global, such art is grounded in a local context. In addition to works by Liu Jianhua, those of three other artists are positioned here as representative expressions of this genre: Ah Xian (阿仙, b. 1960), Sin-ying Ho (何善影, b. 1963), and Ai Weiwei (艾未未, b. 1957). The two decades from 1996 to 2016 have been chosen as the span of time during which these four artists produced most of their work in porcelain and a pivotal moment of transition for Jingdezhen, when state-enforced privatisation of the ceramics industry forced the city's artisans to seek alternative means of support. In five thematic chapters focused on: the re-making of history; modularity, mass-production and the multiple; constructions of culture; the material appeal of porcelain; and the tension inherent to ceramics between exotic and erotic, an original interpretative paradigm is proposed for

² The term "New Export China" as used in this dissertation was inspired by the category of "New China" defined by Fang Lili and Nancy Selva in their exhibition "New 'China': Porcelain Art from Jingdezhen, 1910-2012" held in 2012 at the China Institute Gallery, New York.

the work of Liu, Ah Xian, Ho and Ai as participant-creators in the previously undefined genre of New Export China.

I have selected these four artists over others working in the increasingly expansive field of contemporary ceramic art because they represent four distinct attitudes toward, and personal associations with porcelain, though many parallels can nevertheless be drawn between them. Liu Jianhua has the longest professional and artistic affiliation with both porcelain and Jingdezhen, where he trained as a factory ceramicist during his teenage years and later attended the Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute (*Jingdezhen Taoci Xueyuan* 景德镇陶瓷学院, abbreviated from now on as JCI), and to which he returned in 1998 to create his first works of ceramic art. His relationship with porcelain is animated by an extensive knowledge of its history and production techniques, though also coloured by an initial uncertainty about the artistic credentials of his professional training. Ah Xian, on the other hand, first experimented with porcelain five years after moving to Sydney, Australia, in an effort to reconnect with his Chinese heritage. As a self-taught artist who had formerly worked in oil paints and cast plaster, his engagement with ceramics was highly idiosyncratic and driven by a spirit of artistic enquiry, and he produced only one, albeit substantial series of work in porcelain before turning to other materials. Sin-ying Ho's experience with ceramics was similarly driven at first by artistic curiosity, though her relocation to Canada likewise inspired a more sustained engagement through fine arts college and university education. Unlike Liu, Ho works within the fundamentally European tradition of studio ceramics, yet she too has experienced some uncertainty about the definition of her work as either craft or art. Finally, Ai Weiwei, like Ah Xian, has received no formal training in ceramics-making, though rather than a spirit of artistic

inquiry he was inspired to use porcelain above all by its historic and cultural associations, incorporating it within his broader artistic project of political and socio-cultural critique.

All four artists, despite their different levels of training in the medium, share an interest in the historical development of the porcelain industry in China and its association with Chinese identity, demonstrating clearly the extent to which this interest cuts across the field of contemporary art ceramics. They are also united by generational experiences reflecting their birth between 1957 and 1963, notably including the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (*Wuchan jieji wenhua dageming* 无产阶级文化大革命) of 1966-76, the Reform and Opening (*Gaige kaifang* 改革开放) of the 1980s, and the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, to which each artist has formed distinct yet often comparable responses that have influenced their use of porcelain. Several other Chinese artists – Li Jianshen (李见深, b. 1959), Caroline Cheng (Zheng Yi 郑祎, b. 1963), Xu Yihui (徐一晖, b. 1964) and Ni Haifeng (倪海峰, b. 1964) – and one US ceramicist – Barbara Diduk (b. 1951) – are mentioned throughout the dissertation. These artists, however, have not enjoyed the same level of international recognition as Liu, Ah Xian, Ho or Ai and have not engaged to the same extent with the concepts proposed here as central to New Export China, so they are included primarily as points of comparison to complement or clarify aspects of work by the primary artists. They also indicate the extent to which the latter are participants in a broader field of contemporary artistic engagement with porcelain that continues to develop in new directions.

In addition to the insight thereby gained into the work of these artists, the innovation of this thesis principally lies in the medium-specific focus on porcelain and the creation of a methodology derived from lived experiences of travel and translation. Inspired by recent texts on performance and photography in Chinese contemporary art, the focus

on porcelain is intended to balance such accounts of “contemporary” media through a sustained analysis of a medium often overlooked or marginalised in considerations of contemporary artistic practice, despite its extensive use by prominent contemporary artists.³ The recent critical attention devoted to ink painting, in particular, has been a key inspiration. Appropriated since the 1980s by artists like Gu Wenda (谷文达, b. 1955) and Xu Bing (徐冰, b. 1955) to interrogate the culture of elitism and conservatism with which calligraphy and literati ink-landscape painting are associated, “ink art” has only recently been included as a distinct genre in texts on Chinese contemporary art written outside of China. This consolidation of the term largely came about following the staging of the influential survey exhibition *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2013 and the publication of an accompanying text.⁴ Yet ink, with its close ties to painting and enduring cultural cachet, is easily assimilated into conventional hierarchies of art-historical analysis. Porcelain, however, as an artisanal or “craft” medium produced on a commercial scale that seems inherently irreconcilable with its imperial workshop pedigree, has yet to receive sustained critical attention in the contemporary context, and it is this disparity that the current dissertation will address.

The other innovation of this research – a methodological focus on travel and translation – has also been prompted by the implicit assumptions of conventional art-historical analysis. Above all, I aim to interrogate the standard definition of “Chinese art” as a form of artistic practice defined by expression of “Chinese” content and created by artists based in China, showing instead how Liu, Ah Xian, Ho and Ai transgress straightforward

³ See, for example: Silvia Fok, *Life and Death: Art and the Body in Contemporary China* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013); Cheng Meiling, *Beijing Xingwei: Contemporary Chinese Time-Based Art* (London: Seagull, 2013); and Wu Hung, *Zooming in: Histories of Photography in China* (London: Reaktion, 2016).

⁴ Maxwell K. Hearn, *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013).

forms of historical, cultural and geographic identity. Against existing definitions of Chinese art, I propose an interpretive model that accounts for “in-between” spaces of practice, foregrounding the extent to which artists and works of art exist simultaneously in multiple contexts and frames of reference, including but not limited to those within China. This model does not discount the formative influence of place on an artist’s view of the world – on the contrary, the influence of specific contexts and especially that of Jingdezhen, where most of these artists’ ceramics have been produced, is consistently emphasised – but rather seeks to displace the assumption that the creations of Chinese artists are solely derived from and reflective of a Chinese context.

Why porcelain?

In addition to the disparity between the extensive artistic adoption of porcelain and the lack of a corresponding body of art-historical interpretation, I have also chosen to focus on this medium as one that is uniquely suited to an analysis informed by movement between different contexts and states of being. Like all ceramics, porcelain is created through the transmutation of clay and water, refined and shaped by human hands into a variety of forms, and exposed to fire to permanently alter its chemical composition. The vessels, sculptures and other wares created in this manner are exposed to further transformations through trade, of which porcelain offers a rich case-study. Exported from China for centuries to countries where it became symbolic of both “the East” and the experience of distance itself, porcelain is an ideal vehicle for the dynamic interplay of diverse cultural iconographies. At the same time, it retains its utilitarian function, thereby bridging the spheres of the exotic and the domestic. International and intimate,

mysterious and mundane, porcelain objects perform multiple roles in diverse settings and are often caught in the spaces in-between competing functions and associations.

Yet porcelain is not entirely nomadic or adrift from definite origins; it has long been closely tied to Chinese national and cultural identity, both within and outside of China's borders. In English-speaking countries the medium and the nation are synonymous, an etymological association that can be traced to famed Venetian traveller Marco Polo's (1254-1324) use of the word "Chin" in his *Devisement du Monde* (*Description of the World*), one of the first and most influential (albeit disputed) glimpses of China circulated in Europe, and the first known European text containing a description of the material. Polo reports that his Yuan-dynasty (1279-1368) hosts used the term "Chin" – Polo's transliteration of "Jin" (金), a defeated northern Chinese dynasty – to refer to southern provinces still resistant to Mongol control. Following their example, he used the same term for what would later be the primary means of access to porcelain for European merchants: the East China Sea, or Polo's "Sea of Chin". After the first English translation of the *Devisement* in 1502, "Chin-ware" and then "China-ware" became accepted terms for porcelain, perhaps inspiring the naming of the country as well, though this etymology cannot be conclusively traced.⁵ It should also be noted that the term "china" was used interchangeably with other terms, such as "chyna" or "purslane", until at least the early

⁵ John Keay, *China: A History* (London: Harper, 2008), 97–98. The reciprocal relationship between global and local that this etymological slippage indicates is also apparent in the other term by which china is known in European countries: "porcelain", or *porcelaine* in French, *porselein* in Dutch, *porzellan* in German, *porcellana* in Italian, and *porcelana* in Spanish and Portuguese. This term too originated in the *Devisement*, first put to paper by Polo's Occitan scribe Rustichello da Pisa (1272-1300) while both men languished in a Genoan prison in 1298, and is a translation of the Venetian *porcellane*, a feminine diminutive of *porcus* (pig) used widely across medieval Europe to refer to cowry shells because of their perceived resemblance to the snout and arched back of a piglet, and to a woman's genitals. The word first appears in the *Devisement* as a reference to the use of these shells as currency, and is then later used to describe some pieces of porcelain that Polo found to be just as glossy and milky-white in colour. John Carswell, *Blue & White: Chinese Porcelain around the World* (London: British Museum, 2000), 18–19; Robert Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 70–71.

eighteenth century.⁶ Nevertheless, whether the commodity inspired the naming of the country or not, it is certain that China and china have been synonymous from their entry into the English language, and the development of the material has been irrevocably attached to a fixed location.

The dual identity of porcelain as simultaneously globally mobile yet grounded in Chinese culture is a crucial aspect of its appeal for Liu, Ah Xian, Ai and Ho, as well as other contemporary Chinese artists, and a principal motivation for their choice to use it in their artistic practices. The primary aim of this dissertation is to define “New Export China” as an original framework for the interpretation of contemporary porcelain art, and to suggest a more flexible interpretive model for art-historical analysis that recognises in-between spaces of artistic practice. Another objective is to suggest one possible answer to the overarching question: *Why* have so many contemporary Chinese artists chosen to use porcelain? I have discovered five motivations that are unanimous among the artists surveyed, and that reflect the themes of New Export China outlined above: the history of the medium; its suitability for mass-production; artists’ personal associations with ceramics, especially those who now live outside of China; the material appeal of glazed porcelain; and the relationship of the material to issues of cultural identity. The enduring ties between china and China are central to each of these driving impulses, and for most of the artists discussed their choice of porcelain was inspired above all by a desire to release the quintessential Chineseness that they believed to be embodied within this material. Ah Xian, for example, first experimented with porcelain to reconnect with his heritage following his relocation from Beijing to Sydney in 1990, while Ai was motivated by a similar desire on his return to Beijing from New York in 1993. At the same time,

⁶ Stacey Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums: The Field of Chinese Ceramics in Britain, 1560-1960* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 25.

however, each of these artists also came to realise through their use of porcelain that the Chineseness they had sought to uncover is a fictional, fragmentary construct, unable to adequately express their many cultural, contextual, historical and personal influences and allegiances, as artists and as individuals. Seeking access to a stable form of identity, they instead discovered that cultural identification, like porcelain itself, is a palimpsest of diverse influences shaped as much by the dynamic currents of travel and translation as by more static forms of knowledge.

The field

The principal means by which works in porcelain by Chinese contemporary artists have been given visibility outside of China is through a series of survey exhibitions held over the last decade in various European and North American metropolitan centres.⁷ These reflect and extend a broader interest in ceramics usually dated to the unprecedented awarding of the Turner Prize in 2003 to Grayson Perry's *Village of Penians* (2001), but could also be traced to the equally unprecedented inclusion of a porcelain installation by Liu Jianhua in the 50th Venice Biennale of the same year (though his participation was prevented by the global SARS epidemic), the inclusion of works in porcelain by Ah Xian in the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in 1999, or even to Ai Weiwei's iconic *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* of 1995 (fig. 2). By 2005, global interest in ceramics had grown so great that the organisers of the 3rd World Ceramics Biennale, held over

⁷ In chronological order, these exhibitions were: "Breaking the Mold: Contemporary Chinese and Japanese Ceramic Sculpture," Denos Museum Center, Michigan, 2009; "Porcelain City – Jingdezhen," Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 2011-12; "Go East: Canadians Create in China," Gardiner Museum, Toronto, 2011-12; "New 'China': Porcelain Art from Jingdezhen, 1910-2012," China Institute Gallery, New York, 2012; "Ahead of the Curve: New china from China," Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, 2014-15; and, "Reshaping Tradition: Contemporary Ceramics from East Asia," University of Southern California Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, 2015-16.

two months in Icheon, Yeosu and Gwangju, Korea, anticipated an attendance of five million, about 10% of the country's population at the time.⁸

Many explanations have been given for this attraction to ceramics: some associate it with a general broadening of artistic attitudes following the decline of high modernism; others note the appeal of 'a history [of clay] redolent with powerful metaphorical and pictorial references,' and a primal urge to connect 'with something deep in the earth and deep within our collective human memory;' taking a more cynical perspective, some ascribe the current popularity of the medium to changes in the display of ceramics in major museums and galleries around the world, notably including the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A), and the increasing sale prices and status that ceramics now generate.⁹ Yet there is a qualitative difference between the use of porcelain by Chinese artists like Liu and Ai and those of another cultural heritage. The appeal of the ceramic medium for many contemporary artists lies above all in its conceptual affinities, potential to bypass artificial divides between "high" and "low" culture, art and craft, the utilitarian and the conceptual, or domestic and global. It holds special appeal for Chinese artists, however, with ties to a culture and country that is synonymous in English with the name of the material, and which has historically claimed porcelain as one of the foremost inventions of Chinese civilisation. The principal characteristics of this special appeal are made clear in the points of focus emphasised by the several survey exhibitions of porcelain works of art by contemporary Chinese artists that have been held over the last decade in

⁸ Rupert Winchester, "Kiln Me Softly: The 3rd World Ceramics Biennale," *ArtAsiaPacific*, no. 46 (Fall 2005): 26. A selection of pieces from Liu Jianhua's *Games* series were included in the Biennale's invitational exhibition.

⁹ Emmanuel Cooper, *Contemporary Ceramics* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 6–7; Claire Lilley, "A Haptic Art," in *Vitamin C: Clay + Ceramic in Contemporary Art*, by Louisa Elderton (London: Phaidon, 2017), 10, 15.

Europe and North America, and which have created a generic coherence and unity for this type of work.

The most important exhibition to date to include examples of what is here termed New Export China was the comprehensive “New ‘China’: Porcelain Art from Jingdezhen, 1910-2012” held at New York’s China Institute Gallery in late 2012, when rising interest in contemporary ceramic art was also apparent in mainland China. In this exhibition, works by twenty-four Chinese or Chinese-born and one North American artist (Wayne Higby), all created in Jingdezhen, were presented as a survey of artistic activity in that city over the last century. The aim of the curators, Fang Lili and Nancy Selvage, was to demonstrate the continuing importance of Jingdezhen for contemporary ceramicists. In the exhibition text, Fang grouped works included into four chronological groups: those created by Jingdezhen-based intellectuals during the Republican era (1912-1949); by local teachers after 1949; by artists from across China from the 1980s onwards; and by Chinese and non-Chinese artists since the turn of the millennium, including Ah Xian and Sin-ying Ho.¹⁰ This timeframe mirrors the development in China of contemporary ceramic art, initiated by a shift in the 1980s from utilitarian and traditional modes of production to more conceptual approaches, through a period of steady growth and exhibitions in provincial galleries during the 1990s, to the inauguration of the “Chinese Contemporary Young Ceramic Artists’ Biennale Exhibition” (CCYCA) in 1998, initiating national interest in the medium that has subsequently been further inspired by the affiliated “Hangzhou International Contemporary Ceramic Biennale” (HICCB) initiated in

¹⁰ Fang Lili, “Jingdezhen and the Artist: 1910-2012,” in *New “China”: Porcelain Art from Jingdezhen, 1910-2012*, ed. Willow Weilan Hai Chang and J. May Lee Barrett (New York: China Institute Gallery, 2012), 4.

2014.¹¹ “New ‘China’” could therefore be viewed as the next stage in this process of development, a collaboration between the Jingdezhen-born Fang and US-born Selvage that signalled the inevitable expansion of a local tendency onto a global stage.

Yet there are several points of difference apparent in the selection of works for “New ‘China’” and curatorial rationale given in the text that signal its distinction from parallel developments in China, and indicate several key defining characteristics of New Export China analysed in this thesis. Above all, in both exhibition and text, and particularly in the sections on works created from the 1980s to the present, there is an underlying awareness of the long history of Jingdezhen as a production centre for export porcelain. This is associated in an essay by Selvage with the recent re-branding of the city as a must-see destination for international ceramicists, ‘a mecca for Chinese and international talent’ that Fang compares elsewhere in the text with the 798 Art District in Beijing and describes in glowing terms as ‘an “incubator” where the inspirations and dreams of ceramicists from all over the world are ... realised.’¹² However, in contrast to the mass-production of export ware by specialised yet anonymous teams of factory-artisans, and the central role that such workers continue to play in Jingdezhen’s economy, Fang and Selvage focus on studio ceramicists and independent creators, more likely to self-identify as artists (*yishujia* 艺术家) than artisans (*gongjiang* 工匠). This bias is partially a reflection of the city’s recent civic transformation, but also derives from the curators’

¹¹ Ning Gang, Li Chao, and Feng Weina, “Thirty Years of Development of Chinese Contemporary Ceramic Art,” *Ceramics Technical*, no. 31 (November 2010): 88–92; Peng Qian, “A Site for Hybrid Practice: Between Traditional Culture and Contemporary Ceramic Art” (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2016), 5, 65–66.

¹² Nancy Selvage, “Porcelain: A Contemporary Cultural Touchstone,” in *New “China”: Porcelain Art from Jingdezhen, 1910–2012*, by Fang Lili and Nancy Selvage, ed. Willow Weilan Hai Chang and J. May Lee Barrett (New York: China Institute Gallery, 2012), 25; Fang, “Jingdezhen and the Artist: 1910–2012,” 13. The 798 Art District (798 艺术区) is a sprawling complex of de-commissioned military factory buildings in Beijing, many of which were repurposed during the mid-1990s into galleries and artist studios. It has now grown into a hub for contemporary artistic activity and a popular tourist destination, home to an ever-increasing number of arts venues, designer boutiques, bookshops, cafes and performance spaces.

clear emphasis on the contemporary, with most of the works chosen created after 2000 and earlier pieces generally positioned as precedents for more recent artistic activity. This curatorial framing reveals several traits of New Export China that distinguish its development from that of contemporary ceramic art in China in general: above all, a close relationship with the local context of Jingdezhen and the global export trade with which it is associated; a strong sense of historical perspective, though always viewed through the lens of the contemporary; and a preference for highly conceptual and idiosyncratic forms of porcelain art rather than more “artisanal” works.

Just under a year before “New ‘China’,” a similar display opened across the Atlantic at the V&A, from 2011 until 2012: the revealingly named “Porcelain City – Jingdezhen”. Curated by Amanda Game, this relatively modest display of contemporary work by four artists – Roger Law, Takeshi Yasuda, Ah Xian and Felicity Aylieff – was inspired by the opening of the V&A’s refurbished ceramics galleries in 2009 and the ‘new buzz around pots, their history and ... makers’ that this prompted.¹³ Like “New ‘China’,” it was also inspired by Jingdezhen’s shift from industrial centre to artistic hub, and the choice of artists can be read as a reflection of this transformation. Ah Xian and Law first travelled to the city in the late 1990s, when the inauguration of several international ceramics conferences and educational exchange programs stimulated a sudden increase in the number of ceramicists, artists and other overseas visitors. Yasuda and Aylieff, on the other hand – now husband and wife – were directly involved in the founding and administration of early exchange programs as well as the increasing number of arts residency institutions established after 2000. In the exhibition text, Game and ceramics historian Luisa E. Mengoni, taking much the same approach as that adopted in the essay

¹³ Amanda Game, *Porcelain City: Jingdezhen* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2011), n.p.

by Selvage for the New York display, reflect on the shifting identity of Jingdezhen and its history as a production centre for export ware, while Law, Yasuda, Ah Xian and Aylieff all provide first-hand accounts of their artistic practices and experiences in the city. Once again, then, around the same time that the organisation of “New ‘China’” was underway in New York, these characteristics of New Export China were emphasised in “Porcelain City”: a focus on the export trade; a *longue-durée* perspective; and the privileging of independent studio-based artistic practices over collective factory labour. The staging of this exhibition in London also gives an early indication of the extent to which works of New Export China are largely displayed and received in the metropolitan centres of North America, Europe and Australia, though derive their potency from their creation in a Chinese industrial hub with which audiences in these regions are likely unfamiliar.

Another earlier display that also contributed to the “buzz” fostered by the opening of the V&A’s newly-refurbished ceramics galleries is “Breaking the Mold: Contemporary Chinese and Japanese Ceramic Sculpture,” held in 2009 at the Denos Museum Center, Michigan, which can be viewed once again as an early indicator of the key characteristics distinguishing New Export China. Like “Porcelain City,” this exhibition was modest in scale, juxtaposing works by nine Japanese and seven Chinese ceramicists to compare their respective ceramics cultures. All sixteen artists were represented by Dai Ichi Arts, a private gallery in New York specialising in contemporary Japanese ceramics that staged an earlier version of the exhibition 2008 under the title “The Summit: China and Japan,” with works by Chinese ceramicists Yao Yongkang, Xu Hongbo, Wei Hua, Wan Liya and Li Lihong alongside those of eight Japanese artists.¹⁴ This display was organised by Beatrice Chang, an arts dealer and Director of Dai Ichi, following a trip to Shanghai during which

¹⁴ Beatrice Chang, *The Summit: China and Japan* (New York: Dai Ichi Arts, 2008), n.p; Beatrice Chang, email communication with Alex Burchmore, 24 May 2018.

‘[her eyes were] opened ... to the less familiar world of contemporary Chinese ceramic sculpture,’ which she felt had received little overseas attention.¹⁵ The innovation of the Denno Museum Center show was the inclusion of two additional Chinese artists – Lu Bin and Caroline Cheng – both of whom, along with Yao, later participated in “New ‘China’” and have subsequently appeared in many accounts of works that could be defined as New Export China. Cheng is also notable for founding the Pottery Workshop (PWS) in Jingdezhen in 2005, now one of the most successful arts residency institutions in the city. Although the exhibition did not include a specific focus on Jingdezhen, then, most of the artists included (Xu and Li were both born and trained as ceramicists in Jingdezhen) share a close connection to the city, while the curators identified a shared focus in their work on ‘Western influences, social issues and human relationships’ in contrast to the Japanese artists’ emphasis on ‘form, texture, colour and materials,’ thereby marking them as conceptual rather than artisanal creators.¹⁶ Held in New York and Michigan but indebted to the locality of Jingdezhen, and oriented toward studio artists rather than factory artisans, “Breaking the Mold”/“The Summit” makes clear that already in 2009, independent of interest in contemporary ceramics in China, awareness of a distinct form of porcelain art was beginning to emerge in the metropolitan centres of Europe, North America and Australia.

A similarly comparative approach was adopted for the exhibition “Go East: Canadians Create in China,” held at the Gardiner Museum in Toronto during the pivotal transition in 2011 and 2012, which included works by nine Chinese, Chinese-born and Canadian ceramicists with ties to Jingdezhen. Taking an aspect of the contemporary landscape of

¹⁵ Chang, *The Summit*, n.p.

¹⁶ Denno Museum Center, “Breaking the Mold: Contemporary Chinese and Japanese Ceramic Sculpture,” Denno Museum Center, 2009, <http://www.dennomuseum.org/exhibitions/past/2009/dai-ichi.html>.

the city alluded to but not directly addressed in “New ‘China’,” “Porcelain City” and “Breaking the Mold,” curator Rachel Gotlieb focused on the role of arts residencies in Jingdezhen’s shift from industry to artistic exchange. All selected ceramicists had either participated in or helped to establish an arts residency program – Jackson Jianshen Li, for instance, one of two Chinese artists included (the other being Sin-ying Ho), founded the Sanbao International Ceramics Village (SICV) in 2001 which, along with PWS, is now a flourishing institution, while Canadian ceramicist Wayne Higby oversaw several key educational exchange initiatives during the 1990s. In the accompanying text, echoing Selvage and Mengoni, Gotlieb contextualises the founding of these residencies within the long history of European and North American fascination with China and draws a parallel with the emergence of the studio ceramics movement in the early twentieth century. This is followed by artist statements on three themes: ‘Making and History’, ‘Identity and Tradition’ and ‘New and Post-China Perspectives,’ all of which are primarily conceptual rather than technically or aesthetically-focused.¹⁷ As in the other exhibitions so far discussed, “Go East” presented contemporary work in porcelain as the preserve of studio ceramicists, based in and inspired by Jingdezhen as well as by the history of export with which the city is associated, but distinguished from the artisanal associations of factory production by a focus on conceptual themes. This exhibition also introduced the theme of mobility that logically follows from the tension between global and local contexts in all these exhibitions, and that is presented in this thesis as the central feature of New Export China.

Following the concentrated burst of attention directed at Jingdezhen and contemporary Chinese ceramicists in 2011 and 2012, several years passed before a second cluster of

¹⁷ Rachel Gotlieb, *Go East: Canadians Create in China* (Toronto: Gardiner Museum, 2012), n.p.

shows appeared from 2014 to 2017. The first of these was “Ahead of the Curve: New china from China,” a display of works by fifteen ceramicists and five artists working in glass staged at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery (BMG) from 2014 to 2015. Like Cheng’s “The Summit,” this exhibition was initially inspired by a transformative encounter with contemporary Chinese ceramic art experienced by two of the curators – Claire Blakey of the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery (PMG), Stoke-on-Trent, and Kate Newnham of BMG – while travelling in Shanghai, Beijing and Jingdezhen in 2010. More empirical connections with the exhibitions discussed above can be traced to another journey to Jingdezhen that Blakey and Newnham made in 2012 accompanied by a third curator, Helen Brown of Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum (CAGM), for which they received introductions from Mengoni and during which they were introduced to Yasuda, Aylieff and Caroline Cheng.¹⁸ This second trip brought Blakey, Newnham and Brown together with Shannon Guo, founder of Twocities Gallery in Shanghai, who subsequently became the fourth co-curator and selected many artists from the Twocities roster – including Li Jianshen, who previously participated in “Go East,” and Wan Liya and Xu Hongbo, who took part in “Breaking the Mold”/“The Summit”.¹⁹

Like the earlier exhibitions, then, “Ahead of the Curve” clearly reveals the relatively small community of artists, writers and curators who have constructed an institutional setting for New Export China, establishing connections between Jingdezhen and metropolitan centres in Europe and North America that echo the global reach of the historic export industry. The defining influence of this history also remains apparent in text and display: contemporary ceramics were shown alongside historic pieces from the collections of

¹⁸ Claire Blakey, “Ahead of the Curve: Behind the Scenes,” in *Ahead of the Curve: New China from China*, by Alexandra Nachescu and Kate Newnham (Bristol: Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, 2014), 7–8.

¹⁹ Ibid, 11.

BMG, PMG and CAGM, while Guo contributed an essay to the text in which she reaffirms the (by now obligatory) link between the export trade and a contemporary Jingdezhen that is 'full of energy and welcomes pilgrims from all around the world.'²⁰ Finally, the third defining quality of New Export China – preference for conceptual over technical or aesthetic content – is apparent in the works selected, chosen for their representation of artistic positions 'at the crossroads of tradition-modern and Chinese-Western,' desire 'to re-interpret the conceptual and material definition of ceramics,' and communication of 'the search for identity and understanding.'²¹ By 2014, then, New Export China had been established, in the world of survey exhibitions at least, as a form of ceramic art defined by key thematic criteria (Jingdezhen, export industry, global/local mobility, and conceptual expression) that distinguish it from the broader sphere of contemporary ceramics in China.

Finally, the most recent curatorial expression of these criteria is "Reshaping Tradition: Contemporary Ceramics from East Asia," at the University of Southern California Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, from 2015 to 2016. This exhibition followed the formula used for "Porcelain City," "Go East," and "Breaking the Mold"/"The Summit": a selection of works by a small group of artists born in China and elsewhere – Ai Weiwei, Liu Jianhua, Ah Xian, Ikjoong Kang and Yee Sookyoung from Korea, Harumi Nakashima from Japan, and Bui Cong Khanh from Vietnam. As in earlier exhibitions, the artists were associated by the curator – Christina Yu Yu, now the Chair of Asian Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston – with what she identified as their desire '[to] build on tradition while innovating outside established manners and aesthetics.' In the short promotional text

²⁰ Shannon Guo, "Ahead of the Curve: Artistic Context," in *Ahead of the Curve: New China from China*, by Alexandra Nachescu and Kate Newnham (Bristol: Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, 2014), 14.

²¹ Ibid, 15.

accompanying the display, Yu addresses each of the thematic criteria identified with previous exhibitions: in the first sentence, she differentiates selected artists' work from the products of artisanal labour by explaining that they've 'elevat[ed] [ceramics] to the realm of sculpture.'²² Following this, she notes their position 'at a crossroads [between] rich traditions from the past ... and the influx of new information and techniques [that have] triggered ... questions, challenges and possibilities' in the contemporary era.²³ Again, the productive intersection of global and local, history and contemporary shown here to be central to New Export China is clearly apparent, while the works selected for display (and especially those by Ah Xian, Ai and Liu) derive their potency from conceptual rather than aesthetic or technical expression. The only criteria lacking is the inclusion of some reference to Jingdezhen, though the role of the Porcelain Capital as a meeting-point for artists interested in porcelain is inferred by the inclusion of Ah Xian and Liu, whose ceramic works have been produced exclusively in this city. Ah Xian's work also establishes a link with the first exhibition of New Export China discussed, "New 'China'," demonstrating the shared vision that animates the continuous development of this genre in survey exhibitions staged over the last decade.

These English and North American displays of porcelain art and the interpretive criteria they establish form the basic framing context for this thesis, the innovation of which is to refine and expand their implications in the first extensive study of the genre unrelated

²² Christina Yu Yu, *Reshaping Tradition: Contemporary Ceramics from East Asia* (Pasadena, CA: University of Southern California Pacific Asia Museum, 2015), n.p.

²³ Ibid. Independent arts writer Kay Whitney repeated these emphases in a review of the exhibition for *Ceramics Monthly*, writing that the artists are united by their shared experience of 'political upheavals, war, and the influx of information technologies,' while their works emerge from 'a continuum of creative entanglements with the present and future [and] an ongoing process of negotiation with the past.' Kay Whitney, "Reshaping Tradition," *Ceramics Monthly* 65, no. 4 (April 2017): 48, 51.

to a gallery or museum exhibition. Many other displays of similar work have been held within and outside of China during the same timeframe, yet there are clear distinctions in curatorial rationale that reinforce the independence of New Export China. Above all, most other displays of porcelain art, either in China or elsewhere, follow the invitational survey model established by the CCYCA and HICCB and present an overview of the field of ceramics that emphasises aesthetic and technical rather than conceptual concerns, and that reflects a focus on vessel-based work. At the University of Hong Kong Museum and Art Gallery, for example, survey exhibitions in 2009 and 2016 respectively displayed “Traditional Jingdezhen Wares from Contemporary Kilns” and “Contemporary Treasures by Jingdezhen’s National Masters.”²⁴ In the US, at West Virginia University, “Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute Faculty Ceramic Art Works Tour Exhibition in USA” (2007) and “From the Dragon’s Fire: Contemporary Ceramic Art U.S.A. Invitational Exhibition” (2011-2013) adopted the same pattern, using that institution’s educational exchange initiatives to survey contemporary ceramic art created in Jingdezhen.²⁵ Many artists featured in these exhibitions were also included in “New ‘China’,” demonstrating the extent to which the distinction between the two types of display is not impermeable, and the extent to which artists move with ease from one context to another. Yet the latter exhibition also exemplifies a crucial point of departure from this curatorial framework when positioned alongside “Porcelain City,” “Go East,” “Breaking the Mold,” “Ahead of the Curve,” and “Reshaping Tradition”.

²⁴ Joan Yi Hsing Ho, *Traditional Jingdezhen Wares from Contemporary Kilns* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Museum and Art Gallery, 2009); Wong Kai Tat and Florian Knothe, *Painted Ceramics: Contemporary Treasures by Jingdezhen’s National Masters from the Lamda Foundation* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Museum and Art Gallery, 2016).

²⁵ Li Chao, *Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute Faculty Ceramic Art Works Tour Exhibition in USA* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University, 2007); Li Chao, *From the Dragon’s Fire: Chinese Contemporary Ceramic Art U.S.A. Invitational Exhibition* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University, 2011).

Each exhibition, held in a metropolitan centre in the UK or North America, reinforces the defining criteria of global/local interaction; a preference for the conceptual over the aesthetic or technical; association with Jingdezhen and the transcultural narrative of ceramics export, both past and present; and a historical perspective. Analysis of these criteria has been limited to European and North American contexts not only to reflect the predominant passages travelled by the artists discussed (although it should be noted that many contemporary Chinese artists with an interest in ceramics have also travelled to and worked extensively in Japan), but also to focus on the particular Euro-American cultural context in which New Export China has taken shape. While the mapping of a more global range of exhibitions of porcelain art, including not only European and North American metropolitan centres but also venues in Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia and the Middle East – all of which have also long been active participants in the Chinese ceramic export trade – would add a further layer of nuance to the argument, the very different contexts of interpretation in these countries and regions would dilute the definition of New Export China as a clearly-defined artistic and curatorial phenomenon. Reception of contemporary Chinese porcelain art in these settings is without doubt a subject worthy of extended consideration, yet each area deserves a study of its own that takes account of specific contextual characteristics.

In addition to the critical definition and curatorial representation that New Export China has received from dedicated survey exhibitions, ceramic works by Chinese artists should also be situated within the broader art-historical field of contemporary Chinese art. Like the various approaches adopted for displays of porcelain, the interpretation of Chinese works of art in general can be approached from a range of perspectives that depend on

both context and critical perspective. Even the terms “contemporary Chinese art” and its Mandarin equivalent *Zhongguo dangdai yishu* (中国当代艺术), which only gained widespread use after the turn of the millennium, have been subject to much debate. Wu Hung, Paul Gladston and Philip Tinari, for example, have all noted the often unremarked change in terminology during the 1990s from *xiandai* (现代, translated as “modern”) to *dangdai* (当代, translated as “contemporary”) and the attendant shift from a diachronic, progressivist vision of artistic practice toward a more synchronic, pluralist conception.²⁶ Of particular relevance for this dissertation, Wu has also observed that the designation *dangdai yishu* or “contemporary art”, in China as in Europe and North America, often excludes those forms of art (like porcelain) that aren’t widely viewed as “contemporary”, and so inadequately encompasses the range of artistic practice in China.²⁷ Nevertheless, despite critical disagreement about the suitability of the term “contemporary Chinese art” and the many perspectives through which this phenomenon can be understood, several prevailing themes in current scholarship can be identified. Above all, there is the persistence of what Tinari terms the “’79 Narrative,” in which Chinese artistic activity of the past four decades is isolated from both that termed “modern” and from a broader historical context, despite the inevitable existence of many connections and overlaps

²⁶ Wu Hung, “A Case of Being ‘Contemporary’: Conditions, Spheres, and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art (2008),” in *Contemporary Art in Asia: A Critical Reader*, by Melissa Chiu and Benjamin Genocchio (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 393–94; Paul Gladston, “Problematizing the New Cultural Separatism: Critical Reflections on Contemporaneity and the Theorizing of Contemporary Chinese Art,” *Modern China Studies* 19, no. 1 (2012): 218–19; Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A Critical History* (London: Reaktion, 2014), 7–8, 26–27. For Tinari, the switch from the ‘provocative, socially minded, forward-looking’ term *xiandai* to the government-endorsed *dangdai*, synonymous in literary studies with the decades following the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, also reflects the increasing involvement of the Chinese Communist Party in the use of contemporary art as a tool for international diplomacy after the turn of the millennium. Philip Tinari, “Between Palimpsest and Teleology: The Problem of ‘Chinese Contemporary Art,’” in *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, by Alexandra Munroe, Hou Hanru, and Philip Tinari (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2017), 52.

²⁷ Wu, “A Case of Being ‘Contemporary’: Conditions, Spheres, and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art (2008),” 392.

between these realms of inquiry.²⁸ This narrative is further subdivided into a series of four broad phases usually dated according to significant exhibitions, artistic tendencies or political events, and has given rise to several enduring tropes, including: the assertion of a divide between “official” and “unofficial” or politically dissident forms of art; a one-way derivation of influence from European and North American sources; an alternate resistance and capitulation to the pressures of commercialisation and globalisation; and a tension between essentialist and deconstructivist critical frameworks. The phenomena identified by these tropes, however, are much more ambiguous and subject to multiple interpretation than they seem, and there is a great need for counter-narratives, like that offered by the development of New Export China, that present a more nuanced account.

The first phase into which the ‘79 Narrative divides contemporary Chinese art covers the years between the death of Mao Zedong and the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976, and the embrace of European and North American influences associated with the ‘85 New Wave. The defining events for this phase are the confirmation of Deng Xiaoping’s policy of “Reform and Opening” (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) in December 1978, the “Democracy Wall” movement in Beijing between November 1978 and December 1979, and the first and second exhibitions of work by the Stars (*xingxing* 星星) group in September 1979 and March 1980.²⁹ Coverage of these events, especially of the Stars, established several critical tropes that have maintained their authority to the present, including above all

²⁸ Tinari, “Between Palimpsest and Teleology: The Problem of ‘Chinese Contemporary Art,’” 53–54.

²⁹ Gladston, “Problematizing the New Cultural Separatism: Critical Reflections on Contemporaneity and the Theorizing of Contemporary Chinese Art,” 201–2; Li Xianting, “Contemporary Chinese Art and a Declining Culture,” in *Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*, by Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 25–26; Wu Hung, “Major Traditions in Contemporary Chinese Art,” in *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 1999), 17–18.

the separation of contemporary Chinese artistic practice into diametrically opposed “official” and “unofficial” camps. Hans van Dijk penned the earliest clear statement of this separation in the first section of a two-part essay “Painting in China after the Cultural Revolution: Style Developments and Theoretical Debates” (1991), defining official artists by their advanced age and preference for ‘traditional Chinese painting ... woodcutting [and] oil painting,’ and unofficial artists by their youth and interest in ‘experimental art forms, partly derived from modern Western art.’³⁰ Even before this, however, in a *New York Times* review of the first Stars exhibition published in October 1979, art critic Fox Butterfield praised what he understood to be ‘an easing of the restrictions on artistic freedom.’³¹ Further expanding on this sentiment in an article of 1983, Butterfield wrote at length of the ‘political minefield’ in which the Stars worked and the ‘anger and brazen political challenge’ contained within their ‘brooding, bitter, powerful works.’³² This alleged opposition between a radical present and denigrated past recurs with regularity in almost all accounts of contemporary Chinese art, by Chinese, European and North American writers alike, with little acknowledgment of the more complex and ambiguous relationship that exists in reality between “official” and “unofficial”, transgressive and traditional forms of art.³³ This ambiguity is apparent already in Butterfield’s 1983 article,

³⁰ Hans Van Dijk, “Painting in China after the Cultural Revolution: Style Developments and Theoretical Debates, Part I: 1979-1985,” *China Information* 6, no. 3 (Winter 1991/1992): 27.

³¹ Fox Butterfield, “Peking Permits Once-Banned Exhibit of New Art,” *New York Times*, October 20, 1979, 1.

³² Fox Butterfield, “Serving the Workers and Peasants: Wang Keping,” in *China: Alive in the Bitter Sea* (London: Coronet, 1983), 590, 583–84.

³³ For a more detailed discussion of this trope, see: Wu, “Major Traditions in Contemporary Chinese Art,” 14, 17–18; Ai Weiwei, “The Multiple Predicaments and Upturns of Chinese Contemporary Art,” in *Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*, by Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 13; and, Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China* (Milan: Charta, 2006), 22, 26. Paul Gladston gives a very concise and nuanced account of the ambiguous relationship between the official and the unofficial in his recent article “Problematizing the New Cultural Separatism: Critical Reflections on Contemporaneity and the Theorizing of Contemporary Chinese Art,” concluding that Chinese artists should more accurately ‘be seen to shuttle continually ... between resistance to and complicity with established authority,’ occupying a spectrum of positions that shift according to circumstance. Gladston, “Problematizing the New Cultural Separatism: Critical Reflections on Contemporaneity and the Theorizing of Contemporary Chinese Art,” 211–18.

which closes with the author's recollection of a gift presented to him by sculptor Wang Keping: 'an old Qing dynasty vase, in yellow and *famille rose*, emblazoned with dragons and flowers.'³⁴ Even an artist celebrated for political dissidence was not immune to the charms of China's past, or to the appeal of porcelain as an ambassadorial symbol of classical Chinese culture.

The second chapter in the '79 Narrative centres on the '85 New Wave and the adoption of European and North American artistic ideas with which this moment in the history of Chinese contemporary art has been associated. The earliest clear statement of this trope can again be found in van Dijk's "Painting in China after the Cultural Revolution," in which the Dutch critic identifies the years between 1984 and 1987 with 'a sudden, large-scale, countrywide explosion [of artistic activity] outside the official circuit,' led by young artists inspired by an 'overwhelming torrent of new influences' from overseas.³⁵ An anchoring event for this sudden flurry of activity singled out for attention both by van Dijk and subsequent scholars was the first exhibition of works by Robert Rauschenberg held in China at the National Art Museum in 1985.³⁶ While the first phase in the '79 Narrative establishes the apparently foundational separation of official and unofficial artists, this second phase is presented as 'a time of unprecedented ... fervour and experimentation' fostered by contact with European and North American modernist and post-modernist artistic tendencies.³⁷ To the official/unofficial divide can therefore be

³⁴ Butterfield, "Serving the Workers and Peasants: Wang Keping," 597.

³⁵ Hans Van Dijk, "Painting in China after the Cultural Revolution: Style Developments and Theoretical Debates, Part II: 1985-1991," *China Information* 6, no. 4 (Spring 1992): 1; Van Dijk, "Painting in China after the Cultural Revolution: Style Developments and Theoretical Debates, Part I: 1979-1985," 37.

³⁶ Van Dijk, "Painting in China after the Cultural Revolution: Style Developments and Theoretical Debates, Part I: 1979-1985," 34; Li, "Contemporary Chinese Art and a Declining Culture," 26-27; Britta Erickson, "Introduction: An Explosion of Possibilities," in *China Onward: The Estella Collection*, by Britta Erickson (Humblebaek: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 16.

³⁷ Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China*, 21; Wu, "Major Traditions in Contemporary Chinese Art," 19.

added a second trope defined succinctly by Tinari as ‘a one-way dynamic of influence and assimilation,’ by which the work Chinese contemporary artists is presented as a derivative adaptation of that created by their counterparts to the west.³⁸ Once again, little consideration is given in this narrative to the spaces of ambiguity between alleged binary oppositions like East and West, old and new, tradition and innovation, to which this dissertation is dedicated.

The third phase of the '79 Narrative is marked by the opening and early closure of the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition at the National Art Gallery in February 1989, the horrific events of the night of June 4, 1989, and the widespread public cynicism that followed. “China/Avant-Garde,” hailed by van Dijk as ‘*the* big, path-blazing exhibition,’ has been consistently positioned as ‘both the peak and demise of the artistic freedoms of the eighties,’ a convenient watershed between the '85 New Wave and the “underground” art of the early 1990s.³⁹ The ‘anger, hopelessness and resignation’ of the years 1989-1996 are inextricably tied in the imaginations of Chinese, European and North American critics to the “Cynical Realist” and “Political Pop” styles defined by Beijing-based avant-garde trendsetter Li Xianting.⁴⁰ In addition to the tropes of an unofficial art characterised by political dissidence and a one-way passage of artistic ideas from Europe and North America, the theorising of these styles also overlapped with a new thematic concern: the rising impact of commercialism in the wake of Deng’s market-oriented reforms. Profit-making and private interest are presented in this trope as ‘the most pervasive

³⁸ Tinari, “Between Palimpsest and Teleology: The Problem of ‘Chinese Contemporary Art,’” 57–58.

³⁹ Van Dijk, “Painting in China after the Cultural Revolution: Style Developments and Theoretical Debates, Part II: 1985-1991,” 1, italics in original text; Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China*, 24; Shen Kuiyi, “No U-Turn: Chinese Art After 1989,” in *Mahjong: Art, Film, and Change in China*, by Julia Frances Andrews (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 69.

⁴⁰ Tinari, “Between Palimpsest and Teleology: The Problem of ‘Chinese Contemporary Art,’” 55–56; Political Pop and Cynical Realism are defined most clearly in Li, “Contemporary Chinese Art and a Declining Culture,” 26–27.

source of constraint on artists' continuous quest for creative experiments,' expressed through the appropriation of global consumer icons in Political Pop and the *fin-de-siècle* ennui of Cynical Realism.⁴¹ Commercialism has also been cited as inspiration for a turn during the mid-1990s toward explorations of the self, expressed via the "international" (read: European/North American) media of photography and performance, and framed both as a reaction against consumerist conformity and a direct result of the freedoms offered by private enterprise.⁴² Despite a shift in aesthetic and socio-political context, then, Chinese contemporary art in the 1990s was still predominantly presented as one of resistance, animated by a desire for independent action yet realised paradoxically through a dependence on European and North American artistic forms.

Alongside escalating commercialism, the 1990s and the first decades of the 21st century have been associated with an increased international focus on contemporary Chinese art, culminating with its appropriation by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a tool for cultural diplomacy and overseas propaganda. An international turn in contemporary Chinese art during the 1990s is usually traced through a series of survey exhibitions in Europe, North America and Australia, beginning with "China's New Art, Post-1989" (co-curated by Li Xianting) and "China Avant-garde" (co-curated by Hans van Dijk) in 1993, and culminating with the CCP-sponsored "Alors, la Chine?" (2003).⁴³ These exhibitions

⁴¹ Cheng Meiling, "Dappled China: 'Untamed Histories' - Surrounding the China Brand," *Yishu* 11, no. 4 (August 2012): 47; See also: Pi Li, "Chinese Contemporary Art: Toward Diversity," in *China Onward: The Estella Collection*, by Britta Erickson (Humblebaek: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 139–40; Shen, "No U-Turn: Chinese Art After 1989," 70–71; Gao Minglu, "Changing Motivations of Chinese Contemporary Art Since the Mid 1990s," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 11, no. 2/3 (December 2012): 210–11; and, Wu, "Major Traditions in Contemporary Chinese Art," 21–22.

⁴² Li, "Contemporary Chinese Art and a Declining Culture," 27; Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China*, 26; Shen, "No U-Turn: Chinese Art After 1989," 69–70; Cheng, "Dappled China: 'Untamed Histories' - Surrounding the China Brand," 47.

⁴³ The canonical exhibitions cited in most texts on contemporary Chinese art are, in chronological order: "China Avant-garde" (Berlin, 1993), "China's New Art, Post-1989" (Hong Kong, 1993), "Mao Goes Pop: China Post-1989" (Sydney, 1993), "Inside Out: New Chinese Art" (New York, 1998), and "Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century" (Chicago, 1999). This list could also be expanded to include the post-2000 survey exhibitions "Paris-Pékin" (Paris, 2002), "Alors, la Chine?"

established a canon for the interpretation of Chinese art that still remains influential, enshrining Political Pop and Cynical Realism as the foremost tendencies. Biennales and triennials are likewise central to this narrative, from the first inclusion of Chinese artists at the Venice Biennale, also in 1993, to the founding of the Shanghai Biennale in 1996 and the Guangzhou Triennial in 2002.⁴⁴ Government co-option of these events has been linked to the gilding of China's global reputation, including the country's admission into the World Trade Organisation in 2001 and hosting of the Olympic Games in 2008.⁴⁵ The intersection of these various internationalising tendencies has prompted what Gladston identifies as a split between those who see the purpose of contemporary Chinese art as expression of an essential national identity, and those who view it as a corollary of European and North American post-modernist deconstructivism.⁴⁶ As Gladston explains

(Paris, 2002), "Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection" (Bern, 2005), and "China Onward: The Estella Collection" (Humblebæk, 2007), which followed a similar format and included many of the same artists. This form of survey exhibition remains an important forum for contemporary Chinese art, as illustrated by the recent success of "Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World" (2017) at the Guggenheim Museum, New York. Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China*, 17–19, 27–33; Jerome Silbergeld, "Chinese Art, Made-in-America: An Encounter with Geography, Ethnicity, Contemporaneity, and Cultural Chineseness," in *Outside In: Chinese x American x Contemporary x Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), 120–21; Tinari, "Between Palimpsest and Teleology: The Problem of 'Chinese Contemporary Art,'" 58, 64.

⁴⁴ Chinese art first appeared at the Venice Biennale in 1980, when a selection of Chinese embroideries were included in the Yugoslav pavilion; the 45th Venice Biennale of 1993, however, included a more substantial contingent of fourteen Chinese artists in the *Aperto* display, under the title "Passaggio a Oriente" ("Passage to the Orient"). China was assigned a national pavilion in the 50th Venice Biennale (2003) but, due to the SARS epidemic then sweeping the world, the opening of this pavilion was postponed until the next biennale, held in 2005. John Clark, "Between the Worlds: Chinese Art at Biennials since 1993," *Yishu* 4, no. 2 (2005): 43; Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China*, 17–18.

⁴⁵ For an extensive discussion of the shifting functions of the Shanghai Biennale, see Yao Yung-wen, "China's Modern Image - Contemporary Chinese Art," *Journal for Cultural Research* 21, no. 1 (2017): 51–75. John Clark has also frequently noted the propagandistic functions of both the Shanghai Biennale and Guangzhou Triennial in the large body of work that he has devoted to the topic of international exhibitions. See, for example: John Clark, "Three Recent Biennales in Asia: Gwangju, Busan and Shanghai," *Art and Australia* 42, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 39; John Clark, "Contemporary Asian Art at Biennales and Triennales: The 2005 Venice Biennale and Fukuoka Asian Triennale, the Sigg Collection, and the Yokohama and Guangzhou Triennales," *CAA.Reviews*, September 7, 2006, <http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/884#.W8f5VNp96UI>.

⁴⁶ See, for example: Paul Gladston, "Locating Displacement: Envisioning the Complex 'Diasporization' of Contemporary Chinese Art," in *Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century*, by Vishaka Desai (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2007), 246–52; Gladston, "Problematising the New Cultural Separatism: Critical Reflections on Contemporaneity and the Theorizing of Contemporary Chinese Art," 227–28; and, Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A Critical History*, 27–29.

in numerous articles, however, some of those scholars who adhere to the latter view blur this distinction by claiming a precedent for post-modern aesthetic strategies in Chinese cultural touchstones like Daoism, the *Yijing* and *feng shui*.⁴⁷ This apparently clear-cut binary is therefore subject to a greater depth of ambiguity than it might at first seem. The apparent split between essentialism and deconstructivism is also reflected in a parallel bias among mainland Chinese art critics – some involved in both debates – against overseas Chinese artists, who have been accused of playing up their Chineseness to satisfy European and North American curators.⁴⁸ Even in the brief terms in which these disputes are outlined here, however, their contradictions are evident, manifested above all in the arbitrary distinction drawn between mainland Chinese art expressing allegedly essential national traits, and the denigrated foregrounding of largely identical traits in the work of overseas Chinese artists. These debates can also be sited within a longer history of antagonism in the twentieth century between “Chinese-style” and “Western-style” painting discussed by John Clark who, like Gladston, has observed that distinctions between these schools of thought are not as defined as they seem, and that they should more accurately be seen as mutually interdependent constructions.⁴⁹ The final phase of the ’79 Narrative, associated with commercialisation, globalisation and government co-option of Chinese contemporary art from the 1990s to the present, is defined by this uncertainty and unease about the boundaries between the global and

⁴⁷ A detailed analysis of this argument is given in Paul Gladston, “Chan-Da-Da(o)-De-Construction or, The Cultural (Il)Logic of Contemporary Chinese ‘Avant-Garde’ Art,” *Yishu* 7, no. 4 (August 2008): 63–69.

⁴⁸ Melissa Chiu, “An Expanded Chinese Art History,” in *Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century*, by Vishaka Desai (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2007), 222; For a typical example of such criticism, see: Wang Nanming, “The Shanghai Art Museum Should Not Become a Market Stall in China for Western Hegemony - A Paper Delivered at the 2000 Shanghai Biennale (2000),” in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, by Wu Hung (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 353–54.

⁴⁹ John Clark, “Modern and Contemporary Chinese Art: Main Issues,” in *Negotiating Difference: Contemporary Chinese Art in the Global Context*, by Brigit Hopfener (Weimar: VDG, 2012), 33–47.

the local, though the rigid interpretive binaries that have formed around these issues tend to obscure more complex, ambiguous realities.

Although the conceptual framework of New Export China proposed in this dissertation, and the artists whose works are discussed as case-studies for this framework, can be positioned within this dominant narrative of contemporary Chinese art, it also suggests one of many potential readings that cut across its often uncriticised reiteration. Above all, the focus on porcelain and the extensive history of this medium's production in, and export from China resituates the work of contemporary artists within a broader context of artistic and cultural activity. Works of porcelain art created by Ai, Ah Xian, Liu and Ho also introduce necessary ambiguity into the assumption that "unofficial" contemporary art must be politically disruptive. Although many of their works do have political aims, their use of porcelain engenders a more complex criticality that transcends the simple binary of propaganda/dissidence, questioning not only current political conditions but also abstract ideas of historical authority and cultural identity. Their choice of porcelain, a medium long associated with China and Chineseness, likewise refutes the supposition that contemporary art in China was inspired by European and North American sources. At the same time, their combination of this choice with concepts and forms prevalent outside China further blurs the apparently clear boundaries between "East" and "West", tradition and innovation, to reveal the dynamic interpenetration of ideas that has always been central to artistic practice. These artists also present a more nuanced account of commercialisation and globalisation as formative influences, showing through their engagement with the history of porcelain export that these forces have long been present. Finally, works of New Export China clearly demonstrate the inability of binaries

like those asserted between essentialism and deconstructivism, mainland and overseas Chinese artists, to account for the complex realities of a global contemporary situation characterised by increased movement, overlapping and interaction of cultural contexts. This study of contemporary Chinese porcelain art is therefore an attempt to write a “wild history” (*ye shi* 野史), in the sense of this term recently outlined by Meiling Cheng rather than the journalistic speculation with which it is usually associated. Cheng defines wild histories as a counterpoint to official history (*zheng shi* 正史), ‘colourful, malleable, agile, and tactically peripheral’ narratives that introduce more subjective, speculative and subversive dimensions of meaning into inherited understandings of the past.⁵⁰ It is with this aim in mind that a definition of New Export China is proposed, in the hope that scholarly understandings of Chinese contemporary art can be expanded, rendered more multi-layered and complex.

Methodology

I have chosen several overlapping methodologies to trace expressions of these criteria of New Export China in works by Liu Jianhua, Ah Xian, Ai Weiwei and Sin-ying Ho, and thereby to uncover their reasons for choosing porcelain and the perspectival shifts that it allowed them to explore. Foremost among these methodologies is the gathering of information in interviews and conversations with the artists to gain a more informed understanding of their life experiences, interests, and intentions. Recalling his use of interviews as a source for *Contemporary Art in Shanghai: Conversations with Seven Chinese Artists* (2011) and *Avant-Garde Art Groups in China, 1979-1989* (2013), Gladston has observed that this approach generates ‘multi-voiced texts which open up differing

⁵⁰ Cheng, “Dappled China: ‘Untamed Histories’ - Surrounding the China Brand,” 45, 55.

cultural-interpretative perspectives’ and ‘exceed the limitations of any single cultural purview through the translational multiplication of meaning [in] a densely compacted palimpsest.’⁵¹ Gladston has also identified the main issues with the use of interviews: the unreliability of memory, misunderstandings across cultural difference, the impact of social or political pressures, the unconscious interpretive bias of the interviewer, and the impossibility of one person ever entirely comprehending another.⁵² Nevertheless, despite such limitations, I have found interviews to be a crucial means to test my ideas and interpretations, as well as the particular socio-cultural perspective from which they derive, which are inevitably altered or enriched by such exchange.

I have maintained regular contact and conducted formal interviews with both Ah Xian and Sin-ying Ho, as well as other artists (Guan Wei and Li Xiaofeng) whose work I decided not to include in my analysis but whose insights have enhanced my understanding of the topic. Ai Weiwei and Liu Jianhua have proven more difficult to contact, though a large body of interviews with each artist published in Chinese and English over the past two decades grants some access to their personal viewpoints. The existence of these interviews and the frequency with which porcelain and Jingdezhen are mentioned also further indicate the importance of this medium within their *œuvres* and the need for a comprehensive analysis of their porcelain works. Additionally, many interviews with Liu Jianhua have been published only in Chinese and have received little attention from scholars outside of China, so my translation and use of these represents a significant enriching of the current understanding of his work. Alongside interviews and personal

⁵¹ Paul Gladston, “Interviews and Documentary Sources in Chinese Contemporary Art Research: Towards the Critical Use of Polylogues,” *Art Libraries Journal* 39, no. 2 (2014): 20–21, 25–26; Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Art in Shanghai: Conversations with Seven Chinese Artists* (Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2011); Paul Gladston, *“Avant-Garde” Art Groups in China, 1979-1989* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013).

⁵² Gladston, “Interviews and Documentary Sources in Chinese Contemporary Art Research: Towards the Critical Use of Polylogues,” 22–24.

conversation, I have also carried out concentrated visual analyses, supplemented and supported by art-historical research. The heart of this thesis lies at the intersection of these modes of inquiry – triangulating the sometimes corresponding and at other times conflicting answers given by artists’ perspectives, their interpretive context, and my own understanding, informed by research, to generate a complex, multifaceted perspective.

In addition to art-historical methodologies, I have been informed throughout by theories of travel and translation, especially the concept of “transexperience” formulated by Chinese-French artist Chen Zhen and Australian-born, US-based art historian Melissa Chiu. These theories are particularly suited to the intertwined global and local aspects of porcelain’s material and historical identity, emphasising the role of movement across cultural, geographic and linguistic borders in the historic export trade and contemporary New Export China. It is from such sustained engagement with broader issues of travel and translation that the originality of this dissertation derives, positioning works of art related to China’s ceramic traditions in a new transcultural perspective.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives a range of definitions for “translation,” including the general understanding of it as ‘[the] process of turning from one language into another [and] the product of this.’ It should be noted, however, that this isn’t the first definition given, which is instead: ‘Transference ... or conveyance from one person, place, or condition to another,’ highlighting the relation of translation to movement between contexts – an important aspect of my own engagement with this term and its several meanings.⁵³ Etymologically, the *OED* explains that “translation” can be traced to the Old

⁵³ “Translation, N.,” in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press), accessed June 30, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204844>.

French *translation* or Latin *translātiōn-em*, nouns of action that can be approximated to the contemporary English, ‘a transporting.’⁵⁴ It is also related, as noted by postcolonial cultural critic Rey Chow, to the terms “tradition” and “betrayal,” adding another layer of meaning to the accusation often directed at translators of concealing or distorting – i.e. betraying – the translated text.⁵⁵ This distortion is likewise implicit in the etymology of “tradition,” associated by Raymond Williams in his *Keywords* with a handing over, ‘surrender or betrayal.’⁵⁶ Williams doesn’t define translation, yet his reading of tradition illustrates the ties between them that later proved so fecund for Chow, who asks in her *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*: ‘Tradition itself is nothing if it is not a transmission [so how is it] to be transmitted, to be passed on, if not through translation?’⁵⁷

Many authors have sought to answer this question, both before and after its articulation in Chow’s text. Foremost among these is German cultural critic Walter Benjamin, who conceived of translation in his foundational essay, “The Task of the Translator” (1921), as a creative act rather than a simple conversion, able not only to communicate that which is translated but to enhance its meaning, ‘to release the language held prisoner in the work by rewriting it.’⁵⁸ Russian linguist Roman Jakobson theorised translation in 1959 as something that occurs not only between different languages, but also *within* a language, and between linguistic and non-linguistic semiotic systems.⁵⁹ More recently,

⁵⁴ “Translation, N.,” in *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁵⁵ Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 182.

⁵⁶ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976), 268-269.

⁵⁷ Chow, *Primitive Passions*, 183.

⁵⁸ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2009), 42.

⁵⁹ Roman Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” in *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, by Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 144-51.

French semiotician Jacques Derrida invoked the narrative of the Tower of Babel to draw attention to that which remains untranslatable or that cannot be resolved into singular, conclusive form.⁶⁰ Feminist literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an important translator of and commentator on Derrida's work, adopted a postcolonial perspective on his ideas in her essay "The Politics of Translation" (1993), arguing that the translator must 'surrender' to that which they are translating, they must open themselves, through intimate contact with an Other, to the possibility of mutual transformation.⁶¹

Spivak's exhortation recalls the etymological ties that bind translation with transference, transportation, and the surrender of tradition, emphasising the psychological or even physical crossing of cultural and temporal boundaries involved in any act of translation. Her work and, indirectly, that of Derrida and earlier theorists of translation cited above can therefore be understood as a precedent for anthropological theorisations of travel, notably including James Clifford's concept of dwelling-within-motion and Mary Louise Pratt's definition of the "contact zones" that develop between cultures.⁶² In the field of art history, Margo Machida is noteworthy for her incorporation of such theoretical models of travel and translation into her analysis of Asian-American art, most recently including the idea of an "oceanic imaginary" as a theoretical framework for the complex cultural identifications generated by islander artists.⁶³ In my own research, drawing on

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, "From *Des Tours de Babel*," in *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, by Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, trans. Joseph F. Graham (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 218-227.

⁶¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Politics of Translation," in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 179-200.

⁶² James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁶³ See, for example: Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Machida, "Convergent Conversations: Contemporary Art in Asian America," in *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture*, edited by Rebecca M. Brown and Deborah S. Hutton (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 264-89; and, Machida, "Pacific Itineraries: Islands and Oceanic Imaginaries in Contemporary Asian American Art," *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas*, no. 3 (2017): 9-34.

Chow's pivotal concept of "cultural translation" as a means to move beyond reductive binaries of East and West, original and translation, to reveal such categories as equally constructed, 'equally corrupt ... participants in contemporary world culture,' I argue that works of New Export China exist in a constant state of translation.⁶⁴ Globally mobile yet grounded in a specifically Chinese local context, they ensure the transmission of ancient porcelain production methods while simultaneously enacting a mutual transformation of both origin and destination, surrendering to multiple possible spheres of meaning.

For this research, Chen Zhen and Melissa Chiu's understanding of transexperience has been chosen as the most potent and appropriate crystallisation of such ideas for analysis of contemporary works in porcelain by the artists selected for discussion. Like the latter, before his untimely death in 2000, Chen travelled and lived extensively outside of China and used his experiences of travel and translation to create deeply complex explorations of fractured cultural identity. Born in Shanghai in 1955, and so of the same generation as Ah Xian, Sin-ying Ho, Ai Weiwei and Liu Jianhua, Chen moved to Paris in 1986 and lived there until his death.⁶⁵ He first defined transexperience in the idiosyncratic yet appropriate form of an imagined dialogue between himself and his fictional alter-ego Zhu Xian, in an exhibition text published in 1998 by the Centre for Contemporary Art, Kitakyushu, two years before his death. Among reflections on travel, cultural interaction, Chineseness, and the need to surpass the binary of "East" and "West", Chen links transexperience with the Chinese word *zou* (走), usually translated as "movement" or "to walk", but also implying a much broader range of meanings that includes searching, wandering, escape, abandonment, desertion and seclusion. These coalesce in Chen's argument to suggest a 'spiritual running-away ... [a breaking] out of one's own "cocoon,"

⁶⁴ Chow, *Primitive Passions*, 195.

⁶⁵ Lisa G. Corrin, ed., *Chen Zhen* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2001), 6.

and [the courage to] to “break away from one’s own self”.⁶⁶ The concept is associated with transmission, transition and transcendence, united by the prefix “trans-”, defined by the *OED* as meaning ‘across, through, over, to or on the other side of, beyond, outside of, from one place, person, thing, or state to another.’⁶⁷ At first, then, a direct correlation seems to emerge between transexperience and travel, implying a link between the two. Yet “transexperience” can describe more than feelings of displacement and liberation fostered by global travel, pointing instead to a state of mind attainable by anyone, in any situation. To cite Chen:

[Transexperience] does not mean the outward signs of an individual having travelled all over the world ... [but rather] indicates a type of internal “loneliness of spirituality and the overlapping of experiences,” a ... “cultural homelessness” [whereby] you do not belong to anybody, yet are in possession of everything.⁶⁸

Travel is an important and frequent catalyst but not an essential condition for this state. Liu Jianhua, for example, has never lived outside of China but could be said to exemplify a “transexperiential” artistic practice in his movement between different media, styles and thematic concerns, striving to avoid the restrictive clarity of singular definition and the apparently unavoidable dictates of his past. The defining trait of transexperience becomes its transgressive potential, recognised by Chiu in her use of Chen’s theory in *Breakout: Chinese Art outside China* (2006). Chiu views transexperience as a means to depart from the fixed binaries of homeland/destination, global/local, past/present, and original/translation, to focus on the processes of change *in-between* these states, ‘an

⁶⁶ Chen Zhen, *Transexperiences* (Kitakyushu: Centre for Contemporary Art Kitakyushu, 1998), 1, 82n2.

⁶⁷ “Trans-, Prefix,” in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press), accessed August 30, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204575>.

⁶⁸ Chen, *Transexperiences*, 1–5, 82n2.

identity in flux, constantly changing and responding to influences [rather than] swinging pendulum-like between two mutually exclusive terms.’⁶⁹

As such, transexperience can be productively associated with postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha’s influential assertion of the fluid and always proximate “Third Space” created in the process of linguistic or textual communication as the locus for a model of cultural identity that rejects the fixity of essentialism. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha defines Third Space as the ‘contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation’ between the source of a linguistic statement (that is, the speaker or writer), the subject of that statement, and its receiver (the listener or reader). It is here, he asserts, that meaning is produced in an ‘act of interpretation [that] is quite literally neither [of] the one nor the other,’ but that incorporates the shifting subject position of each party in the exchange, as well as the influence of varying contexts and frames of reference.⁷⁰ The meaning of any statement is therefore neither stable nor fixed, but constantly subject to a process of translation and recombination. Applying this concept to the realm of culture, Bhabha, like Chiu, asserted a ‘need to think beyond narratives of originary ... subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural

⁶⁹ Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China*, 45. Similar ideas have also been explored by Ah Xian, Singing Ho and Ni Haifeng, and by art historian Francis Maravillas. Ah Xian’s thoughts on living in-between cultures are most clearly expressed in his oft-cited statement “Self-Exile of the Soul,” *TAASA Review* 8, no. 1 (1999): 8–9; Ho discussed her thoughts on the in-between with the author of this dissertation in a series of interviews conducted at the School of Art & Design, Australian National University, in April 2017; Ni Haifeng’s ideas can be found in Ni Haifeng and Marianne Brouwer, “A Zero Degree of Writing and Other Subversive Moments: An Interview with Ni Haifeng,” in *Ni Haifeng: No-Man’s Land*, by Roel Arkesteijn and Ni Haifeng (Amsterdam: Artimo, 2003), 46–55; and Maravillas’ concepts of “haunted cosmopolitanism” and *zhongjian* are outlined in Francis Maravillas, “Haunted Cosmopolitanisms: Specters of Chinese Art in the Diaspora”; and Thomas J. Berghuis & Francis Maravillas, “The Middle Passage - Contemporary Art in and out of China,” in *Zhongjian: Midway*, by Jin Sha (Wollongong: Wollongong City Gallery, 2009), 30–34.

⁷⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 52-56.

differences,' arguing for the recognition of '[those] "in-between" spaces [that] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood – singular or communal.'⁷¹

Although *The Location of Culture* is dedicated to literary manifestations of Third Space, Bhabha also traces its expression in the work of several contemporary artists, including African-American artist Renée Green and self-proclaimed Nuyorican (New York/Puerto Rican) Pepón Osorio. He associates these artists with what Mexican-American scholar Tomas Ybarra-Frausto has defined as the aesthetic of *rasquachismo*:

... utilisation of available resources for syncretism, juxtaposition, and integration
... a sensibility attuned to mixtures and confluence [merging] found material and
satiric wit [in] the manipulation of *rasquache* artefacts, codes and sensibilities.⁷²

This eclectic, recombinatory aesthetic immediately recalls Chen and Chiu's vision of a transexperiential artistic practice characterised by an 'overlapping of experiences' and an 'identity in flux.' Both concepts can in turn be associated with the increasing visibility of global movement, communication and interconnection within contemporary society, or what Bhabha has identified as 'the demography of the new internationalism [in] the history of postcolonial migration [and] the poetics of exile.'⁷³ The *rasquache* or migrant artist becomes in this context, alongside the nomad, the refugee and the global traveller, a heroic protagonist of what Frantz Fanon identified in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) as the age of emancipation when the apparent solidity of past narratives is dissolved in 'that fluctuating movement ... which will be the signal for everything to be called into

⁷¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2.

⁷² Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, "Chicano Movement/Chicano Art," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 133-134.

⁷³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 6-7.

question ... the zone of occult instability where the people dwell.⁷⁴ Fanon, too, famously described a transexperiential mode of being in his earlier, ground-breaking tome *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952):

... the real *leap* consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world in which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself. And it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate my cycle of freedom.⁷⁵

These and other perspectives are applied in this dissertation alongside Chen's and Chiu's concepts of transexperience to define the transcultural sphere of meaning in which New Export China is situated.

Finally, the third methodology I have used in my analysis is that of focused historical research into the global porcelain export trade between China, Europe and the US. I have chosen to focus on the European and US trade because these are the regions to which artists discussed have predominantly travelled or emigrated, and in which their works have been most often displayed and interpreted. Nevertheless, it is not the precise history of the ceramics trade that is of interest – this has been comprehensively discussed elsewhere.⁷⁶ Rather, it is the conceptual implications of this history and the issues it raises for contemporary Chinese artists that here attain most importance. As prominent ceramics historian Stacey Pierson has made clear in a recent article, the

⁷⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 168.

⁷⁵ Idem, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto, 1986), 218, 231.

⁷⁶ See, for example: Carswell, *Blue & White: Chinese Porcelain around the World*; Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History*; Stacey Pierson, ed., *Transfer: The Influence of China on World Ceramics* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2009); Vimalin Rujivacharakul, ed., *Collecting China: The World, China, and a Short History of Collecting* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2010).

enduring effects of exported ceramics, the conceptual implications they held from the opening of the export trade, and the multi-centred nature of this trade require us to

[look] away from surviving ... objects toward the traces that these objects left behind – literary and pictorial references, changes in local approaches to ceramic production, and importantly the physical spaces for Chinese ceramics in different cultures.⁷⁷

While each of the ‘traces’ Pierson specifies are investigated in this thesis, my argument rests on an equally important, though unmentioned fifth area of study: the continuing influence of the historic export trade on contemporary global perceptions of Chinese porcelain, affecting both its reception by exhibition viewers and use by artists. To clarify and better understand this influence, I have identified key themes derived from the history of the China trade that are expressed in the work of contemporary artists, and that embody the potential of transexperience to surpass conventional binaries. I hope that, by organising my argument in this manner, I can achieve what historian Yujie Li terms a ‘multi-dimensional rhizome of knowledge that connects the local and global, the high and the low, and the old and the new.’⁷⁸ Or, following the logic of transexperience and the Third Space, an in-between passage for the definition of New Export China that can transgress the constraints of established art-historical hierarchies.

Within each of these three methodological frameworks, especially when interacting with artists and theorising the experiential dimensions of travel across cultural contexts,

⁷⁷ Stacey Pierson, “The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History,” *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (March 2012): 12–13.

⁷⁸ Yujie Julia Li, “From Translation to the Transnational: Reading Art for the 21st-Century Classroom,” *Studies in Art Education* 53, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 203.

my personal history and view of the world have been very influential. As an immigrant, born in England and resident there until the age of sixteen, when my family relocated to Australia, I have long felt a similar sense of living in-between countries and am familiar with the peculiar experience of living a life divided, though fortunate to have relocated within a single linguistic and cultural context. I have also, however, albeit for a relatively short duration, experienced the challenges posed by relocation to a completely different culture and language: in 2014, I received a Prime Minister's Asia-Australia Endeavour Post-Graduate Award to fund a year of intensive language-study in Beijing. This period of study not only allowed me to broaden my knowledge of Chinese language and culture but provided an insight into the difficulties faced by those who leave the country of their birth for unfamiliar environments. Subsequent journeys to mainland China and Taiwan, as well as my translation of Chinese-language texts, have enriched my awareness of these difficulties and contributed to my understanding of the state of being that Chen and Chiu refer to as "transexperience". It is also important to note here that my current home in Australia – a nation that is geographically part of Asia but culturally tied for many of its inhabitants to Europe and North America, and so a consummate case-study of an in-between existence – has been pivotal to the formation of my critical perspective on the arts of China. The study of contemporary Chinese art is particularly dynamic and developed in this country, where leading scholars including not only Clark and Gladston but Claire Roberts, Geremie Barmé and Linda Jaivin, among others, have contributed to global knowledge of this field by expanding and adding nuance to existing narratives.

The argument

This dissertation has three principal aims: first, to unpack the motivations underlying the use of porcelain by contemporary Chinese artists; second, to analyse issues of personal, cultural and historical identity that this material enables them to explore; and third, to use these insights in developing a definition of “New Export China” as an open-ended framework through which to read their work. Taking Liu Jianhua, Ah Xian, Ai Weiwei and Sin-ying Ho as representative case-studies, I have identified five main reasons for their decision to use porcelain: the medium’s immaculate historical pedigree; its suitability for mass-production; their personal association of ceramics with their Chinese heritage; the material appeal of glazed porcelain; and its resonance with broader issues of cultural identity. These motivations provide an organisational framework for the five chapters of the dissertation, each of which presents an exploration of five corresponding criteria that can be used to define New Export China as a field of creative practice: a critical and revisionist view of history; an uneasy relationship with artisanal or industrial production; a focus on personal experience and concerns; an awareness of the visual and tactile appeal of porcelain; and, finally, interrogation of the etymological association between china, the material and China, the country. Experiences of travel and translation are central to each of these criteria, underlying and uniting the dissertation to form an open-ended interpretive paradigm for considering a certain type of Chinese ceramics and, more broadly, a counter-narrative within the field of contemporary Chinese art history that accounts for spaces in-between multiple contexts and frames of reference.

The dissertation opens with the most significant impulse driving contemporary artistic use of porcelain: an attraction to the historic and cultural weight of the medium, and a corresponding desire to interrogate this authority by introducing new ambiguity into the

reiteration of mythologised historical narratives. This impulse is analysed with reference to works by Ai Weiwei and Liu Jianhua, both of whom have consistently drawn attention to the fragility and artificiality of conventional histories, employing artistic strategies of destruction, preservation, containment, and reproduction in a wide range of works from Ai's now iconic *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* (1995; fig. 2) to Liu's refined evocations of Song-dynasty (960-1279) aesthetics in a series of celadon (*qingci* 青瓷) glazed sculptures created between 2008 and 2012, of which *End of 2012* (2011) is a consummate example. The making of most of these works in Jingdezhen, either partially or completely by hired artisans, also reveals the importance of this city for the development of New Export China, especially its current reputation as a centre for the manufacture of historical reproductions. In the presentation of their work, however, both Liu and Ai frequently conceal or marginalise the role of hired labour, even while exploring themes of modular and mass-production.

This tension is analysed in the second chapter, in which the various approaches to the multiple in Ai's *Sunflower seeds* (2010; fig. 51), Liu's *Regular-Fragile* (2001-10; fig. 11) and Diduk's *The vase project: Made in China – Landscape in blue* (2004-06; figs. 52-54) illustrate a continuum of interactions between artist and artisan, from exploitation to the promise of empowerment. The historical resonance of porcelain remains apparent, especially in exhibitions by Liu at Oxburgh Hall, Norfolk (2007; figs. 35-40) and by Ai at Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire (2014; figs. 45-50) that recall the style of massed porcelain display once popular in European stately homes. Once again, however, history is neither faithfully recreated nor uncritically celebrated, with Liu's installation creating a spectacle of malign occupation and certain pieces in Ai's exhibition casting doubt on the boundary between fact and fiction. Both artists expose the potentially destabilising material mass

and industrial origins of the porcelain once prized by aristocratic collectors for its exotic appeal, while concealing their own reliance on hired labour and contemporary networks of global exchange.

In addition to these deconstructive aims, porcelain has been selected by migrant artists like Ah Xian and Sin-ying Ho as a vehicle for reconstructions of their Chineseness, though again its transcultural history has prompted a realisation that cultural identity is a more complex fabrication – a tension explored in the third chapter. In Ah Xian's *China china* porcelain busts (1998-2004; figs. 33, 68-74, 114, 117) and Ho's *Identity* (2001; fig. 55), *Binary code: The link* (2004; fig. 63), *Matrix no. 1* (2005; figs. 64, 65) and *Gibberish no. 3* (2005; fig. 60), culture dissolves into a combination of linguistic and ornamental codes, shot through with layers of meaning that derive from the multiple private worlds veiled beneath the surface of an apparently unified cultural classification.⁷⁹ In contrast to this constructivist approach to identity, similar desires for cultural revival have prompted a more essentialist vision of China and Chineseness epitomised by Li Jianshen and Caroline Cheng (figs. 61, 62, 75, 76). Li has given form to his imagined visions of an idyllic classical China with his Sanbao International Ceramics Village art residency initiative just outside of Jingdezhen, while Cheng offers ceramicists visiting the city an opportunity to imbue their work with an "authentic" Chineseness at her own residency centre, The Pottery Workshop. Despite their different approaches to cultural identity, all four artists rely on porcelain as a vehicle for explorations of self, family and heritage, and a medium for the transmission of their discoveries to the world.

⁷⁹ The title *China china* is preferred in this dissertation to the frequent variation *China, China* which, although more grammatically correct, doesn't adequately convey the artist's intended play on the two meanings of the word "china".

Beyond and usually before any engagement with historic or cultural meaning, however, Ai, Liu, Ah Xian and Ho have all shown a consistent appreciation for the visual and tactile appeal of porcelain, using this variously to critique consumerism and commodity culture or to imbue that which seems shallow with a more profound depth of meaning. Works by Ai, Liu and Ho discussed in the fourth chapter of this dissertation seem to emphasise appearance over depth: Ai's *The Wave* (2005; fig. 78), *Bowl of pearls* (2006; fig. 80), and *Watermelon* (fig. 81), *Oil spill* (fig. 82), and *Dress* (fig. 83) series produced from 2006, for example, are aesthetically appealing but appear to lack meaningful content aside from their status as commodities and their association with the artist's personal brand. Yet beneath their lustrous, eye-catching surfaces lies a scathing critique of contemporary consumerism and the commodification of Chinese art that can be found also in Liu's *Obsessive memories* (1998-2000; figs. 84, 85, 87) series depicting women sprawled on armchairs and bathtubs, outwardly lavish but ultimately empty and unfulfilling. A more positive note is sounded in Ho's *Confucius, Jesus Christ and John Lennon no. 1 and no. 2* (2003-06; figs. 88-91), *Music* (2004; fig. 96), *Hero no. 1 and no. 2* (2007-09; figs. 97-99) and *Trilogy no. 1 and no. 2* (2007-09; figs. 100, 101), in which commodity culture and the entertainment industry are shown to carry the possibility of a greater depth through the use of pop-culture icons as emblematic of the artist's life experiences. These works continue the constructivism of Ho's earlier work, but rather than "authentic" signs and symbols of different cultures, the "superficial" icons of consumerism take precedence – a parallel that reveals both to be just as contrived and liable to shatter to pieces as a finely-crafted porcelain vase, and just as beguiling to the eye and the hand.

Finally, the ambiguous divide between inside and outside, authentic and superficial, is again cast into doubt in works by Liu and Ah Xian discussed in the fifth chapter in which

the presentation of porcelain as a stand-in for the exotic Chinese Other is complicated by the introduction of a more universal bodily dimension of meaning. In Ah Xian's *China china* busts, for example, markers of a stereotyped Chineseness are transformed into a form of self-expressive embellishment, analogous with a tattoo. Like Ho, he stages a reclamation of that which could be considered superficial or contrived, reorienting it as a badge of pride to be celebrated and cherished, a colourful cocoon that the wearer can adopt or cast off at will. In contrast to Ah Xian's meditative, empathic approach to the human form, Liu's *Games* series (figs. 34, 106) of dismembered, decapitated women "served up" on plates reduce bodily identity to an objectified sexuality, transforming the women represented into little more than emblems of their sex. Liu and many writers on his work have interpreted these as a critique of the global commodification of Chinese art, yet their implicit misogyny undermines any critical content. This is especially true when the works are displayed outside China, where the historical resonance of the *qipao* (旗袍) worn by the women depicted is overshadowed by a disturbing gendered violence, so out of place in European, Australian and North American arts venues accustomed to a robust critique of gender disparity and misogyny. Despite their different approaches to the subject, both Ah Xian and Liu insert a disruptive bodily dimension of meaning into the reiteration of the exotic, emphasising its instability as a form of costume that can be adopted or discarded at will in different cultural and critical contexts.

Each of these chapters proposes and analyses a defining feature of what is here termed New Export China, in addition to outlining the principal motivations for the choice of porcelain as an artistic medium by Ai Weiwei, Liu Jianhua, Sin-ying Ho, Ah Xian and, by extension, other contemporary Chinese artists. These generic features and motivations are encapsulated in the five forms of tension discussed in each chapter. First, the tension

between an attraction to the historic and cultural significance of porcelain and a desire to undermine or otherwise destabilise this authority. Second, the tension between each artist's harnessing of the industrial potential of porcelain for mass-production in artistic explorations of multiplicity, and their need to differentiate their work from the everyday output of the artisans they employ. Third, the tension between a desire to reconnect with a lost sense of Chineseness and a realisation that all forms of cultural identity are composite fabrications. Fourth, the tension between the superficial appeal of porcelain and the depths of meaning concealed beneath its attractive façade, some of which imply a critique of superficiality itself while others reveal that even the most apparently trivial image can contain a wealth of personal associations. Finally, the fifth form of tension contained is that between the objectifying and socially isolating impulses of exoticism, and the bodily experiences and desires that reveal our shared humanity.

Underlying each of these tensions is an enduring awareness of the mobility and flexibility with which porcelain, as a medium long exported and enjoyed around the world, is indelibly associated. These artists and their work exist in an in-between space of artistic practice, at the dynamic intersection of cultural and historic contexts. At the same time, they are grounded not only by the specific settings of their life experiences but also by a fascination with Jingdezhen, and with the clay from which the artisans of this city have built its reputation. The term "New Export China" is therefore intended not as a rigid classification, but an open-ended framework for these and other works of contemporary Chinese art, and the innovation of this thesis is to displace the assumption that works by Chinese artists are reflective only of a Chinese context with a renewed recognition of the multiple contexts and frames of reference in which all works of art exist, translating across time and place. To cite Chen Zhen, the work of these artists is viewed here as an

‘overlapping of experiences’ that reflects their various perspectives on history, culture and identity, one of many mediums adopted in a lifelong construction of self within and in response to multiple contexts of influence.

Chapter 1: Re-viewing the past

For contemporary Chinese artists, one of the primary attractions of porcelain, and of Jingdezhen as the Porcelain Capital, is the long history of production and exchange with which material and city are associated, imbuing them with a potent symbolism and historic authority. Yet artists like Ai Weiwei, Liu Jianhua, Sin-ying Ho and Ah Xian neither uncritically perpetuate nor unequivocally reject this authority, but instead use porcelain to uncover and interrogate slippages between historical fact and mythologised fiction, revealing the fragility of even the most entrenched assumptions.

In his photographic triptych/performance *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* (1995; fig. 2), as well as the less studied but conceptually similar photograph *Breaking of two blue-and-white "Dragon" bowls* (1996; figs. 27-30), Ai is pictured destroying what are alleged to be ceramics of the Han (206 BCE-220 CE) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties. Both works derive their symbolic and affective power from the historic importance with which the Han and Qing dynasties are invested in representations of Chinese national identity inside and outside of China, respectively, the implication seeming to be that the artist seeks to assert independence from such identification. Rather than an iconoclastic protest, however, Ai's photographs are read in this discussion as a more nuanced attempt to introduce ambiguity into the reiteration of historical narratives, to expose the acts of selection and distortion underlying such accounts of history, and to return the depicted ceramics to the currents of lived existence. History is thereby recast as a transexperiential field: an accumulation of images and events between the past, as lived reality/retrospective artifice, and the present, as the point from which past events are reformulated to reflect current realities.

Alongside the “creative destruction” of Ai’s photographic/performative engagements with ceramics, several other works created by the artist and by Liu Jianhua during the 1990s and later record acts of preservation and restoration or reproduction that likewise appropriate the potency of historical narratives only to undermine the certainty of their authority. In Ai’s *Untitled* (1993; fig. 6), *Tang-dynasty courtesan in bottle* (1994; fig. 7), *Souvenir from Beijing* (2002; fig. 8), *Dust to dust* (2009; fig. 9) and *Spouts* (2015; fig. 10), he parodies museological methods of conservation, classification and display while at the same time demonstrating his own expert knowledge and connoisseurship of ceramics and other antiquities. These works, in which fragments of the past are preserved within a range of vessels and named to suit Ai’s personal typologies, imply that preservation can be more harmful than beneficial, masking often morally ambiguous collection methods, radically simplifying the diversity of past societies, and removing preserved objects from the fullness of lived existence.

Liu conveys similar ideas in *Regular-Fragile* (2001-10; fig. 11), for which contemporary commodities were reproduced in *qingbai* (青白) “blue/green-white” glazed porcelain to highlight the fragility of the things with which we surround ourselves. In this chapter, the Song-dynasty origins of *qingbai* take precedence, deliberately recalled by the artist to evoke parallels with the growth of global trade and the elegant restraint of literati aesthetics, to which Liu skilfully alludes in both *Regular-Fragile* and his more recent celadon-glazed sculptural works shown in the exhibitions “Horizon” (2009-10) and “Liu Jianhua” (2012). Like Ai, Liu is a connoisseur of ceramics and possesses a comprehensive knowledge of historical types cultivated not only by years of study but also by his past employment as an assembly-line ceramicist in Jingdezhen. In a counterpoint to Ai’s return of alleged antiques to the ebb and flow of the everyday, Liu isolates and abstracts

contemporary commodities in a pale monochrome, adopting what he has termed a “no meaning, no content” (*wu yiyi, wu neirong* 无意义, 无内容) approach in which sight and touch are given precedence over concept. His use of a historically resonant material, however, enhanced by his use of Song-dynasty glazes and aesthetics, imbue these works with another layer of significance as a revelation of the emptiness and fragility of even this much-vaunted moment in China’s national narrative.

This simultaneous reverence for and undermining of the continued authority of the past finds consummate expression in the third group of works considered in this chapter, in which destruction, preservation and reproduction are combined in the act of replication. Ai’s *Blue-and-white moonflask* (1996; fig. 24) and *Ghost Gu coming down the mountain* (2005-06; figs. 19-23), replicas of Qing- and Yuan-dynasty ceramics produced by artisans in Jingdezhen, lovingly imitate the physical forms of the past yet, by the very act of imitation, dispel the historical aura with which these forms are associated, exposing it once again as a calculated fabrication. Suspicion of fabrication has also long coloured interpretations of Ai’s other ceramic works, further complicating their relationship to historical narrative while strengthening the artist’s connection to Jingdezhen, where reproduction now constitutes a principal source of revenue for professional ceramicists.

These artisans are only the latest manifestation of a long tradition of reproduction in the Porcelain Capital that can be traced to the formative stages of the industry during the Tang dynasty (618-907), while the history of the city itself has been subject to a parallel process of fabrication, often more myth than reality. Pivotal moments in this mythology are analysed throughout this chapter alongside works by Ai and Liu, focusing on the city’s Han-dynasty founding, its naming by a Song emperor, development of blue-and-white during the Yuan and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties, and the celebrated “golden age”

under the Qing Kangxi (r.1661-1722), Yongzheng (r.1723-35) and Qianlong (r.1735-96) Emperors, all central to understanding the *oeuvres* of Ai, Liu and other contemporary Chinese artists working in porcelain. This is the narrative of porcelain production and export in China on which these artists have drawn for inspiration, and which motivated several of them to choose the medium. Yet their desire to interrogate and question the authority of such narratives has prompted a shared realisation that historical fact is often little more than mythologised fiction, imbued with an impression of unshakeable solidity by constant reiteration but always vulnerable to the disruptive influence of the transient, contingent and prosaic.

Ai Weiwei's Dropping a Han-dynasty urn (1995) and the fragility of historical fact

Although *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* (fig. 2) could be termed a photographic triptych in which ceramics are represented rather than a work of ceramic art, it seems fitting to open this dissertation with an analysis of this piece, considering its importance for Ai's subsequent engagement with porcelain and significance for contemporary Chinese art in general. The work can and has been interpreted in many ways – as documentation for a performance, self-portrait in the guise of iconoclast or, most often, as a defiant statement of resistance to national and political authority. These and many other interpretations, however, overlook two crucial aspects that are presented here as most important: the artifice of photography, and the use of a ceramic artefact. Images produced by photographic means are not infallible or completely trustworthy and can very easily be manipulated to supply different meanings. Ceramics, on the other hand, possess a potent affective and, especially in China, historical significance foregrounded in Ai's work by the shattering of the vessel and its identification as a Han-dynasty "urn".

This era in China's history is central to definitions of Chinese nationality, so on one level the breaking of a Han artefact implies a parallel fracturing of the foundational myths of nationhood. At the same time, as illustrated by the role of the Han dynasty in narratives of the development of Jingdezhen, the authority of this historical era is based on faith and adherence to tradition, rather than empirical certainty, and is motivated by a desire to enhance prestige rather than a commitment to historiographic accuracy. *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* is therefore reinterpreted here as an obscuring of the straightforward reiteration of such historical narratives, exposing the artifice of interpretation.

Reframing Dropping a Han-dynasty urn as an engagement with the affective and historical associations of ceramics

Ai Weiwei was among the first Chinese contemporary artists to incorporate ceramics within his artistic practice and is undoubtedly the most globally recognised. *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* (1995), one of the first pieces Ai created following his return to Beijing in 1993 after over a decade living in New York, and an important early stimulus for his rise to global fame, is also one of the earliest in which the artist engages with the history of ceramics in China and has been compared in terms of influence with French Modernist artist Marcel Duchamp's (1887-1968) *Fountain* (1917), which Garth Clark, among others, has cited as a precedent for Ai's use of a ceramic object for a conceptual statement.⁸⁰ Duchamp, along with other pivotal figures in the twentieth-century canon

⁸⁰ Garth Clark, "Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn (Ceramic Works, 5000 BCE - 2010 CE)," *ArtAsiaPacific*, no. 70 (October 2010): 159. Clark identifies *Dropping a Han dynasty urn* as part of 'a small group of 20th-century ceramics that have changed the face of contemporary art,' including not only *Fountain* but also Isamu Noguchi's *The Queen* (1931), Meret Oppenheim's *Object* (1936), Kazuo Yagi's *Walk* (1954), and Jeff Koons' *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (1988). Ibid. Adam Welch has similarly imbued *Dropping a Han dynasty urn* with an epochal significance, comparing it with Peter Voulkos' *Rocking Pot* (1956). Adam Welch, "I Hate Ceramics: Ai Weiwei Drops the Urn," *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, no. 82 (2010): 84.



Figure 2: Ai Weiwei (b.1957), Dropping a Han-dynasty urn, 1995, gelatin silver photographs on paper, 192 x 180.8 cm (each); Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.

of European and North American art like Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol, is frequently cited as a formative influence in studies of contemporary Chinese art. This reflects the assumption outlined above of a one-way line of inspiration running from Europe and the US to China, where the avant-gardist innovations of Duchamp and others were allegedly essential to the fostering of a contemporary form of artistic practice from the late 1970s.⁸¹ The parallel drawn between Duchamp's *Fountain* and *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn*, however, though indebted to this entrenched stereotype, suggests a more nuanced comparison, placing the works alongside each other as pioneering statements of global contemporary ceramic art. They could also be compared for their mutual survival only as photographs of a performative act, representing ceramic objects that have long since been misplaced or destroyed. Nevertheless, this comparison ignores their creation in the very distinct contexts of early twentieth-century New York and late twentieth-century Beijing, and the very different ceramic objects appropriated by each artist to achieve their conceptual aims.

Dropping a Han-dynasty urn comprises three monochrome photographic prints, each measuring almost two metres in height and width, displayed as a record of the titular action at beginning, middle and end. In the first frame, Ai is pictured standing in front of a nondescript brick wall, delicately balancing an urn in his fingers; in the second, he has moved his hands apart and the urn is shown falling toward the ground; in the third, his hands remain in the same position, but the urn lies in pieces at his feet, while the artist continues to stare impassively into the lens of the camera. The triptych can be read from several different perspectives: as a record of a performative act, a portrait of the artist,

⁸¹ Tinari, "Between Palimpsest and Teleology," 57–58. Ai Weiwei is also regularly compared with both Beuys and Warhol. See, for example, Max Delany, ed., *Andy Warhol / Ai Weiwei* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2015), published to accompany the exhibition of the same name held at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2015–16.

or an illustration of an attitude toward the past, and especially the past represented in China by ceramics.

Like *Fountain*, Ai's photographic triptych is usually interpreted as an iconoclastic gesture of defiance and a questioning of established authority, not necessarily as canon-defining as the earlier work but allegedly premised on similar principles. This reading foregrounds the event recorded by the camera, marginalising the inherent qualities of the medium of photography and Ai's choice of a ceramic artefact as the vehicle for his statement. Instead, the act of "dropping" is given precedence, described variously as vandalism, a 'wilful destruction' of heritage, symbolic severing of ties with history, provocation of art-historical authority, and a rebuttal to the conventional view of 'ancient artefacts [as] sacred, precious and priceless.'⁸² Some commentators have linked Ai's performance to the methodical obliteration of the past by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, defining it as a satirical re-enactment of this 'blind obedience' to Mao Zedong Thought at a time in China when Maoism was increasingly being overtaken by a market-oriented political vision.⁸³ Others position these photographs as 'a portrait of the artist as an iconoclast,' associating Ai's impassive expression and the matter-of-fact documentation

⁸² See, for example: Charles Merewether, ed., *Ai Weiwei - Works: Beijing 1993-2003* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003), 13–14; Sarah Tiffin, "Refined Anarchy," in *The 5th Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, by Lynne Seear and Suhanya Raffel (Brisbane, QLD: Queensland Art Gallery, 2006), 52; Charles Merewether, "Made in China," *Parkett*, no. 81 (2007): 148–49; Mark Wilson and Sue-an Van der Zijpp, eds., *Ai Weiwei* (Rotterdam: Groninger Museum, 2008), 9; Suhanya Raffel, "Ai Weiwei," in *The China Project*, by Suhanya Raffel, William Yang, and Zhang Xiaogang (South Brisbane, QLD: Queensland Art Gallery, 2009), 145; Clark, "Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn (Ceramic Works, 5000 BCE - 2010 CE)," 159; Welch, "I Hate Ceramics: Ai Weiwei Drops the Urn," 84; Juliet Bingham, ed., *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds* (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 14; Yap Chin-Chin, "Devastating History," *ArtAsiaPacific*, no. 78 (June 2012): 81; Christie Davies, "Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn, Ceramic Works 5000 B.C.-A.D. 2010," *New Criterion*, February 2012, 47.

⁸³ Wilson and Van der Zijpp, *Ai Weiwei*, 14; Dario Gamboni, "Portrait of the Artist as an Iconoclast," in *Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn (Ceramic Works, 5000 BCE - 2010 CE)*, by Gregg Moore and Richard Torchia (Glenside, PA: Arcadia University Art Gallery, 2010), 86; Andrew Cohen, "Ai Weiwei," *ArtAsiaPacific*, no. 74 (August 2011): 78–79; Adrian Locke, "All Eyes on Ai Weiwei," *Ceramic Review*, no. 275 (October 2015): 16.

of the performance with an indifference to authority, an inversion of the rage with which such acts of iconoclasm are usually associated in favour of a more 'refined anarchism'.⁸⁴

These readings, however, presuppose the antiquity of the urn – as several writers have observed, Ai has experience with the making of reproductions and commissioned a series of "fake" porcelain pieces shortly before and after *Dropping a Han dynasty urn*.⁸⁵

A more nuanced reading therefore casts the triptych as a contemplation on the nature of "authenticity" and "value" as abstract concepts, disregarding the age of the urn as irrelevant to the broader issues raised.⁸⁶ This is an interpretation that Ai has endorsed, remarking in 2003 that the understanding of his action as iconoclastic is misplaced and reveals more about viewers' attitudes than his own: '[the urn] is only grabbed by [its] weight and [by] gravity. It's powerful only because someone think it's powerful.'⁸⁷ Nevertheless, although partially contradicting other readings, this interrogation of value in the abstract nevertheless privileges the action and artist over the object portrayed.

⁸⁴ Tiffin, "Refined Anarchy," 52; Marko Daniel, "Ai Weiwei and the Geopolitical Supplement," in *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*, ed. Juliet Bingham (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 56; Gamboni, "Portrait of the Artist as an Iconoclast," 86–88.

⁸⁵ Clark, "Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn (Ceramic Works, 5000 BCE - 2010 CE)," 159; Gamboni, "Portrait of the Artist as an Iconoclast," 89; Gregg Moore and Richard Torchia, *Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn (Ceramic Works, 5000 BCE - 2010 CE)* (Glenside, PA: Arcadia University Art Gallery, 2010), 12; Danielle Shang, "Multiply It and Fake It: On Ai Weiwei," *Yishu* 11, no. 2 (April 2012): 42–43.

⁸⁶ See, for example: Merewether, *Ai Weiwei - Works: Beijing 1993-2003*, 15; Merewether, "Made in China," 146; Charles Merewether, "Ai Weiwei: The Freedom of Irreverence," *ArtAsiaPacific*, no. 53 (June 2007): 110–11; Philip Tinari, "Postures in Clay: The Vessels of Ai Weiwei," in *Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn (Ceramic Works, 5000 BCE - 2010 CE)*, by Gregg Moore and Richard Torchia (Glenside, PA: Arcadia University Art Gallery, 2010), 33–34; Daniel, "Ai Weiwei and the Geopolitical Supplement," 55; Gamboni, "Portrait of the Artist as an Iconoclast," 87–88; Stacey Pierson, "Historical and Cultural Contexts for Ceramics in China," in *Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn (Ceramic Works, 5000 BCE - 2010 CE)*, by Gregg Moore and Richard Torchia (Glenside, PA: Arcadia University Art Gallery, 2010), 102–3; Jane Chin Davidson, "Affirmative Precarity: Ai Weiwei and Margarita Cabrera," *Journal of Visual Culture* 12, no. 1 (April 2013): 138.

⁸⁷ Ai Weiwei, cited in Merewether, *Ai Weiwei - Works: Beijing 1993-2003*, 30–31. See also: Ai Weiwei, cited in Ai Weiwei, Juliet Bingham, and Marko Daniel, "A Conversation," in *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*, ed. Juliet Bingham (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 88–92; Ai Weiwei and Robert Bernell, "Ai Weiwei with Robert Bernell," in *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium*, by John Clark (Hong Kong: New Art Media, 2000), 176; and Ai Weiwei, cited in Brendan McGetrick, "Ai Weiwei: Cultural Evidence," *Flash Art International*, December 2010, 58.

This object and the clay from which it is formed, however, are central to the meaning of *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn*. Above all, the affective impact of the triptych is directly derived from two of the inherent qualities of the ceramic medium: its fragility, and its tendency to shatter when dropped. While a comparable iconoclasm and questioning of entrenched value could be achieved with other antiques, the same tension and shock would not be present if the object dropped had been a bronze or lacquered vessel which, although it would be damaged, would not shatter. Ai's potent gesture could only have been achieved with a ceramic artefact. It could be argued that the dropping of a glass object would have the same effect, yet here it is the identification of the vessel as a "Han-dynasty urn" that indicates its singularity, drawing attention to the cultural and historic significance of ceramics in China, a dimension of meaning that renders the affective impact of destruction even more devastating. Speaking in general of his use of historic materials, including ceramics, Ai explains that he has chosen

... artistic materials [that] express high culture or expensive tastes, or [that] are associated with a certain history, memory, status or class [because] the status that those kinds of materials reflect is problematic ... When we say we understand the meaning of something, it means that we feel very safe about it. Every aspect is solid and unshakeable ... But [when] that safety disappears [it] puts us in a new area of knowledge ... uncertainty and danger.⁸⁸

The Han dynasty is a highly mythologised era in Chinese history that has long been central to definitions of national identity, and therefore the shattering of an artefact of

⁸⁸ Ai Weiwei, cited in McGetrick, "Ai Weiwei: Cultural Evidence," 57.



Figure 3: Wine jar [hu], Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), painted earthenware, 47.25 cm (height); British Museum, London.

this era implies a parallel shattering of such myths of a united nationhood. Ai's choice of the word "urn" is also deliberate, implying museological and antiquarian associations in contrast to the utilitarian qualities suggested by the more accurate identification of the vessel as a wine jar (*hu* 壺; fig. 3). "Urn" suggests a certain antiquity and connection with imperial ceremony, used to designate vessels that are respected by collectors as 'potent symbol[s] of refined taste, cultural achievement and purchasing power.'⁸⁹ On the other hand, authentic or not, wine-jars were intended for daily use, the dispensable material culture of [their] time ... just as mass-produced soda bottles are of ours,' and are little valued by contemporary collectors, within and outside China, relative to other antique ceramics.⁹⁰ The value that Ai bestows upon his jar, then, is primarily symbolic, vested in its derivation from the vaunted Han dynasty, his renaming of it as an "urn" and, above all, in the material identity of ceramics as a fragile yet figuratively potent medium.

A comparable blurring of history and mythology is apparent in conventional narratives about the founding of Jingdezhen, the destination to which Ai's foray into ceramics with *Dropping a Han dynasty urn* and other works led him. Following literary precedent, the first organised manufacture of ceramics in the Jingdezhen area is dated by Chinese, North American and European scholars alike to the Eastern or Later Han dynasty (25-220), when the site of the present city and surrounding area were collectively known as Xinping (新平).⁹¹ This date, however, as noted Sinologist Stephen Wootton Bushell

⁸⁹ Daniel, "Ai Weiwei and the Geopolitical Supplement," 56; Tiffin, "Refined Anarchy," 52.

⁹⁰ Glenn Adamson, "The Real Thing," in *Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn (Ceramic Works, 5000 BCE - 2010 CE)*, by Gregg Moore and Richard Torchia (Glenside, PA: Arcadia University Art Gallery, 2010), 52; Pierson, "Historical and Cultural Contexts for Ceramics in China," 102-3; Garth Clark, "Mind Mud: Ai Weiwei's Conceptual Ceramics," in *Ceramics in America*, by Robert Hunter (Lebanon, NH: Chipstone, 2011), 51.

⁹¹ See, for example: Michael Dillon, "A History of the Porcelain Industry in Jingdezhen" (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 1976), 19; Feng, Hu, and Shao, *Jingdezhen: A City with Kiln-Fire Burning a Thousand Years*, 8; Fang Lili and Nancy Selvage, *New "China": Porcelain Art from Jingdezhen, 1910-2012*, ed. Willow Weilan Hai Chang and J. May Lee Barrett (New York: China Institute Gallery, 2012), xvii.

(1844-1908) observed over a century ago, is based on a line from the 1823 edition of the *Fuliang County Gazetteer* (*Fuliang Xianzhi* 浮梁县志), the first known version of which was published in 1682.⁹² Gazetteers, and especially those published during the Ming and Qing dynasties, were generally compiled by central government representatives and funded by the local elite, for distribution among those same authority figures. They were intended above all to gild the reputation of the area rather than present an accurate account of its history, drawing on local tradition to emphasise praiseworthy or unique claims to posterity.⁹³ It should also be noted that even the earliest extant version of the *Fuliang County Gazetteer* was published almost 1500 years after the collapse of the Han dynasty. Like the authenticity of Ai's wine-jar, then, the dating of ceramic production in Jingdezhen to this same era is an act of faith and adherence to tradition, rather than an empirically established fact.⁹⁴ In both cases, history is exposed as an artificial construct, shaped by the needs and interests of its makers in much the same manner as a vessel is shaped by a ceramicist to serve a specific function.

Ceramics as vehicles of return and recollection in Ai Weiwei's personal history

This shift in focus from the action recorded in *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* (fig. 2) to the object depicted and its historical and affective associations, supports an alternative reading of the work within the broader context of Ai Weiwei's artistic practice. Rather

⁹² Stephen Wootton Bushell, *Oriental Ceramic Art, Illustrated by Examples from the Collection of W.T. Walters* (London: Frederick Muller, 1981 [1896]), 11–12.

⁹³ Anne Gerritsen, "Fragments of a Global Past: Ceramics Manufacture in Song-Yuan-Ming Jingdezhen," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 52, no. 1 (2009): 138–39.

⁹⁴ Recent archaeological excavations in Jingdezhen have dated the origins of porcelain production in the area to the Tang dynasty, but evidence for a ceramic industry during the Han dynasty remains confined to the realm of supposition. Wu Juan, Zhang Maolin, Hou Tiejun, Li Qijiang and Wu Junming, "Analysis of the Celadon of the Tang and the Five Dynasties Unearthed from Nan Kiln and Lantian Kiln Site of Jingdezhen, China." *Ceramics International* 41, no. 5 (June 2015): 6851–6857.

than an early statement of his oft-cited iconoclasm and defiance of canonical authority, in this reading the triptych encapsulates the more complex relationship with ceramics as a vessel for history and heritage that the artist has developed throughout his life. The details of his biography have been comprehensively documented elsewhere, so only the most pertinent events will be outlined here.⁹⁵

Ai was born in Beijing in 1957, the same year that his father, poet Ai Qing (1910-1996), was denounced in the Anti-Rightist purge after the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956) and forced into exile in Xinjiang province, with his wife and two sons Ai Weiwei and Ai Xuan (艾軒, b. 1947). After moving through several detention-camps, they eventually settled in Shihezi, a small town in the north-west of the province near the border with Mongolia and Kazakhstan, where Ai Qing was assigned to clean public toilets. In 1976, approaching the end of the Cultural Revolution, he was rehabilitated and allowed to return to Beijing in the summer of 1977.⁹⁶ Then 21 years old, Ai Weiwei was among the first cohort of students to enrol in the reopened Beijing Film Academy, where he studied Set Design and developed a European-inspired, post-Impressionistic style. In the same year, he became associated with the Stars and participated in their exhibition outside the National Art Museum. Following the suppression of the Democracy Wall movement with which the Stars had been associated, however, Ai left Beijing in 1981 for the US and lived in New York for the next decade, returning to Beijing in 1993 because his father had fallen ill. He remained in China for the next twenty-two years, building his reputation

⁹⁵ An encyclopaedic discussion of the first twenty-five years of Ai's career, for example, is given in: John L. Tancock and Stephanie Tung, *Ai Weiwei: New York 1983-1993* (Berlin: Distanz, 2011); Merewether, *Ai Weiwei - Works: Beijing 1993-2003*; and, Urs Meile, ed., *Ai Weiwei: Works 2004-2007* (Lucerne: Galerie Urs Meile, 2007).

⁹⁶ For more information about the circumstances of Ai Qing's arrest, see Geremie R. Barmé, "An Afternoon in Beijing - September, 1978," in *China in the Seventies: Australian Perspectives*, by Stephen FitzGerald and Pamela Hewitt (Canberra: Contemporary China Centre, 1980), 137-45. Barmé gives a vivid, first-hand account of the poet's situation in the years immediately following his return from exile.

as an avant-garde artist first in Beijing then internationally, as documented in the many scholarly studies and exhibition texts devoted to his work.⁹⁷ In 2014, after four years of sporadic house arrest and government monitoring, Ai again left China, choosing this time to relocate to Berlin, where both his home and studio are now based.

The events of Ai's life are very similar to those experienced by other Chinese artists of his generation, yet his current international reputation has transformed his biography into an origin-story of mythic proportions for a man now hailed as 'China's leading artist dissident' and 'one of the most significant cultural figures of his generation.'⁹⁸ For those who propagate such unqualified praise, the events of Ai's life are easily rendered heroic, a sweeping narrative of exile endured in China's barren north-west, intrepid pilgrimage to the art-world centre of New York, and his triumphant return to Beijing as enlightened prophet, inspired innovator and passionate crusader for human rights. This presentation of Ai's career surfaces repeatedly in texts dedicated to his work, often at the expense of a more nuanced analysis of his extensive and eclectic *oeuvre* and can be compared with the mythologising of the history of Jingdezhen and of ceramics manufacture in China as an attempt to glamourise historical fact or gild the reputations of interested parties.

Most descriptions of Ai's artistic career begin with the training in drawing he received in Beijing from his father's friends, renowned print-maker Jiang Feng and ink-painter Zhang Ding, yet clay was the first material in which he discovered his artistic aptitude. In the summer of 1977, immediately after the Ai family's return to Beijing, and a year before his draughtsmanship lessons, Ai spent three months in a ceramic factory in Handan,

⁹⁷ These details of Ai's life have been summarised from the far more extensive biographies given in Andrew Cohen, "Ai Weiwei," *ArtAsiaPacific*, no. 74 (August 2011): 74–76; and, Ai Weiwei & Zheng Shengtian, "A Conversation with Ai Weiwei," *Yishu* 12, no. 6 (December 2013): 6–15.

⁹⁸ Lisa Movius, "Censorship: Chinese Roulette," *Art in America* 99, no. 1 (January 2011): 19; Anon, "Traditional & Innovative Production," *Aesthetica*, no. 40 (May 2011): 14.



Figure 4: Wine jar [guan], Cizhou ware, late 13th-early 14th century, Hebei, China, painted stoneware, 31 cm (height); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

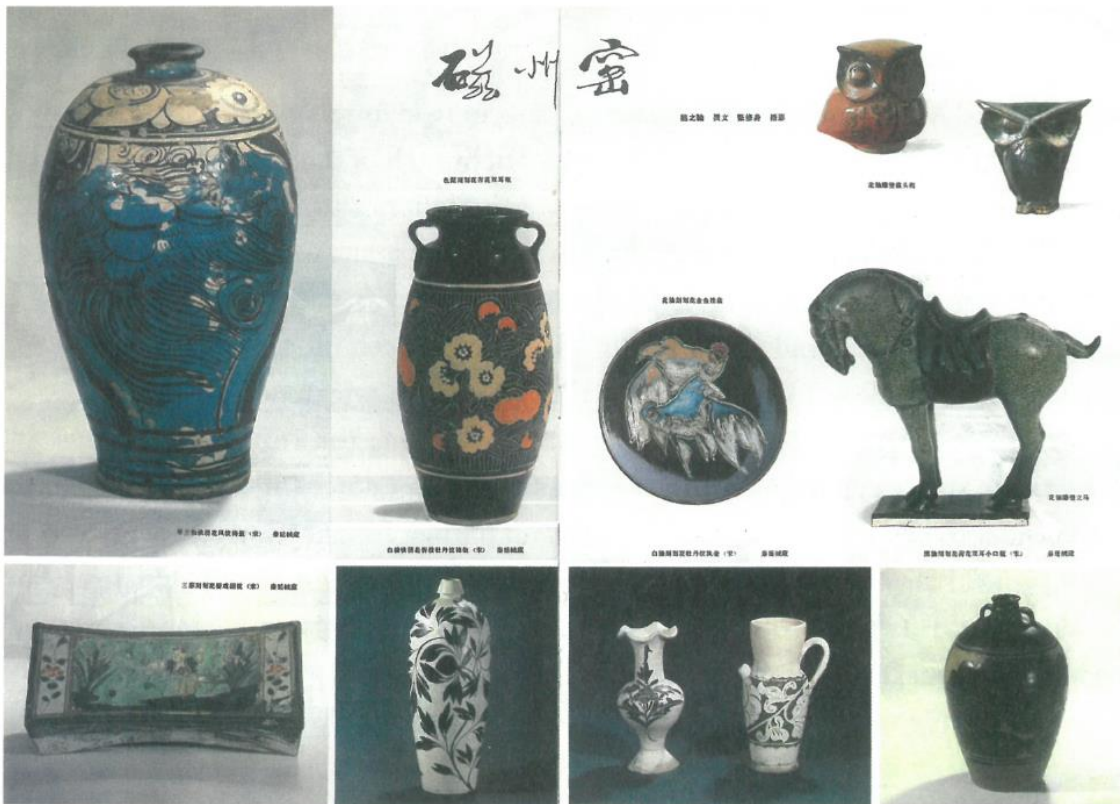


Figure 5: Pages from People's Pictorial (Renmin Huabao 人民画报), no. 4 (1979), showing ceramics produced at the Cizhou kilns, Hebei, with Ai Weiwei's ceramic owl reproduced in the top-right, on the left.

Hebei province – home of the celebrated black-and-white Cizhou ware produced in the area from the Tang to the Ming dynasty (fig. 4). Under the tutelage of famed ceramicist Zheng Ke, he created a series of ceramic sculptures including his first published work: an image of an owl reproduced the monthly *People's Pictorial* (*Renmin Huabao* 人民画报; fig. 5).⁹⁹ Even before this formative experience, the young Ai had become familiar with ceramics and the resonances they could contain through his father's collection of 'knick-knacks [and] trinkets,' amassed at the height of his fame as a state-sanctioned poet and carefully preserved during his exile.¹⁰⁰ These were displayed on 'rudimentary shelves' in their home in Xinjiang and, on their return to Beijing, one of Ai Qing's first priorities was to contact friends who had held 'the more important ceramics in his collection' during his absence.¹⁰¹ From childhood and adolescence, Ai therefore developed a long-standing appreciation for the value of ceramics as fragile vessels for fleeting memories, as well as an awareness of their role as carriers of historic and cultural meaning, and a burgeoning understanding of their expressive capabilities. Each of these qualities is clear in *Dropping a Han dynasty urn*, in which the eponymous "urn" functions as a vessel for a collective memory of the mythic past, a carrier of historically and culturally inflected Chineseness, and an expression of the artist's views on these values.

An even more direct correlation can be drawn between *Dropping a Han dynasty urn* and Ai's later immersion in the world of ceramics collecting following his second return to Beijing in 1993, this time from a voluntary twelve-year "exile" in New York. This return inspired a more sustained engagement with the medium, out of which *Dropping a Han dynasty urn* and Ai's other works of ceramic art discussed in this chapter emerged as

⁹⁹ Ai and Zheng, "A Conversation with Ai Weiwei," 13–14; Tinari, "Postures in Clay: The Vessels of Ai Weiwei," 31.

¹⁰⁰ Tinari, "Postures in Clay: The Vessels of Ai Weiwei," 31–32.

¹⁰¹ Clark, "Mind Mud: Ai Weiwei's Conceptual Ceramics," 70.

attempts to introduce a new uncertainty into the established mythology of China's past. According to the equally established narrative of the artist's career, Ai's homecoming – prompted by his father's ailing health – was the catalyst for a fascination with classical Chinese art and culture that drove him to accompany his older brother, artist Ai Xuan, on trips to Beijing's antique markets to salvage cultural artefacts 'huddling untidily on the stalls.'¹⁰² Ai Weiwei recalls that, during these trips, he developed an appreciation for the 'clear definition of shape, colour and markings' that differentiates products of the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, 'awed by the enormous skill, the refined workmanship and the aesthetic instinct of the craftspeople who ... created works of such outstanding beauty.'¹⁰³ His "discovery" of ceramics during these years, in the company of his brother, living in their parents' home, is framed as a return to family and heritage, a reconnection with 'personal and cultural roots' that recalls his childhood experiments with clay as a medium for expression, nostalgic recollection.¹⁰⁴ Yet Ai also discovered another aspect of ceramics collecting during his forays into this trade: the highly organised industry for replicas and reproductions. This prompted a realisation of the contingency of history and heritage as artificial constructs that later inspired the artist to visit Jingdezhen and commission his own series of reproductions:

In the West they are considered treasures, but here you can ... go to the market and find people selling them for a few hundred yuan. It brings up interesting thoughts about how people make judgments, what is real, what is fake ... It's a system that is actually quite fragile, but we all have to live by it.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Wilson and Van der Zijpp, *Ai Weiwei*, 9; Bingham, *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*, 23.

¹⁰³ Ai Weiwei, cited in Cohen, "Ai Weiwei," 78; Wilson and Van der Zijpp, *Ai Weiwei*, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Cohen, "Ai Weiwei," 78.

¹⁰⁵ Ai Weiwei cited in McGetrick, "Ai Weiwei: Cultural Evidence," 58.

The reproduction works that resulted from Ai's first journey to the Porcelain Capital are discussed below; in *Dropping a Han dynasty urn*, however, the shattering of the past takes precedence over its replication. In both cases the authority attached to antique objects is cast into doubt and they are opened to new interpretation, enabling a more dynamic and complex engagement with the past.

In this reading of the work, the photographic dimensions of *Dropping a Han dynasty urn* also assume significance: the ambiguous status of the photograph as trace of a moment passed but simultaneously fixed in the present, a memento of that which has been lost. As a record of three consecutive moments, Ai's photographic triptych further intensifies this tension between presence and absence by introducing a literal representation of the passage of time to which all material things must submit, no matter their historical and cultural significance. The eponymous urn, rather than an immobile icon of classical China, is therefore returned to a lived existence. It becomes a tangible, autonomous object rather than an abstract referent, a mirror for the artist's realisation of his equally dynamic personal and cultural identity, and an emblem of a 'history that is 'malleable, pliant, and can ignore the strictures of chronology.'¹⁰⁶ Several other writers on Ai's work have noted this function of the photographic image, remarking on the "liberation" of the urn from antiquarian categorisation and the parallel implied liberation of artist and viewer from the stifling weight of the past.¹⁰⁷ Yet these authors, as noted above, still base their interpretation on the assumption that the vessel shown is authentic and that the values it represents are coherent and continuous. Craft historian and theorist Glenn

¹⁰⁶ Clark, "Mind Mud: Ai Weiwei's Conceptual Ceramics," 54–55.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example: Merewether, "Made in China," 151; and Welch, "I Hate Ceramics: Ai Weiwei Drops the Urn," 84. Carol Yinghua Lu provides a particularly clear statement of the second form of implied liberation: 'The "ready-made" [Ai] takes aim at ... is not the object, but the fixed perceptions, ideology, myths, misunderstandings and authority attached to [it]. [These photographs] are about letting go of certainties and allowing new possibilities to emerge.' Carol Yinghua Lu, "Ai Weiwei's Relevance," in *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*, ed. Juliet Bingham (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 36–37.

Adamson offers a reading that is more sensitive to the volatile artificiality of both object and value-system, noting that the order of the photographs can be reversed to create a narrative in which ‘a shattered vessel makes itself whole, and floats upwards into [Ai’s] hands.’¹⁰⁸ This not only foregrounds the highly contrived construction of the images, but also invokes the creation of antique replicas and historical reproductions that has long informed Ai’s engagement with ceramics, and that enacts a similar making-whole of the fragments of the past. Adamson goes on to draw a comparison between Ai’s work and his movement between geographical and historical contexts – i.e. transexperience – prompting a close engagement with the idea of mobility itself.¹⁰⁹ This transexperiential reading can also be emphasised by rearranging the narrative of the work: if the second photograph in the triptych is viewed in isolation, it becomes an exemplary image of the object (and the artist) in a position of multiple allegiances and significations: released from Ai’s hands but not yet caught by the inevitable pull of its own weight, the urn hovers between preservation and destruction, both its fate and origin unknown. To return to the artist’s words cited above, the only certainty then becomes gravity, that irresistible force that soon terminates all flights of fancy – or, with a more forceful trajectory, a power of equilibrium that can hold the traveller, like a satellite, in perpetual motion, neither here nor there, past or present, but caught in a space in-between.

Drawing together the readings of *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* (fig. 2) outlined above, this work can also best be positioned in between two perspectives on the past. Ai’s use of ceramics was initially inspired by the historic authority of the medium in China, and

¹⁰⁸ Adamson, “The Real Thing,” 49.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 49–50.

the potency of his photographs rests almost entirely on the continued importance of the Han dynasty as a putative cradle of national identity. His introduction to ceramics at two pivotal moments in his life also reflects this understanding of the medium as a carrier of Chineseness. Both moments can be associated with a now-canonical narrative of exile and return, separation from and reunion with family and nation: the time he spent in Cizhou immediately before his family's return to Beijing in 1977, and his trips to antiques markets with his brother following his second return to the city in 1993. Yet during these trips Ai discovered another aspect of ceramics that complicates the invocation of historic prestige in *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* – the ease with which antique forms and styles can be fabricated and reproduced. This aspect of the work is most clearly understood through its photographic medium. Photographs are widely viewed as traces of moments passed but now fixed in place, a memento of that which has been lost. Yet, like ceramics, they are a malleable medium, susceptible to manipulation and artifice, and can be used to alter present views of past events. This tension between fact and fiction, between history and myth, is central to the reading of *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* proposed here, as a work in which Ai engages with the historic and affective aura of ceramics as fragile vessels for fleeting memories, as vehicles of cultural meaning and, simultaneously, as a means to introduce ambiguity into historical narratives.

The “preservation” and commodification of history in Ai Weiwei's *Untitled* (1993), *Tang-dynasty courtesan in bottle* (1994), *Souvenir from Beijing* (2002), *Dust to dust* (2009) and *Spouts* (2015)

The attraction of history is also apparent in other works that Ai created before and after *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn*, many of which demonstrate an interest in preservation that can be positioned as a counterpoint to the destruction pictured in the photographic

triptych. Foremost among these are the readymades *Untitled* (1993; fig. 6) and *Tang-dynasty courtesan in bottle* (1994; fig. 7), conceptual pieces *Souvenir from Beijing* (2002; fig. 8) and *Dust to dust* (2009; fig. 9), and the more recent installation *Spouts* (2015; fig. 10). A tension is implied in these works between preservation at the cost of enforced stasis and reduction of meaning, and the paradoxical release of destruction through which objects can be returned to lived existence and open interpretation. In *Untitled* and *Tang-dynasty courtesan in bottle*, this preservation recalls museological displays of artefacts within glass vitrines, where they are protected from damage or decay but subjected to a confining typological classification that contradicts the originally intended function of the “preserved” objects as burial goods to be interred and forgotten. *Spouts*, an installation of broken spouts of various ages displayed as an undifferentiated mass, also recalls arbitrary classification of cultural artefacts in museums within generalising and often meaningless categories. *Souvenir from Beijing* and *Dust to dust*, on the other hand, are premised on the preservation of a past act of destruction – the demolition of a traditional urban residence and the pulverising of Neolithic ceramics – the traces of which have allegedly been preserved by the artist for posterity. The act of salvaging a memento from a demolition site can be viewed, however, as a re-enactment of looting by imperial aggressors, the results of which are now preserved in museums across the world, while disintegration of prehistoric wares evokes comparison with the frequently detrimental effects of archaeological excavation. At the same time, the titles of both works point to a cyclic definition of time, alluding to the restorative powers of memory (*Souvenir from Beijing*) and the interconnection of life and death (*Dust to dust*), thereby reinserting the objects into the dynamic currents of a lived existence far removed from museological classification. Drawing a parallel with urban redevelopment in China as a necessary means to replace outmoded and antiquated structures, each of these works

imply that preservation can be more harmful than beneficial, while destruction can be a force for much-needed positive change.

Exposing the destructive effects of museological containment and classification

While the eponymous vessel in Ai's *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* is "liberated" from the stasis of historical narrative by its ritualistic destruction, the ceramics appropriated for two earlier works evoke a more permanent state of suspended animation. In *Untitled* (1993; fig. 6) and *Tang-dynasty courtesan in bottle* (1994; fig. 7), ceramic tomb-figurines identified respectively as originating in the Song and Tang dynasties are "preserved" in Johnnie Walker Red Label whiskey and Absolut Kurant vodka bottles. This containment recalls conventional museological display of such cultural artefacts within glass vitrines, exposed for examination but secured against the polluting effect of outside influences that might disturb the object's fixed historical authority. Yet vitrines at least offer the possibility of removal – Ai's figurines, it seems, cannot be removed without breaking the bottles that contain them and so risking damage to the object within. The choice of a bottle rather than a vitrine also evokes what Clark has termed the 'childhood wonder' of a model ship-in-a-bottle, leading viewers to question how an apparently impossible confinement was accomplished.¹¹⁰ A connection with Ai's own childhood could also be noted in his choice of a Cizhou-ware figure for *Untitled*, perhaps in homage to his first experiment with ceramics-making in 1977 (fig. 5) and subsequent desire to recapture or preserve that memory in later acts of appropriation. As in *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn*, liberation from such confinement to a fixed narrative, whether personal or cultural, can

¹¹⁰ Clark, "Mind Mud: Ai Weiwei's Conceptual Ceramics," 53.



Figure 6: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Untitled, 1993, Cizhou ware, earthenware sculpture, glass bottle, 27 x 6.5 x 6.5 cm; Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing.



Figure 7: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Tang-dynasty courtesan in bottle, 1994, earthenware sculpture, glass bottle.

be gained only by the object's destruction, and preservation is maintained at the cost of indefinite stasis under obscure circumstances.

A comparable tension between destruction and preservation is apparent in another pair of works that Ai created after the turn of the millennium. In the first of these, *Souvenir from Beijing* (fig. 8; 2002), a clay brick sits within an artfully constructed wooden box, the stark contrast between its uneven surface and the sophistication of its container recalling the comparable juxtaposition of unpainted clay and factory-made glass in the earlier works. A further layer of meaning is added, however, by the knowledge that Ai salvaged this brick from one of the many traditional *siheyuan* (四合院) or courtyard houses dismantled to make way for redevelopment, while the ironwood of the box was reclaimed from a Qing temple torn down for the same reason.¹¹¹ The second work, *Dust to dust* (fig. 9; 2009), also veils an alleged historical significance beneath an unassuming appearance: a glass apothecary jar partially filled with clay-coloured powder is claimed to be the remains of an unspecified number of Neolithic ceramics, methodically ground into dust by the artist or his assistants.¹¹² Both works derive their narrative intensity from an act of destruction, the traces of which are preserved in what seems to be an attempt to avoid further damage or dispersal and, especially in *Souvenir from Beijing*, to create something new. Their titles make clear this cycle of destruction and creation: the word "souvenir" derives from the French, meaning "to remember" or, more literally, "to come to mind", evoking the restorative powers of memory and nostalgia and thereby imbuing both brick and wood, funerary jar and coffin, with a talismanic significance as

¹¹¹ Meile, *Ai Weiwei: Works 2004-2007*, 174.

¹¹² Clark, "Mind Mud: Ai Weiwei's Conceptual Ceramics," 58; Locke, "All Eyes on Ai Weiwei," 16.



Figure 8: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Souvenir from Beijing, 2002, clay brick, ironwood box, 9.5 x 35 x 22.5 cm; Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing



Figure 9: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Dust to dust, 2009, earthenware powder, glass jar, 26 x 20 x 18 cm.

aides-mémoires for the rebirth of a disappearing Beijing. Similarly, the phrase “dust to dust” is a liturgical recitation performed at Christian funerals to remind mourners of the cycle of birth and death experienced by all living beings.¹¹³ The use of this phrase to describe the alleged disintegration of Neolithic ceramics recalls the act of destruction in *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* (fig. 2): in each work, a historical artefact is returned to the currents of time through a reassertion of its material vulnerability. This impression is further reinforced by Ai’s choice of an apothecary jar to hold the powdered remains, evoking association with the use of medicine to prolong life and so ascribing restorative properties to the pulverised remains of the past.

Dropping a Han-dynasty urn has also been associated with the alternate destruction and renewal evoked by Beijing’s redevelopment. This adds an additional layer of complexity to the transition from historical stasis to lived existence implied in Ai’s abrupt return of the titular vessel to the material world. Most writers have identified this allusion to redevelopment as a critique, ‘a satire of the ruling regime’s approach to its patrimony, and of contemporary China’s curious relation to its past,’ in which the smashing of the wine-jar ‘becomes a cenotaph to an irreversible destructive force.’¹¹⁴ Yet redevelopment can also be a force for constructive, positive change, replacing antiquated or dilapidated structures with an urban environment more suited to contemporary needs.¹¹⁵ From this

¹¹³ The phrase “dust to dust” is drawn from an oft-cited passage in *The Book of Common Prayer*, ‘earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust,’ derived from Genesis 3:19, ‘In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.’ Clark, “Mind Mud: Ai Weiwei’s Conceptual Ceramics,” 74n11.

¹¹⁴ Tinari, “Postures in Clay: The Vessels of Ai Weiwei,” 33–34. Similar points of view are expressed in Gamboni, “Portrait of the Artist as an Iconoclast,” 92; and Pierson, “Historical and Cultural Contexts for Ceramics in China,” 102–3.

¹¹⁵ Ai Weiwei’s own contribution to the redevelopment of Beijing should be noted. In 1999, four years after *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn*, he commissioned the construction of a studio and living quarters in Caochangdi, then a relatively uninhabited site not far from Beijing’s airport. Following the rise of Ai’s international reputation, however, the area soon drew the attention of other entrepreneurs, inflating property values and creating a thriving artists’ colony on what was then the outskirts of the city. In 2001, he was closely involved in the curation of a public art display installed at SOHO NewTown, one of China’s first designer apartment complexes, also on the outskirts of Beijing. From 2004–2007, between making

perspective, Ai's act of dropping an emblem of China's classical heritage can be read as a symbolic letting-go of the past motivated by a desire to explore new conceptions of national and cultural identity. In an interview with Richard Vine published in 2008, Ai eloquently expressed the ambiguity of this situation:

It's a very complicated issue because China is a nation that needs change ... given that the old part is really rotten and cannot meet contemporary standards ... The question is how to change things and to what degree and ... who reaps the benefits? What is going to be damaged in the process? ... In general, I think that the government is using this necessary change to its own advantage. The Party takes not only the financial profit but the glory [while] society becomes very corrupt and very miserable for many others.¹¹⁶

As these comments make clear, the extent to which redevelopment and, by extension, any act of eradicating the past to make way for the new, can be considered a destructive or a constructive force rests in the vested interests and power relations motivating change. In the case of Beijing's redevelopment, the demolition of historic architecture, as Ai observes, has been driven by propaganda and profit rather than a genuine desire

Souvenir from Beijing and *Dust to dust*, Ai commissioned yet more structures in Caochangdi, including Galerie Urs Meile, the Three Shadows Photography Art Centre and the Red Brick Art Gallery; opened his own boutique restaurant in the centre of Beijing; and worked in collaboration with Swiss architectural firm Herzog & de Meuron to complete his most well-known architectural commission: Beijing's National Stadium, the centrepiece of the city's presentation to the world as a cosmopolitan hub. While using his work to critique urban redevelopment, Ai therefore simultaneously contributed to this same process of change, though his stated aims were of course very different to those of the CCP. Andres Lepik, "Building for Society: Ai Weiwei and Architecture," in *Ai Weiwei: Art/Architecture*, ed. Yilmaz Dziewior (Koln: Konig, 2011), 16, 18–20, 27; Reto Geiser, "In the Realm of Architecture: Some Notes on Ai Weiwei's Spatial Temptations," in *Ai Weiwei: Art/Architecture*, by Yilmaz Dziewior (Koln: Konig, 2011), 33–35, 37; Philip Tinari, "Some Simple Reflections on an Artist in a City, 2001–2007," *Parkett*, no. 81 (2007): 110, 114–16. Another tension between Ai's artistic and architectural activities could be noted in his central involvement with the design of the Museum of Neolithic Pottery in Jinhua, Zhejiang Province, an institution dedicated to the preservation of the same class of vessels allegedly destroyed in works like *Dropping a Han-dynasty Urn* and *Dust to dust*. Clark, "Mind Mud: Ai Weiwei's Conceptual Ceramics," 60.

¹¹⁶ Ai Weiwei, cited in Ai Weiwei and Richard Vine, "The Way We Were, the Way We Are," *Art in America* 96, no. 6 (July 2008): 100.

to improve the living conditions of the city's inhabitants. Whether the same motives compelled Ai to (allegedly) destroy an antique remains an unresolved question: should the artist's act of destruction be interpreted as a liberation from the past to make way for a more equitable future? Or should it be seen as little more than a provocative attempt to foster notoriety and thereby enhance Ai's reputation? There is no definitive answer – the work is intentionally ambiguous, and, like the eponymous Han-dynasty vessel, can sustain many possible associations.

Both *Souvenir from Beijing* (fig. 8) and *Dust to dust* (fig. 9) also expose the ambiguities of museological display evoked by *Untitled* and *Tang-dynasty courtesan in bottle*. The act of salvaging a memento from a site of demolition implied in *Souvenir from Beijing* can be viewed as a contemporary re-enactment of the looting perpetrated by Anglo-French forces after the destruction of the Old Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan) in 1860, albeit in a very different cultural and political context. The disintegration of Neolithic ceramics in *Dust to dust*, on the other hand, evokes comparison with the destructive effects of archaeological excavation and invasive authentication tests. In tension with Ai's desire to restore the tangible materiality of his salvaged ceramics, then, each of these works also reflects the antiquarian's desire to catalogue any and all traces of the past, no matter how defaced, quotidian or microscopic, reclassifying fragments as works of art or valuable collectibles.

This impulse is again made the subject of satire in *Spouts* (fig. 10; 2015), an installation of approximately 10,000 spouts detached from ceramic vessels dated to the Song, Ming and Qing dynasties that Ai created as a counterpoint to his earlier *Feet* (2005) installation of stone bases broken from Northern Wei (386-535) and Northern Qi (550-77) dynasty statuary. Ignoring their diverse ages, origins, styles, and quality, fragments of ceramic in



Figure 10: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Spouts, 2015, 10,000 ceramic spouts dated to the Song-Qing dynasties, 495 x 430 cm; Tang Contemporary Art, Beijing.

Spouts are displayed as an undifferentiated mass defined, like the bases in *Feet*, by their basic shared function in a manner that recalls museological classification of artefacts within all-encompassing categories, or the arbitrary juxtapositions of an archaeological excavation. In *Untitled* (fig. 6) and *Tang-dynasty courtesan in bottle* (fig. 7), Ai's use of whiskey and vodka bottles as makeshift vitrines recalls the comparison of Han-dynasty wine-jars with "soda-bottles": these are vessels intended to be discarded after use, not preserved for posterity. Even the tomb-figures, rudimentary in both form and ornament, and unglazed in the case of the Tang-dynasty figure, if authentic would likely have been intended for use as funeral goods, to be interred with the dead rather than treasured by subsequent generations.¹¹⁷ The preservation of either bottle or figurine for aesthetic pleasure is therefore an arbitrary, even an absurd act: both are mass-produced objects customarily abandoned once their purpose has been fulfilled. To enshrine them in a museological display as static artefacts of the past removes them from this function, and from the rhythms of the everyday, by situating them instead within a mythic narrative that purports to embody unchanging truths, but that is equally founded in a contrived, contingent system of values.

Packaging the past for global consumption

There is one aspect of *Untitled* (fig. 6) and *Tang-dynasty courtesan in bottle* (fig. 7) that differs from the detachment of museological display: the association of the bottles used

¹¹⁷ In his perceptive survey of Ming-dynasty literature of connoisseurship, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China*, Craig Clunas observes that, even in this era of increased appreciation for and collection of "antique" objects, when the 'cultural stock [of the Tang dynasty] was on the rise ... there is not a single piece of evidence for one of these [tomb] figures, so much admired in twentieth-century writing on Chinese art, being collected, displayed, bought, [or] sold.' He ascribes this to their 'eerie reputation ... as potential gateways to a disturbingly real experience of the people of the past, the dead.' Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 93.

with global commerce, drawing these works closer to the history of ceramics export than that of domestic production. On one level, as noted by Charles Merewether, one of the few writers on Ai's artistic practice to discuss these two works, this implies 'the capture of Chinese culture within the confines of ... a US-led commodity economy ... "bottled up" for consumption.'¹¹⁸ In this reading, the bottles are little more than a convenient symbol of branding and commodification, equating the sculptures they now contain with the Scottish whiskey and Swedish blackcurrant vodka they were manufactured to hold, also viewed as representative products of their respective cultures. Garth Clark has pursued a similar line of analysis, noting that Johnnie Walker Red Label whiskey is the preferred brand of China's elite and so the choice of this particular bottle could be read as 'a sly dig at a regime that had begun to practice communism for profit.'¹¹⁹ Both bottles could alternatively be read, however, in more general terms as vessels for transporting their precious cargo out of obscurity and into the world – on first encountering these works, most viewers might think first of the construction of model ships inside bottles, or the image of stranded sailors desperately despatching floating messages of salvation. Both connotations evoke maritime travel and trade and recall the long history of global trade so central to the identity of ceramics. This is another defining trait of the medium, like fragility, that Ai has intentionally foregrounded, though his decision to convey this trait using tomb-figures intended for burial in Chinese soil rather than a recognisable example of export ware indicates that it is the global transmission of an *idea* of China that is here subjected to critique, not the material currency of exchange. As a voracious collector of ceramics, among other antiquities, Ai was almost certainly aware of this history and the pivotal role within its growth that is ascribed to the Tang and Song dynasties, when the

¹¹⁸ Merewether, "Made in China," 146–48.

¹¹⁹ Clark, "Mind Mud: Ai Weiwei's Conceptual Ceramics," 53.

ceramics export trade expanded to an unprecedented scale and the rudiments of a national self-mythology gained initial definition.

Echoing his later exposure of the power relations underlying historical narratives, Ai's choice of mass-produced liquor bottles implies that the history of export is also inflected by worldly concerns, closer to contemporary global commodity culture than the myths of open exchange and utopic receptivity to the world with which it is often associated. The export of ceramics from China began during the Han dynasty, alongside that of more valuable commodities like silk, gold and lacquer, primarily to the kingdoms of Southeast Asia and the eastern Indian coast. With the consolidation of the Tang dynasty, however, this trade achieved a scale and level of organisation that reflected the political culture and emphases of the time, supplementing existing maritime routes with an expansion of the overland Silk Road that opened new markets in the Middle East and Africa. The subsequent Song dynasty built on this expansion and systemisation to foster a vibrant culture of global trade, supported by government policy and central to the prosperity of China during the 11th and 12th centuries.¹²⁰ Throughout the thousand-year history of the export trade summarised here, profit rather than a desire to engage with the world served as the principal motive for global exchange, just as it does now.

In each of the works by Ai Weiwei discussed above, the function of ceramics as vessels for the safekeeping and transmission of historical, personal and monetary value is a recurring theme. *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* (fig. 2) dramatises the literal passage of a

¹²⁰ Rose Kerr and Nigel Wood, *Chemistry and Chemical Technology, Part 12: Ceramic Technology*, Science and Civilisation in China 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 714–16; Kanazawa Yoh, "The Export and Trade of Chinese Ceramics: An Overview of the History and Scholarship to Date," in *Chinese Ceramics from the Paleolithic Period through the Qing Dynasty*, by Li Zhiyan, Virginia L. Bower, and He Li (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 536, 542–43, 548.

ceramic vessel through the space between the artist's hands and the unyielding surface of the ground, and through three successive moments in time, yet it also alludes to the passage of historical fact into mythologised fiction and to the artist's own journeys to and from his birthplace, Beijing. In *Untitled* (fig. 6) and *Tang-dynasty courtesan in bottle* (fig. 7), glass vessels not only "preserve" but also ease the transport of the ceramic figurines they contain, recalling the historic export of Chinese ceramics across the world and the desire for profit that motivated this trade. The ambiguities of preservation and transmission are also central to Ai's later works *Souvenir from Beijing* (fig. 8) and *Dust to dust* (fig. 9), both of which imply that the need to safeguard or remember the past often becomes apparent only after its destruction, and that the act of preservation can itself be a destructive process. As the discussion of these works makes clear, they evoke two interrelated conceptual spheres: museological display on one hand, and commodification on the other. Central to both of these, and more broadly to the discussion of history in this chapter, is the exercise of power in understanding traces of the past, which can be associated with a wide range of narratives, both factual and fictional, depending on the needs and desires of the narrator. As eminently mobile, affectively potent and historically ubiquitous objects, ceramics are susceptible to such manipulation though, as indicated by Ai's work, they also serve as vessels for introducing a disruptive ambiguity and multiplicity of interpretation.

Liu Jianhua's use of *qingbai* and celadon glazes to undermine the grand narratives of history

While Ai Weiwei referred indirectly to the history of global ceramics export in works like *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn*, *Untitled* and *Tang-dynasty courtesan in bottle*, Liu Jianhua has made extensive use of the specific types of ceramics that would once have been sent

from China to countries around the world. In *Regular-Fragile* (fig. 11), for example, he focused on the historic associations of *qingbai* porcelain as a product central to the historic growth of Jingdezhen and the ceramics export trade from the Tang to Song dynasties. Another key distinction between these artists can be noted in Liu's extensive training as a ceramicist while working as a teenager in a factory in Jingdezhen, then as a student at the Jingdezhen Ceramics Institute (JCI), the city's largest tertiary education provider and China's only specialist ceramics college. For the current analysis, however, the thematic concerns uniting their works are of most importance, including, above all, their shared interest in the affective and historical symbolism of ceramics as vessels for the transmission of the past. In the various iterations of *Regular-Fragile* Liu has created for different display spaces, he draws on his training as a ceramicist to imbue *qingbai* porcelain replicas of contemporary global commodities with a new layer of meaning as emblems of twenty-first-century consumerism and the historic rise and fall of dynastic fortunes. *Qingbai* glaze emerged at a pivotal moment in the development of Jingdezhen, associated with emergent regional identity as well as international trade in ceramics. In his installations of grand material abundance, Liu recreates the visions of unsurpassed wealth associated with this golden age of expansion, though the calculated fragility of his cracked, warped and very thin-walled porcelain sculptures implies that such dreams are unsustainable and will inevitably disintegrate. In the more expansive artistic context of ceramics as a medium for historiographical interrogation, *Regular-Fragile* casts doubt on the same grand narratives of cultural and national ascendancy earlier critiqued by Ai Weiwei, exposing the uneasy relationship between fact and fiction, reality and myth, by reducing the latter to a pile of abject fragments.

Regular-Fragile (2001-10), Song-dynasty trade in qingbai porcelain, and the fragility of an imagined historical certainty

In his *Regular-Fragile* installations, Liu drew on his extensive professional training as a ceramicist to reproduce *qingbai* glaze, imbuing it with a vitality and a new dimension of meaning that create a tension between destruction, preservation and renewal like that discussed in relation to Ai's works. In the versions of *Regular-Fragile* staged for the 50th Venice Biennale (2003; fig. 11), inaugural MC1 International Biennial of Contemporary Chinese Art (2005), and first Singapore Biennale in 2006, Liu filled the exhibition spaces with porcelain replicas of everyday commodities bearing a translucent *qingbai* glaze that imbued them with an icy ethereality. The spectral appearance and unsettling impression of fragility evoked by these objects – especially in MC1 and the Singapore Biennale, for which porcelain casts were broken into pieces – added a visceral affective dimension to the artist's (and curators') desire to cast doubt on grand narratives within an increasingly fractured global socio-cultural context. Charles Merewether identifies such questioning as a key trait of contemporary Chinese art, customarily expressed through the 'favoured tropes of Tiananmen Square, Mao's visage, and the human figure,' though he remarks that it can tend 'to trap itself in labyrinthine identity politics.'¹²¹ He suggests that one means to avoid this entrapment is to shift focus from depictions of 'dislocation and ennui' and toward 'the creation of an ordered disorder [in] an eclectic range [of objects] stripped of their standard identities and reconfigured as a question about integrity and objectivity.'¹²² Although written about works by Ai Weiwei, this description could also be applied to the critical mass of dislocated objects in Liu's *Regular-Fragile* installations. In the case of both artists, however, it is argued here that the object of their critiques is

¹²¹ Merewether, *Ai Weiwei - Works: Beijing 1993-2003*, 8.

¹²² *Ibid*, 8.

not just to cast doubt on grand narratives, but to question the coherence and authority of linear history as a mode of understanding the past, seeking instead to create a more nuanced, transexperiential interpretive framework.

In the *longue durée* of Jingdezhen's history, the six hundred years from the founding of the Tang dynasty to the fall of the Song was not only a pivotal turning-point in the city's rise to global fame but also the first phase in its development when porcelain production is supported by archaeological evidence as well as by literary sources. From the early seventh century, the area formerly referred to as Xinping assumed new prominence and a new name: Changnan (唱南), meaning "South of the Chang River", from which some believe the epithet "china" (for porcelain) derives.¹²³ This increased attention to local specificities can, to a certain extent, be traced to a contemporaneous decline in the use of bronze for jugs, bottles and other vessels as the escalation of trade created a need for greater quantities of copper for currency, compelling restrictions on its use as an alloy.¹²⁴ A new attention to the aesthetic qualities of ceramics in addition to utilitarian function also influenced this shift, as the elaboration of tea-drinking culture fostered closer relationships between literati elites and artisanal producers that 'both promoted refinement and increased sales of favoured types.'¹²⁵ Two of these types referred to repeatedly in literature of the era are the white Xing ware, produced in Hebei province, and green Yue ware, made in Zhejiang, from which derived the popular adage "*nan qing*,

¹²³ Lan Pu and Zheng Tinggui, *Ching-Te-Chen T'ao-Lu or The Potteries of China*, trans. Geoffrey R. Sayer (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), 1; Ah Xian, cited in Marita Bullock, "'China, China': Autoethnography as Literal Translation in Ah Xian's Porcelain Forms," in *Memory Fragments: Visualising Difference in Australian History* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 104.

¹²⁴ Dillon, "A History of the Porcelain Industry in Jingdezhen," 20.

¹²⁵ Kerr and Wood, *Chemistry and Chemical Technology, Part 12: Ceramic Technology*, 28–29.

bei bai” (南青北白), “southern green, northern white”.¹²⁶ The earliest known traces of porcelain production in Jingdezhen appear alongside deposits of a green-glazed, grey-bodied stoneware believed to be an imitation of Yue ware and dated to the tumultuous Five Dynasties (907-960) era that separated the Tang and Song eras.¹²⁷ Green and white wares therefore coexisted in Jingdezhen, though the rapid decline in production of Yue-type stoneware as the ‘extreme whiteness, purity and translucency’ of early porcelain gained popularity soon reversed the binary division of the above-cited adage.¹²⁸ From this moment, there is abundant archaeological evidence for large-scale production of porcelain in Jingdezhen, for use by consumers in both domestic and overseas markets.

The *qingbai* glaze that Liu adopted for his contemporary ceramic art also derived initially from an imitation of popular wares of the time, though it was modelled on the northern Xing ware rather than “southern green”, and first appeared during the Northern Song dynasty (960-1126). This was a time of great stability and almost continuous economic development for Jingdezhen, largely subsidised by the patronage of the imperial court. It was also during this era that the city gained its current name: the third Song emperor, Zhenzong (r. 997-1022), commissioned an order of porcelain from Changnan inscribed “Made in the years of Jingde” (*Jingde nian zhi* 景德年制) to commemorate the opening of this contract during his second reign era (Jingde 景德, 1004-07). He decreed that the city be named “Jingde-zhen”, thereby officially designating it a market town (*zhen* 镇) in recognition of its centrality for the burgeoning porcelain trade.¹²⁹ Further advances in both reputation and production followed the relocation of the Song capital in 1127 from

¹²⁶ Hajni Elias, “In Search of China’s Ceramic Past: A Visit to Jingdezhen and Laohudong,” *Arts of Asia* 37, no. 2 (April 2007): 144.

¹²⁷ Rosemary E. Scott, *Elegant Form and Harmonious Decoration: Four Dynasties of Jingdezhen Porcelain* (London: Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, 1992), 9.

¹²⁸ Kerr and Wood, *Chemistry and Chemical Technology, Part 12: Ceramic Technology*, 214.

¹²⁹ Lan and Zheng, *Ching-Te-Chen T’ao-Lu or The Potteries of China*, 1, 39–40.

present-day Kaifeng to what is now Hangzhou, inaugurating the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279). This not only brought the centre of political and cultural authority closer to Jingdezhen but also, on a practical level, compelled large numbers of ceramicists from the north to migrate to the south in the wake of incursions by the Jurchen people of Manchuria, who had compelled the Song court to migrate southward.¹³⁰ The invention of *qingbai* is closely associated, then, with a turning-point in the history of Jingdezhen, and is central to the historic identity of the city.

These historic associations of *qingbai* aren't directly represented in Liu's *Regular-Fragile* series of large-scale ceramics installations, but his decision to use this glaze suggests an awareness of its historical significance. During the Northern Song dynasty, not long after the invention of *qingbai*, porcelain made in Jingdezhen and coated with this glaze rapidly came to occupy the prime position within China's global export trade that had previously been held by Yue ware made in Zhejiang.¹³¹ This commercial success played a pivotal role in the Emperor Zhenzong's decision to bestow imperial patronage on Jingdezhen, which in turn prompted the development of imitations in many other kiln-cities across China. A high-point of production was attained following the relocation of the Song court, with the prosperity that followed this prompting even greater mass-production. As conflict with the Jurchens weakened Song authority, however, the broad popularity of *qingbai* also declined and quality of production deteriorated.¹³² In *Regular-Fragile* (fig. 11), Liu recreates the abundance with which *qingbai* would have been associated at the height of its popularity, combining the historic glaze with contemporary slip-casting to

¹³⁰ Dillon, "A History of the Porcelain Industry in Jingdezhen," 23.

¹³¹ Yoh, "The Export and Trade of Chinese Ceramics: An Overview of the History and Scholarship to Date," 543–46.

¹³² Chen Baiquan, "The Development of Song Dynasty Qingbai Wares from Jingdezhen," in *The Porcelains of Jingdezhen*, by Rosemary E. Scott, trans. Anthony Hua-Tien Lin (London: Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, 1993), 14–17, 23–25; Kerr and Wood, *Chemistry and Chemical Technology, Part 12: Ceramic Technology*, 556–57.

create huge quantities of mass-produced consumables replicated in porcelain. While slip-casting – pouring liquid clay or “slip” into a mould to build up a thin layer that, once air-dried, retains the shape of the moulded form using the minimum amount of ceramic material – enabled Liu to replicate and indefinitely reproduce the surface characteristics and shapes of his models, his approach to the technique resulted in very thin-walled, fragile pieces. Leaving visible any cracks, gaps between mould sections, or warping when fired, Liu created an image of abundance in decay or material inadequacy, the lustrous surface of the glaze masking an inner emptiness and instability that recalls the shifting fortunes of the era in China’s history when *qingbai* was developed: the cultural effervescence of the Song dynasty, constantly threatened and eventually destroyed by military weakness.

The subject-matter and themes of *Regular-Fragile*, in all its many incarnations, further reinforce this foregrounding of the unpredictable currents of history. Conceptually, Liu traces his inspiration for the project to media coverage of several high-profile plane crashes in China in 2001, recalling that images of debris drove him to contemplate the impermanence of life and the fragility of the world of things we build around us. He has also cited the deep depression into which he and his wife were plunged after their newborn son’s diagnosis with a chronic medical condition in 1994, which Liu remembers as a time when he felt acutely aware of the vulnerability of the human body. Reflecting on these experiences, Liu realised that porcelain would be an ideal vehicle for the artistic expression of his thoughts: while it seems strong and can endure sustained use over many years, even centuries if handled with care, as a material it is inherently fragile and

always vulnerable.¹³³ The same tension between preservation and destruction is clear in his choice of daily-use consumables as subject-matter, including hair driers, bottles, children's toys, shoes, books, hats and handbags – in sum, to cite Merewether writing of Ai Weiwei's use of similar objects, '[the] poor, wondrous detritus of our lives.'¹³⁴ The durability of these objects is taken for granted despite their status as throwaway objects to be discarded once their usefulness has been exhausted, while the impression of material comfort they afford is ultimately little more than a palliative illusion. Recalling his intentions for the work in 2014, Liu explains that he chose this subject matter and the medium of *qingbai* porcelain because

... both are instantly recognizable and are remembered fondly by many people [yet] the unique material characteristics of porcelain always convey a tension between durability and fragility ... implying that these diverse fantasies and sensations are ultimately fleeting, and that we live in a state of uncertainty about what is reality and what is illusion.¹³⁵

As in Ai Weiwei's *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn*, the cherished myths that lend a sense of stability and continuity to our lives, '[the] accepted history that we can only make, and lose ourselves in the making,' is threatened with destruction and demystification.¹³⁶ And the fragility inherent to ceramics, moreover, is foregrounded as an effective means to convey the shock that follows this abrupt reentry into the ruthless ebb and flow of time.

¹³³ Yan Yuting and Liu Jianhua, «嬗变中的刘建华: 艺术转变的内在逻辑 - 阎玉婷对话刘建华» [The Evolution of Liu Jianhua: Internal Logic for Art Transformation - Yan Yuting in Dialogue with Liu Jianhua], 东方艺术, no. 3 (2009): 42.

¹³⁴ Merewether, *Ai Weiwei - Works: Beijing 1993-2003*, 17.

¹³⁵ Liu Jianhua, «思维的连贯性: 关于我这些年的作品» [Collected Thoughts: About My Work over the Years], 苏州工艺美术职业技术学院学报, no. 2 (2014): 77.

¹³⁶ Merewether, *Ai Weiwei - Works: Beijing 1993-2003*, 17.



*Figure 11: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), Regular-Fragile, 2003, porcelain, qingbai glaze;
Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou.*

In the first display of *Regular-Fragile* for the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003 (fig. 11), both this tension and the association of the work with the comparably mutable currents of global trade were made clear. As one of five pieces selected for inclusion in the inaugural China Pavilion, Liu's work, like *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn*, is pivotal to the broader development of contemporary Chinese porcelain art.¹³⁷ The curators of the exhibition, Fan Di'an and Wang Yong, adopted the experiences of urbanization and globalisation in contemporary China as their overall theme, aiming to create a "synthi-scape" or artificial vista communicating the tensions between artists' dreams and the inescapable realities of the world.¹³⁸ Within this conceptual context, Liu's *qingbai* consumables would have gained an air of ethereality as ghostly echoes of the everyday objects reproduced, pale, translucent, fragile and otherworldly.

At the same time, their standardised and deliberately compromised manufacture may have implied a subtle critique of the homogenisation and lack of construction standards that many have identified with China's urban renewal projects. Ultimately, however, a further indication of the unpredictable precarity of life that first inspired Liu's installation arose when the exhibition was cancelled following the outbreak of the SARS epidemic, which prevented the artists and their works travelling to Venice. *Regular-Fragile* was put on display instead at the Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, and broadcast to the Biennale via video link.¹³⁹ Several of the 972 pieces included in the complete installation were also photographed on the rocky peaks of a mountain near Kunming, Liu's home at

¹³⁷ The other four artists selected were: Lu Shengzhong, *Landscape Study*, 2003; Wang Shu, *Reconstruction*, 2003; Yang Fudong, *Flutter Flutter*, *Jasmine Jasmine*, 2002; and Zhan Wang, *Urban Landscape*, 2003.

¹³⁸ Fan Di'an, "People's Republic of China: Synthi-Scape," in *Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer - Biennale Di Venezia, 50th International Art Exhibition*, by Francesco Bonami (Venice: Marsilio, 2003), 582.

¹³⁹ Jin Simeng, «刘建华:给艺术做减去» [Liu Jianhua: An Art of Subtraction], *L'Officiel Art China*, January 2013, 90.



Figure 12: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), Regular-Fragile, 2003, Kunming, Yunnan Province, China, photograph.

the time, perhaps alluding to their imposed isolation as well as the ubiquitous theme of fragility in the face of arbitrary natural forces (fig. 12). Though fame and fortune may seem assured, little can be done to prevent the imposition of circumstances beyond our control, and the apparently irresistible weight of history is vulnerable to the passage of time, exposed by an act of chance as little more than an empty vessel, attractive on the surface but hollow within.

The fragility of grand historical narratives is also the subject of another variation of the *Regular-Fragile* series: *Dream*, created for “Montpellier/Chine: Biennale Internationale” or MC1, the first (and only) International Biennial of Contemporary Chinese Art to be held in Montpellier, France, from June to October 2005. In this incarnation of the series, over six thousand porcelain consumables were shipped from Jingdezhen to Montpellier, where the artist smashed them and arranged their fragments on the floor of the space to form the outlined silhouette of a space shuttle. Liu chose this form as a memorial to the seven astronauts who died in the disintegration of US Space Shuttle Columbia upon re-entry on 1 February 2003.¹⁴⁰ Television coverage of the disaster was projected on the wall of the gallery at the “nose” of the shuttle, with footage of the earlier disintegration of US Space Shuttle Challenger, on 28 January 1986, which also claimed the lives of the crew.¹⁴¹ Both tragedies are positioned in the video as part of a broader history of space exploration, narrating the tension between our dream to discover unknown worlds and the dangers involved in such ventures: another synthi-scape, exposing tensions between aspiration and reality. Liu has explained that his intention was to emphasise that

¹⁴⁰ Elizabeth Howell, “Columbia Disaster: What Happened, What NASA Learned,” Space.com, November 14, 2017, <https://www.space.com/19436-columbia-disaster.html>.

¹⁴¹ Elizabeth Howell, “Challenger: Shuttle Disaster That Changed NASA,” Space.com, November 30, 2017, <https://www.space.com/18084-space-shuttle-challenger.html>.

... our exploration of the profound mysteries of the universe has been achieved at a very high price [and], while we are now excessively dependent on the latest technologies, the security that these seem to offer is in fact extremely fragile, with many exposed areas of weakness.¹⁴²

The video and porcelain installation also recall Liu's initial inspiration for *Regular-Fragile*: news coverage of plane crashes and the revelation of mortality that such images evoke. His decision to substantiate the previously implied fragility of his porcelain consumables by smashing them and displaying their fragments, however, renders the work even more melancholy, implying that the worst has already come to pass and that we are left only to salvage what we can from the debris.

These implications found even more spectacular realization in a second installation of *Dream* for the Singapore Biennale in 2006 (fig. 13). Housed in Sculpture Square, a church established in 1870 and repurposed as an arts venue in 1999 after falling into disrepair, Liu's broken porcelain installation extended the entire length of the nave, with the video component enshrined in the apse on three vertical screens that recall the doors and central panel of an altarpiece. For Huang Zhuan, this *Dream* perfectly encapsulated Jean Baudrillard's concept of the "hyperreal", exposing the widening divide between reality and simulation that excessive visual stimuli in contemporary society has forced open.¹⁴³ The edited footage of the Columbia and Challenger disasters creates a simulacrum of these events, simultaneously rendering them visible while also casting doubt on their

¹⁴² Liu, «思维的连贯性: 关于我这些年的作品» [Collected Thoughts: About My Work over the Years], 77.

¹⁴³ Huang Zhuan, «无所遁形: 爱德文斯瓦克曼 – 刘建华对话展» [Vanished Boundaries: A Dialogue between Edwin Zwakman and Liu Jianhua], 荣宝斋: 当代艺术版, no. 6 (2011): 143.



Figure 13: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), Dream, 2006, porcelain, qingbai glaze, 3-channel DVD projection, 1200 x 900 x 80 cm; Sculpture Square, Singapore.

authenticity. The porcelain fragments on the floor of the church confuse the distinction between the real and simulated even further by their double replication of consumables on one hand, and the outline of a disintegrated space shuttle on the other. Finally, the exhibition itself constitutes a spectacle in another sense: the centerpiece of a biennale conceived as ‘official window dressing for an [International Monetary Fund] and World Bank conference ... representing [the wealthy inhabitants of] Singapore to well-heeled investors as ... an art-interested, cosmopolitan populace.’¹⁴⁴ Ultimately, however, as in the final frame of Ai’s *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* (fig. 2), Liu reduces such dreams, from the narrative of religious salvation in the architecture of the former church to the worldly aspirations of the global business elite, to a disorderly accumulation of shattered fragments strewn across the floor.

Liu Jianhua’s cultivation of conceptual emptiness in “Horizon” (2009-10) and “Liu Jianhua” (2012) as an extension of the “blandness” of literati aesthetics

In contrast to the crushing revelations of transience and fragility in *Regular-Fragile*, Liu adopts a less destructive approach in his use of celadon, another historically significant glaze closely connected to *qingbai*. He created his first celadon-glazed works in 2008, just two years after the installation of *Dream* at the Singapore Biennale, signaling a shift in focus from the historical drama of dynastic fortunes to the intimate resonance of ceramics as objects of aesthetic appreciation. A parallel could be drawn with Ai Weiwei’s presentation of ceramics as a vehicle for memory and nostalgia, though Liu defines these works as the earliest expression of his “no meaning, no content” approach: a disavowal

¹⁴⁴ Joe Martin Hill, “A Tale of Two Biennales: Singapore and Shanghai,” *Yishu* 5, no. 4 (December 2006): 7.

of conceptual or symbolic association in favour of purely visual and tactile responses.¹⁴⁵

Celadon and *qingbai* are uniquely suited to this line of thought, defined by an emphasis on depth of colour and visual appeal, rather than complexity of ornament. These glazes have also been associated by ceramics collectors since at least the mid-20th century with literati ideals of restraint and elegance, and especially with the concept of “blandness” (*pingdan* 平淡): cultivation of monotone, sparse compositions in ink landscape painting to express isolation, exile and detachment from everyday life. A revival of this concept has been identified in the work of several contemporary Chinese artists as a response to the increasingly fast pace and visual complexity of our current era, though the evident parallel with Liu’s “no meaning, no content” ethos has yet to be noted. Although first developed for his celadon works, the clearest expression of this method in Liu’s *oeuvre* is *Discard* (fig. 1), which also evokes comparison with the archaeological/museological mapping of history satirised by Ai Weiwei. In this installation, a typology of material culture is suggested, but only to be exposed as arbitrary and incomprehensible, blurring distinctions between past and present and generating an ambiguity that undermines the customary authority of mythologised historical narratives.

Both *qingbai*- and celadon-glazed wares are defined and celebrated above all for visual and tactile appeal rather than symbolic complexity or decorative sophistication. *Qingbai* first appeared at a time of increasing sophistication in both the production and reception of ceramics in China, signaling a technological advance over previous Five Dynasties wares and closer conformity to the criteria of clarity, hardness and lustre by which

¹⁴⁵ Liu, «思维的连贯性: 关于我这些年的作品» [Collected Thoughts: About My Work over the Years], 80.



Figure 14: Bottle with lotus scroll, late 13th-early 14th century, porcelain with incised decoration, qingbai glaze, 27.9 cm (height); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 15: Vase with dragon-fish handles, 12th-13th century, porcelain with applied decoration, celadon glaze, 17.1 cm (height); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

porcelain is now most often defined. Like Liu's contemporary slip-cast pieces produced for *Regular-Fragile*, *qingbai* wares were designed by artisans in Jingdezhen to be as thin-walled as possible, partially to evoke comparison with *repoussé* silver and partially to ensure the icy translucency for which the glaze was famed.¹⁴⁶ In addition to silver, they were often compared with jade for their comparably glossy surface texture and green-blue colour, usually ornamented with carved, incised, moulded or applied decoration in subtle, rhythmic patterns to enhance the unctuous luminescence of the glaze (fig. 14).¹⁴⁷ Similar forms of decoration appear on celadon wares of the same era (fig. 15), reflecting a mutual emphasis on depth of colour rather than surface complexity. The Chinese term for celadon – *qingci* or “green/blue ware” – as well as the European term, derived from the name of a character in Honoré d'Urfé's (1568-1625) novel *L'Astree* (1607-1627) recognizable by his grey-green clothing, further indicate the centrality of colour to the definition of these wares.¹⁴⁸

Yet visual appeal was not the only motive underlying the production of celadon in the Porcelain Capital – like *qingbai*, it was also uniquely suited to literati ideals of restraint and elegance, and it is this aspect of the glaze that Liu explores in works that have been interpreted by critics as meditative, self-reflexive statements. Bracketed by two solo exhibitions – “Horizon” (2009-10) at Beijing Commune, and “Liu Jianhua” (2012) at Pace Gallery, Beijing – these works include the *Untitled* series of “flattened” vases (2008), the sculptures *A reed raft* (2009; fig. 16) and *Bone* (2009), the austere *Container* (2009; figs. 31, 32) and *Blank paper* (2009) series, and abstract *End of 2012* (2011) and *Untitled 2012* (2012; fig. 17). Within the broader context of his *oeuvre*, Liu has explained these as an

¹⁴⁶ Kerr and Wood, *Chemistry and Chemical Technology, Part 12: Ceramic Technology*, 556.

¹⁴⁷ Chen, “The Development of Song Dynasty Qingbai Wares from Jingdezhen,” 13–14.

¹⁴⁸ Carswell, *Blue & White: Chinese Porcelain around the World*, 107.



Figure 16: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), *A reed raft*, 2009, porcelain, celadon glaze, 177.58 x 20.5 x 3 cm; Beijing Commune, Beijing.



Figure 17: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), *Untitled* 2012, 2012, porcelain, celadon glaze; Pace Gallery, Beijing.

attempt to create ‘something more personal and direct, drawing on my background and experience,’ to discover ‘the primal force of art,’ and to offer a remedy for ‘the [current] lack of spirituality ... and absence of an awareness of history.’¹⁴⁹

Similarly, writers on Liu’s work have generally interpreted these pieces as an expression of his desire to retreat from the superficial pleasures and self-promotion attendant on artistic success, and the tendency of many artists in China to imitate international trends in pursuit of fame and fortune. Monica Dematté, for example, has written that *Untitled 2012* reflects Liu’s search for ‘a purer atmosphere ... peaceful and meditative, a state of suspended animation’ that she associates with Chan Buddhist meditation – a connection Jin Simeng has also highlighted.¹⁵⁰ Further elaborating on this association, Dematté asserts that *A reed raft* was inspired by the legendary journey from India undertaken by the Chinese Buddhist patriarch Bodhidharma, conventionally believed to be the founder of Chan Buddhism in China.¹⁵¹ There is certainly a Buddhistic element to these works, with their concentration on the reduction of form to the most basic elements and Liu’s shift in artistic focus from external appearances to innermost being. And Chan Buddhism in the Song dynasty was associated with the scholar-gentry and literati ideals, making Liu’s choice of celadon a very apt artistic decision.

Yet an even closer association with literati aesthetics can be identified for the “Horizon” and “Liu Jianhua” works, as well as *Regular-Fragile*, in the concept of “blandness”, a key precedent for Liu’s “no meaning, no content” approach that has yet to be fully explored.

In a recent article for *Yishu*, UK-based art historian Voon Pow Bartlett tied the idea of

¹⁴⁹ Liu, «思维的连贯性: 关于我这些年的作品» [Collected Thoughts: About My Work over the Years], 80.

¹⁵⁰ Monica Dematté, «瓷的全新可能» [Brand New Possibility of Porcelain], 中国艺术, no. 4 (2014): 25; Jin, «刘建华: 给艺术做减去» [Liu Jianhua: An Art of Subtraction], 90.

¹⁵¹ Dematté, «瓷的全新可能» [Brand New Possibility of Porcelain], 25.

blandness with what she identified as a tendency in contemporary Chinese art in general toward the reclamation of past forms of art. Echoing the view of Liu Jianhua's work put forward by Jin and Dematté, Bartlett explained this as a response to 'globalized world culture with its media onslaught, Internet and socio-economic meltdowns,' contrasting it with the spectacle and sensationalism of previous stylistic trends like Political Pop and Cynical Realism.¹⁵² Bartlett defers to the writings of François Jullien, Susan Bush and James Cahill on literati ink-landscape painting to define the concept of "blandness" as 'a monotonous and monochromatic style, where sparsity ruled, evolving toward even greater simplicity [with] desolation and homelessness hidden in the ... calm.'¹⁵³ Although Bartlett doesn't mention Liu, these hallmarks of literati blandness and the qualities of abstraction, reduction and an aloofness masking an inner melancholia find consummate expression in his work. This is true not only of the "Horizon" and "Liu Jianhua" sculptures but also of *Regular-Fragile* (fig. 11), in which Liu used the luminous monotony of *qingbai*-glazed porcelain commodities to create an impression of sparsity that powerfully evokes the melancholy of material impermanence. Devoid of superficial ornament, the ethereal detritus of his installations for MC1 and the Venice and Singapore Biennales transposes the "blandness" of a literati ink-landscape painting into the medium of porcelain, further reinforcing their historical resonance.

Liu's cultivation of "blandness" finds its clearest expression, however, in *Discard* (fig. 1), a work that also foregrounds tensions between destruction, preservation and renewal so central to all the works considered in this chapter. In *Discard*, the apparent monotony

¹⁵² Voon Pow Bartlett, "Can Blandness Be Praised?," *Yishu* 10, no. 6 (December 2011): 34–36.

¹⁵³ Bartlett, 29. The texts that Bartlett draws on are: François Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics* (New York: Zone, 2004); Susan Bush and Shih Hsio-yen, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); Richard M. Barnhart et al., *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

of Liu's *qingbai* replicas is rendered even more overwhelming by their undifferentiated display within a shallow 'excavation of waste [*feiwu* 废物]'.¹⁵⁴ As in Ai Weiwei's *Spouts* (fig. 10), this mode of display immediately suggests an archaeological or museological approach to history, creating the impression of a typological strata of material culture unearthed and exposed to view. This impression is reinforced by a juxtaposition of these porcelain artefacts with a comparably undifferentiated mass of smashed historical reproductions in a shallow reflecting pool, inspired by the ceremonial destruction of misfired wares in the Imperial kilns in Jingdezhen and the discarding of their fragments in the river that runs through the city.¹⁵⁵ The detritus of our everyday lives, including computer monitors, oil drums, car tyres, bottles and other emblems of a throwaway culture driven by cycles of technological obsolescence, is thereby made to resemble the mysterious remains of an unknown civilisation, distant in time and sensibility. The porcelain pieces submerged in water, on the other hand, although they too appear to be antique in origin, are replicas and reproductions, many of which may have been produced even more recently than some of Liu's *qingbai* commodities. Like Ai Weiwei, Liu therefore shatters our perception of the past as self-contained and independent of present realities by literally immersing the antique within the currents of lived existence. To cite Merewether, writing about Ai's rearticulations of antique furniture, there is a focus here on 'the primary refinement of ... manufactured forms [initiating] a deliberate reconfiguration of the conventional coordinates of time, space, and motion within which [they] exist.'¹⁵⁶ At the same time, however, Liu confuses this process of demystification and disorientation by suggesting the possibility that our current era may one day be

¹⁵⁴ Liu, «思维的连贯性: 关于我这些年的作品» [Collected Thoughts: About My Work over the Years], 82.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Merewether, *Ai Weiwei - Works: Beijing 1993-2003*, 15.

distorted by the same archaeological lens through which we now view the past. In both instances of perspectival confusion, Liu creates a disruptive ambiguity that undermines the usual certainty with which mythologised narratives of the past are given authority.

Like the ceramic works by Ai Weiwei discussed in the first two sections of this chapter, the various iterations of Liu Jianhua's *Regular-Fragile* project and his "bland" celadon sculptures point to a tension between the appeal of history and the desire to critique historical narratives. To communicate this tension, Liu developed comparable strategies of destruction paired with "preservation" or restoration, emphasising the historical and affective symbolism of ceramics. In the installations of *Regular-Fragile* created for the Venice Biennale (fig. 11), MC1 and the Singapore Biennale (fig. 13), he appropriated the emblematic significance of *qingbai* as index of a pivotal moment in the development of porcelain production and export in China to recreate the visions of elite sophistication and global expansion associated, respectively, with the Song and Yuan dynasties. At the same time, like Ai Weiwei, Liu emphasised the fragility of the ceramic medium to cast doubt on the stability of this mythologised narrative, and to reveal the impermanence and inevitable disintegration of all material forms of wealth, both past and present. The same line of thought can be noted in his celadon sculptures created for the exhibitions "Horizon" and "Liu Jianhua", in which literati "blandness" is equated with the reductive abstraction of typological classification. In these works, and especially in his installation *Discard*, Liu reduces familiar forms to vehicles for visual and tactile sensation, emptied of any and all meaning other than that which adheres to their monochrome surfaces. The apparent division between past and present is blurred, while myths of national and cultural identity are exposed empty fictions, superficially appealing but hollow within, and subject to an inevitable deterioration over time.

As to my porcelain-based works, the central issue is the issue of authenticity. What is real and what is fake or a reproduction? ... If they are fake ... how do they differ from authentic ... pieces when they are exact replicas with no recognizable differences? If there is no recognizable difference ... what does this do to the value of the original period piece?¹⁵⁷

As indicated by Ai Weiwei's comment above, in addition to their shared focus on the fragility of historical narratives, he and Liu have also used ceramics to explore the extent to which the past can be fabricated.¹⁵⁸ The objects appropriated for *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* (fig. 2), *Untitled* (fig. 6), and *Tang-dynasty courtesan in bottle* (fig. 7) are of questionable authenticity and are likely replicas rather than genuine antiques, while reproduction is central to both the making and meaning of Liu's *Regular-Fragile* and later celadon sculptures. Both artists shed light on the history of such practices in Jingdezhen, where the manufacture of replicas continues to provide a crucial source of income for ceramicists working within a lineage of imitation often sidelined by canonical narratives of the industry.

A direct connection with this lineage can be identified in Ai's frequent commissioning of replicas, starting with a series of reproduced Ming and Qing blue-and-white vessels in 1996 and culminating a decade later with the installation *Ghost Gu coming down the*

¹⁵⁷ Ai and Bernell, "Ai Weiwei with Robert Bernell," 176–78.

¹⁵⁸ Ai's fascination with reproduction and fabrication, like his interest in urban redevelopment, is also reflected in his architectural practice, which he has directed since 1999 through a studio named FAKE Design, a play on the English word "fake" and the Chinese phonetic transliteration of "fuck" as *fa-ke* (法克). Ai has not explained his reasons for choosing this name in published remarks, yet it likely reflects the same desire to distance himself from orthodoxy (by implying that his is a "fake" architecture), to question established ideas of authenticity, and to court controversy that are expressed in so many of his artistic works. Clark, "Mind Mud: Ai Weiwei's Conceptual Ceramics," 64; Geiser, "In the Realm of Architecture: Some Notes on Ai Weiwei's Spatial Temptations," 35.

mountain (figs. 19-23, for which he commissioned the recreation of a 14th-century blue-and-white jar that gained the highest auction price on record for an Asian art object in July 2005. In these works, Ai exposed the extent to which our view of the past can be distorted by perspective, power and privilege, and the relative ease with which historic narratives can be packaged into a more digestible form. In contrast to the diachronic narrative of porcelain production and export as one of incremental innovation, Ai points to a complex web of influence and imitation, defying chronological classification.

Returning to the tension between destruction and liberation explored at the start of this chapter in relation to *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* (fig. 2), Ai's conceptually similar but overlooked *Breaking of two blue-and-white "Dragon" bowls* (1996; figs. 27-30) unites this with an awareness of historical fabrication and transformation of formerly mundane ceramics into artefacts of great value when placed "under the hammer" at auction. Like *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* and *Ghost Gu*, which derive potency from the historical significance attached to the Han and Yuan dynasties, *Breaking of two blue-and-white "Dragon bowls* evokes another fated moment in the history of Jingdezhen – the peak of production attained under the Qing Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong emperors during the long eighteenth century. Once again, however, the authority of this golden age is cast into doubt by the introduction of new ambiguity into the continued reiteration of grand narratives.

A brief genealogy of reproduction and replication in Jingdezhen

Imitation has long been central to the success of the porcelain industry in Jingdezhen. The earliest known archaeological evidence of porcelain production in the city appears alongside imitation Yue wares of the Five Dynasties era, while the global success of

qingbai grew from its adaptation of earlier Xing ware from Hebei. Such imitation and the related concept of “archaism” (*fanggu* 仿古) should be distinguished, however, from replication and reproduction, which Craig Clunas has defined as largely profit-motivated activities that closely mirror the trends and peaks of the antiques market and are often intended to deceive unwary buyers.¹⁵⁹ In *A Record of Jingdezhen Ceramics* (*Jingdezhen tao lu* 景德镇陶錄), compiled in 1815 by the literati Lan Pu and Zheng Tinggui, there are many references to the reproduction of historical wares, including Yuan imitations of Song glazes, Ming replicas of Yuan ware, and Qing copying of Song, Yuan and Ming ceramics. Lan notes that even the most highly desired product of the city’s kilns at the time of writing was a reproduction ware known as “Official Old” (*guan gu* 官古), ‘called “old” because it is the fashion to prefer old things.’¹⁶⁰ The *Record* also mentions several ceramicists by name who were known to have specialised in reproductions in the Ming dynasty: Cui Gong (*fl.* c. 1521-71), whose imitations of earlier blue-and-white ‘were the crowning glory of the people’s kilns;’ Zhou Danquan (*fl.* c. 1567-1620), for whose replicas ‘bids of a thousand ounces of gold were offered;’ and Chen Zhongmi, another replica-maker whose work was widely admired.¹⁶¹ Many replica-makers even received imperial patronage: the Ming Chenghua Emperor (r. 1464-87), for example, placed an order for exact replicas of ceramics produced during the reign of his grandfather, the Xuande Emperor (r. 1425-35).¹⁶² Liu Jianhua’s and Ai Weiwei’s imitations of past ceramics can

¹⁵⁹ Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 114-115.

¹⁶⁰ Lan and Zheng, *Ching-Te-Chen T’ao-Lu or The Potteries of China*, 15–16, 21–25.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 46, 114.

¹⁶² Maris Boyd Gillette, “Copying, Counterfeiting, and Capitalism in Contemporary China: Jingdezhen’s Porcelain Industry,” *Modern China* 36, no. 4 (July 2010): 374. In his survey of the rising appreciation for antiquities during the late Ming dynasty, Clunas has observed a parallel rise in the number of replicas produced to supply escalating demand, including not only ceramics but also jade, metalwork and, above all, calligraphy and ink-landscape paintings. He asserts that ‘faking came to occupy such a prominent place in certain sections of the luxury handicraft trades that it has seriously distorted our understanding of what was going on in these industries,’ though rather than devaluing the replicated objects these acts of reproduction ‘were only likely to reinforce the importance of “authenticity” as a value and strengthen the mechanisms of authority by which the market operated.’ Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 108-113. Even

therefore be considered part of a much longer history of reproduction in Jingdezhen, and in the development of Chinese art in general.

Liu's and Ai's works of porcelain art can also be situated alongside the continued success of the reproduction industry in contemporary Jingdezhen, where most ceramicists are now engaged in the very lucrative production of imitation historical wares. This trade is driven by what seems to one commentator to be 'an insatiable desire for reproduction ware ... at all levels of the market,' and often includes some of the most consummate expressions of artisanal skill and closest ties to time-honoured production techniques.¹⁶³

The tradition of replicating past wares detailed by Lan Pu and Zheng Tinggui in 1815 continued to flourish throughout the nineteenth century. Even after the abdication of the final Qing emperor in 1912, and despite widespread social unrest across China, the creation of reproduction ceramics remained lucrative, fueled by the dispersal of the former Imperial collections and supported predominantly by a new clientele of overseas collectors, given greater access to the country by European and Japanese territorial claims. The 1920s and 1930s witnessed a peak in the trade, when antiques dealers and appraisers in Shanghai commissioned artisans in Jingdezhen to produce high-quality replicas and historical reproductions to sell as genuine artefacts.¹⁶⁴ Extensive Japanese bombardment of Jingdezhen during the 1940s, however, effectively halted production, with only eight kilns in operation in 1948.

the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), writing in the late 16th century, observed in his voluminous journals that 'counterfeiters of antiques are numerous, and ... clever at cheating the unwary by selling them utterly worthless things.' Matteo Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci: 1583-1610*, translated by Louis J. Gallagher (New York: Random House, 1953): 79-80.

¹⁶³ Anna Wu, "Jingdezhen Today," *Arts of Asia* 41, no. 6 (December 2011): 90.

¹⁶⁴ Gillette, "Copying, Counterfeiting, and Capitalism in Contemporary China: Jingdezhen's Porcelain Industry," 375-76.

Following the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the city's first state-owned factory opened in April 1950 and by 1956 production had been organised into ten state-owned enterprises and twenty collective factories funded by the CCP.¹⁶⁵ Production at government-sponsored factories was primarily restricted to ceramics for domestic, electrical and engineering use, though a quota of antique-style wares was maintained. During the Cultural Revolution, even this limited output was curtailed when historical reproductions were prohibited as evidence of feudal, revisionist, capitalist or counter-revolutionary sentiment.¹⁶⁶ Exceptions were made, however, for government officials, the most distinguished of which is the 138-piece set of *famille rose* dinnerware produced for Mao Zedong and now known as the "7501" series, after the code-number of the document detailing its commission and manufacture.¹⁶⁷ Even under the rigorous stewardship of CCP rule, then, skills in reproduction were maintained, demonstrating the continued popularity of imitation from past to present.

It was from the 1980s to the mid-1990s, however – the same time that Ai Weiwei and Liu Jianhua discovered their interest in porcelain as a medium of artistic expression – that the contemporary reproduction industry first rose to prominence. Following Mao Zedong's death in 1976 and the subsequent implementation of his successor Deng Xiaoping's policies of "reform and opening" (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放), state-directed porcelain production in Jingdezhen gave way to a more market-oriented vision, and ceramicists were once again given the freedom to produce a range of wares as well as the opportunity to operate private businesses.¹⁶⁸ Artisans were compelled to tie their production even more closely to the market following the government's decision in 1994

¹⁶⁵ Gillette, *China's Porcelain Capital*, 40, 46, 52.

¹⁶⁶ Idem, "Copying, Counterfeiting, and Capitalism in Contemporary China," 376.

¹⁶⁷ "For Sale: Porcelain Made Secretly for Mao," *New York Times*, December 12, 1996.

¹⁶⁸ Gillette, *China's Porcelain Capital: The Rise, Fall and Reinvention of Ceramics in Jingdezhen*, 76–77.

to tighten restrictions on bank loans, formerly the main source of income for collective factories since the repeal of state funding in 1985. This decision brought about the closure of the city's first state-owned factory in 1995 followed by other state enterprises until, by October 1998, all had folded and between 60,000 and 100,000 artisans found themselves unemployed.¹⁶⁹ Facing competition from other areas in the production of domestic, electrical and engineering ceramics, many artisans turned to reproductions as a familiar and lucrative line of work. By 2006, almost twenty percent of the 390,000 porcelain workers in Jingdezhen supported themselves solely through the imitation of antique wares. At first, echoing the historic rise of Jingdezhen during the Song dynasty, the most popular type of ceramic copied was *qingbai* ware – another reason, perhaps, for Liu Jianhua's choice of this glaze for *Regular-Fragile*. *Qingbai* was soon eclipsed in popularity, however, by Yuan, Ming and Qing blue-and-white, Ming and Qing overglaze enameled wares, and Qing monochromes.¹⁷⁰ Turning to porcelain (or *returning*, in the case of Liu Jianhua) in 1996 and 1998, respectively, at a crucial point in Jingdezhen's transition from state sponsorship to market-driven entrepreneurial production, Ai and Liu unquestionably benefited from the new emphasis on historical imitation, and this industrial setting likely exercised a definitive influence on the direction of their work.

Ai Weiwei's Ghost Gu coming down the mountain (2005-06) and the distortion of the past for power and profit

The historical implications of Liu's *Regular-Fragile* series as a spectacular staging of the act of replication has already been discussed, but an even more striking example of the

¹⁶⁹ Gillette, *China's Porcelain Capital*, 86, 91–95.

¹⁷⁰ Gillette, "Copying, Counterfeiting, and Capitalism in Contemporary China: Jingdezhen's Porcelain Industry," 370–71, 377.

parallels between the work of contemporary artists and products of the reproduction industry in Jingdezhen is Ai Weiwei's installation *Ghost Gu coming down the mountain* (figs. 19-23), created with Romanian-born artist Serge Spitzer (b. 1951).¹⁷¹ Like *Untitled* and *Tang-dynasty courtesan in bottle*, this work represents an enduring and potent aspect of Ai's oeuvre but has received little critical attention to date, in either Chinese or English. It exists in four variations that share certain features: the basic unit is a conventional *guan* (罐) jar, decorated in several configurations with a meticulously replicated Yuan-dynasty design and reproduced ninety-six times. These reproductions are painted in either underglaze cobalt blue or copper red – both decorative types also developed during the Yuan dynasty – and arranged on the floor of the exhibition space in a square of eight by twelve jars, sometimes with several displayed upside-down. The design used in all variations of the work is drawn from a mid-fourteenth-century *guan* (fig. 18) that gained international fame on 12 July 2005 when it sold to an anonymous collector at a Christie's auction in London for £15.7 million (AU\$36 million), ten times more than its estimated sale price and over triple the former highest auction price paid for an Asian work of art.¹⁷² This jar is one of eight currently known around the world, all decorated with images derived from classical literary works, and bears a continuous decorative band depicting a scene from the Han-dynasty *Strategies of the Warring States* (*Zhanguo ce* 战国策) entitled "Guigu descends from the mountain" (*Guigu xia shan* 鬼谷下山). The titular protagonist is the strategist Wang Yi, known as Guiguzi in reference to his birthplace Guigu (literally, "Phantom Valley"), in a two-wheeled cart

¹⁷¹ Ai and Spitzer first met through their mutual involvement with the curator Harald Szeemann at the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999, in which they both participated. Spitzer later travelled with Ai through China's southern provinces in September 2005, spending a week in Jingdezhen. Philip Tinari, "The Leopard and the Tiger: Circular Narratives in Blue and White," in *Touching the Stones: China Art Now*, edited by Waling Boers and Pi Li (Köln: König, 2007), 136.

¹⁷² Rosemary E. Scott, "A Newly Discovered Yuan Dynasty Narrative Jar," *TAASA Review* 14, no. 4 (December 2005): 4; Tinari, "The Leopard and the Tiger," 134.

drawn by a tiger and leopard. Other characters include Guigu's two attendants on foot before the cart; Su Dai, an emissary on horseback; and a second mounted figure who likely represents the general Dugu Jiao.¹⁷³ Both the design and title of the scene are replicated in Ai's work, with *Guigu* translated as "Ghost Gu".

Each of the four variations of *Ghost Gu* suggests a perspective on historical knowledge that recalls Ai's earlier exploration of the tensions between destruction and preservation arising from the transformation of the past into national myth or museological case-study. In the first version of the work, created in 2005 for the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, each jar is painted in underglaze cobalt-blue with a partial fragment of the entire design. Their precise decorated surface areas vary according to their position within the rectilinear display of the work, shown most clearly in a photograph taken at Ai's Caochangdi studio (fig. 19): the jars at the "front" bear about half the entire design in contrast to those at the "back", which are painted with only a narrow vertical band, while the decoration of the jars in the remaining ten rows effects a gradual reduction from one extreme to the other. The effect of this meticulously calculated progression could be described as a *trompe l'oeil* or perspectival anamorphosis, like the famous skull included as a *memento mori* in Hans Holbein's (c.1497-1543) *The Ambassadors* (1533). The complete design appears to be painted on every jar when the installation is viewed from a specific perspective yet, when seen from the reverse, the jars appear blank (fig. 20). In conceptual terms, this anamorphic distortion exposes the comparable influence of perspective on our understanding of past events, which may seem comprehensively recorded when viewed from one angle but, on taking a different position, are dissolved into disparate fragments assembled into a composite whole. *Ghost Gu* can therefore be

¹⁷³ Scott, "A Newly Discovered Yuan Dynasty Narrative Jar," 5–6.



Figure 18: "Guigu xia shan" jar [guan], mid-14th century, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, 33cm (diameter).

positioned alongside Ai's earlier work as a parodic reenactment of the selective, isolating categorisation enacted by a museological view of history, which derives authority from the assertion of a specific perspective as incontrovertible despite the multiple different narratives that can be woven from the material remains of the past.

A slightly different expression of this idea can be found in the second variation of *Ghost Gu* (2006), in which the eponymous scene is painted on the is rather than external surface of each jar in cobalt blue (fig. 21). Stacey Pierson associates this representational strategy with the long history in Jingdezhen of ceramics with internal decoration, though she observes that complex figurative scenes like that depicted in *Ghost Gu* were only painted in this manner from the eighteenth century, usually on small luxury wares like snuff-bottles, so Ai's choice of a Yuan-dynasty design on an essentially utilitarian *guan* is once again deliberately anachronistic.¹⁷⁴ Pierson identifies another precedent for *Ghost Gu* in the long tradition of *anhua* (暗花) or "secret decoration", also associated with smaller luxury wares and popular from the early Ming dynasty. Porcelain decorated in this manner usually bears a very lightly-incised design concealed under a thick layer of glaze, and therefore only visible to those who are able to hold the piece close to their eyes and examine it at length, the clear implication being a validation of privileged social standing and high-cultural status, as well as a testament to technical virtuosity.¹⁷⁵ This raises a crucial aspect of historical narrative that is implied but not explicitly addressed in Ai's earlier works, especially *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn*: elitist exclusivity, often only accessible to (and created by and for) the powerful and privileged. Such elitism is implied in *Ghost Gu* not only by the *anhua*-style decoration, but also the content of the design –

¹⁷⁴ Pierson, "Historical and Cultural Contexts for Ceramics in China," 101.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 101.



Figure 19: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957) and Serge Spitzer (b. 1951), Ghost Gu coming down the mountain, 2005, 96 porcelain vases with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, 27 x 35 cm (each); Ai Weiwei's Studio House, Caochangdi, Beijing.



Figure 20: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957) and Serge Spitzer (b. 1951), Ghost Gu coming down the mountain (reverse view), 2005, 96 porcelain vases with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, 27 x 35 cm (each); Ai Weiwei's Studio House, Caochangdi, Beijing.

an ancient historical record now only legible by those able to read classical Chinese and with knowledge of the events to which the tale refers. Once again, then, tension is implied between the fiction of a transparent window on the past and the reality of a more partial view, impacted not only by time but also by social status.

The final two iterations of *Ghost Gu*, created concurrently with those analysed above, deploy the same decorative strategies but are painted in copper red rather than cobalt blue (figs. 22, 23). When these are viewed alongside their blue-and-white counterparts, this change in colour acts to foreground the materiality of the jars over their conceptual implications, raising the spectre of commodification also conjured by *Untitled* (fig. 6), *Tang-dynasty courtesan in bottle* (fig. 7) and *Souvenir from Beijing* (fig. 8). This returns the focus of analysis to the “original” Yuan-dynasty jar from which the design of the *Ghost Gu* jars is derived, not only multiplied by reproduction but also, like contemporary designer ceramics, available in two colours. This characteristically irreverent handling of a treasured cultural artefact draws attention to the contrast between its astonishing monetary value and the more modest auction prices gained by other pieces of Yuan-dynasty porcelain, and to the likely manufacture of the vessel in multiple at the time of its creation.¹⁷⁶ Yet Ai was not the only person to notice these incongruities and realise their potential – in Jingdezhen, news of the sale was followed by the creation of replicas by Huang Yunpeng, owner and chairman of the Jiayang Porcelain Company, a leading maker of Yuan-, Ming- and Qing-dynasty reproductions in blue- and-white. When one of Huang’s replicas was featured on a Chinese Central Television (CCTV) documentary that

¹⁷⁶ Pierson, “Historical and Cultural Contexts for Ceramics in China,” 99. It is also worth noting here that the design on the “original” *Guigu xia shan* jar was copied ‘figure for figure’ from a contemporaneous woodcut illustration of the same scene in a *pinghua* (平话) version of the narrative, ‘a hybrid [literary] form combining history with myth and derived from storytellers’ scripts.’ Even before appropriated by Ai and Spitzer, then, this jar was ‘a copy of a copy, a translation of an already inaccurate translation.’ Tinari, “The Leopard and the Tiger,” 135.



Figure 21: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957) and Serge Spitzer (b. 1951), Ghost Gu coming down the mountain, 2006, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, 27 x 35 cm.

aired in October 2005, rumour soon spread throughout Jingdezhen that he had sold the jar for as much as ¥200,000, inspiring others to follow his example.¹⁷⁷ Ai's installations can therefore also be positioned alongside this more entrepreneurial response to the sale of the Yuan-dynasty jar as a comparable indication of the extent to which the past can be reproduced and commodified. Even the most apparently unique and sacrosanct of cultural artefacts is not immune to the currents of the market, while the "original" jar itself was likely a product of the same impulse: the desire for profit.

Blue-and-white porcelain and canonical narratives of Jingdezhen's ascendance to global prestige from the Yuan to Qing dynasties

Despite Ai's exposure in *Ghost Gu* of the gaps in knowledge, perspectival distortion and relations of power underlying apparently self-evident historical narratives, like *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* this work derives its iconic power from the authority attached to another key moment in the history of the Jingdezhen porcelain industry: the rise of blue-and-white ware. The unprecedented sale price of the "original" *Guigu xia shan* jar is also partially a result of the status with which this overdetermined episode in global ceramics history is invested, as is the prevalence of blue-and-white among the reproductions and replicas produced by artisans in contemporary Jingdezhen. Ai is not alone in his choice of blue-and-white for artistic expression: most contemporary Chinese artists who have

¹⁷⁷ Gillette, *China's Porcelain Capital: The Rise, Fall and Reinvention of Ceramics in Jingdezhen*, 368; Wu, "Jingdezhen Today," 91. Wu provides a vivid description of the Jiayang Porcelain Company headquarters and production facilities in 2011, six years after the lucrative creation of Huang's replica *Guigu xia shan* jar: 'The busy workshop area of the Jiayang Porcelain Company is adjacent to an elegantly arranged showroom replete with a small museum containing sherds collected from local kiln sites which are available for study by staff and visitors. The workshop itself is on two levels. On the ground floor potters sit throwing and trimming at high wheels on stepped platforms. Noise and flying clay dust fill the air ... The potters are all men in their teens and early twenties. Upstairs young men and women sit at workbenches painting on blank porcelain forms. Most of the designs are copied from glossy publications ... and auction catalogues. Rather than painting completely freehand they first apply stencils.' Wu, 91.



Figure 22: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957) and Serge Spitzer (b. 1951), Ghost Gu coming down the mountain, 2005, 96 porcelain vases with underglaze copper-red decoration, 27 x 35 cm (each); Faurschou Foundation, Nodhavn, Denmark.



Figure 23: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957) and Serge Spitzer (b. 1951), Ghost Gu coming down the mountain (detail), 2005, porcelain with underglaze copper-red decoration, 27 x 35 cm; Lisson Gallery, London.

worked in porcelain, and many European, North American and Australian artists as well, have chosen to use this style. Sin-ying Ho, for example, has consistently adorned her ceramics with underglaze cobalt blue motifs throughout her career, while the first ten works in Ah Xian's *China china* series of porcelain busts (figs. 68, 69, and several later in the series, reproduce the appearance and motifs of historic blue-and-white ceramics¹⁷⁸ Among those artists not discussed in this dissertation, Ni Haifeng has created works that engage with the history of blue-and-white porcelain, notably including his large-scale installation *Of the departure and the arrival* (2005); Zhang Hongtu used blue-and-white motifs to ornament his *Six-pack of Kekou-Kele (Coca-Cola)* (2002); Lei Xue has used the style in a similar manner for his *Drinking tea* (2001-04) installations of porcelain soft-drink cans; and Li Lihong painted his *McDonald's #1* (2007), now in the collection of the V&A, with cobalt-blue dragons. For each of these artists, as for Ai Weiwei, the appeal of blue-and-white likely derives above all from its enduring historic cachet.

Like the founding of the Jingdezhen ceramics industry in the Han dynasty, however, the story of the development and dispersal of blue-and-white wares during the Yuan and Ming dynasties is a historical narrative of comparably mythic proportions. In her myth-dispelling 2012 article on "The Movement of Chinese Ceramics," Stacey Pierson traces the early genesis of the 'the grand narrative of blue-and-white' in European and North American studies of Chinese porcelain to the writings of Margaret Medley and Duncan Macintosh in the 1970s, subsequently attributed canonical authority in John Carswell's exhibition text *Blue and White: Chinese Porcelain and its Impact on the Western World* (1985) and, more recently, Robert Finlay's *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World*

¹⁷⁸ This aspect of Sin-ying Ho's and Ah Xian's work is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

History (2010).¹⁷⁹ In a subsequent elaboration of his version of the narrative published in 2000, Carswell provides a retelling of the main points associated with this ware that, ‘with hardly any precedent, sprang onto an empty stage ... which it was to dominate in the history of world ceramics for the next four hundred years.’¹⁸⁰ As this quote indicates, the first of the mythic traits of blue-and-white is its alleged pioneering originality though, as Carswell goes on to assert, the combination of cobalt blue pigment and white-bodied clay that gives the ware its name was apparently the result of a merging of imported Islamic materials, aesthetics and motifs with local Chinese ceramic technology (a long-held assumption that has since been discredited by new archaeological evidence and scientific analyses).¹⁸¹ In all versions of the blue-and-white origin myth, the global appeal of this “new” decorative style is assumed to be self-evident, and its spread across the world inevitable, a result of an inherent commercial suitability rather than one moment in a long history of trade that also includes *qingbai* and celadon. This is an ideal example, then, of the perspectival distortion parodied in Ai’s *Ghost Gu* installations.

In contrast to the apparently unbroken contours of the conventional narrative of blue-and-white, the historical use of cobalt blue pigment in Jingdezhen is much more complex and multifaceted, though still closely tied to a pivotal era in the development of the city and its porcelain industry. As Pierson notes, the earliest extant evidence for the use of cobalt pigment dates to the Tang, when it was incorporated into the *sancai* (三彩) or “three-colour” ware with which ceramics of that dynasty are canonically associated, and

¹⁷⁹ Pierson, “The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History,” 9, 10n2, 28–29. The texts Pierson refers to are: Duncan Macintosh, “Beloved Blue and White: An Introduction to the Porcelains of the Yuan and Ming Dynasties,” *Orientalism*, no. 4 (1973): 36–38; Margaret Medley, *The Chinese Potter: A Practical History of Chinese Ceramics* (New York: Phaidon, 1976); John Carswell, *Blue and White: Chinese Porcelain and Its Impact on the Western World* (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 1985); and Robert Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010).

¹⁸⁰ Carswell, *Blue & White: Chinese Porcelain around the World*, 11.

¹⁸¹ Carswell, *Blue & White: Chinese Porcelain around the World*, 11.

occasionally used as a monochrome glaze. Such wares have been discovered in many places outside of China, indicating the considerable scale of their export.¹⁸² Carswell admits the existence of these earlier precedents, though he argues that Tang ceramicists struggled with the tendency of Chinese cobalt to separate or respond unpredictably when fired, and so asserts that use of the pigment dwindled during the Song dynasty and only resurfaced in the fourteenth century, with the importation of a purer Iranian cobalt ore.¹⁸³ Along with this influx of raw material from West Asia, driven partially by the greater number of Arabic merchants resident in China under Mongol rule, Carswell and Finlay assert a parallel rise in the popularity of “Islamic” motifs and forms, including the stereotyped preference for dense “all-over” patterning, geometric designs and new types of serving dish for communal dining.¹⁸⁴ Turning again to Pierson’s article, however, it should be noted that most examples of blue-and-white referred to in canonical studies are painted with typically Chinese motifs, such as cloud-collar bands, Buddhist emblems, dragons, and floral medallions.¹⁸⁵ The *Guigu xia shan* jar, for example, in addition to the central scene from a classical Chinese text, is painted on its foot with the Eight Buddhist Treasures (*bajixiang* 八吉相), which first appeared on Yuan-dynasty porcelain, while the shoulder bears images of the four seasonal flowers – the peony, lotus, chrysanthemum and plum – among the most popular designs used throughout the history of Chinese ceramics.¹⁸⁶ The development of blue-and-white during the Yuan dynasty was not a sudden emergence fostered by contact with Islamic West Asia, but part of a local process

¹⁸² Pierson, “The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History,” 28–29.

¹⁸³ Carswell, *Blue & White: Chinese Porcelain around the World*, 21.

¹⁸⁴ Carswell, *Blue & White: Chinese Porcelain around the World*, 23–24; Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History*, 170–72.

¹⁸⁵ Pierson, “The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History,” 29.

¹⁸⁶ Patricia Bjaaland Welch, *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery* (Vermont: Tuttle, 2008), 241–43; Eva Strober, *Symbols on Chinese Porcelain: 10,000 Times Happiness* (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche, 2011), 108.

of development in which Chinese tastes exercised an influence just as strong, if not even stronger than Islamic imports.

One aspect of the production of blue-and-white that did mark a pivotal shift in porcelain-making in Jingdezhen was the increasingly large scale of production. This was fostered to a great extent by the consolidation of Imperial control over the porcelain industry, with the establishment by the first Yuan emperor Kublai Khan (r. 1260-94) in 1278 of a “Porcelain Bureau” (*ciju* 瓷局) to oversee the ordering, quality-control and shipping of wares, thereby extending the patronage granted by the Song Emperor Zhenzong in the previous dynasty.¹⁸⁷ Poet and government official Hong Yanzu (洪焱祖; 1267-1329), resident in Jingdezhen as director of the local Confucian Changxiang Academy, wrote of the increased activity that followed this conferral of patronage:

On the outskirts [of Jingdezhen], many pestles pound the earth,
on the river, half the boats transport mud.

Wind and mist render the autumn even gloomier,
the road is entirely obscured by shards of pottery.¹⁸⁸

After the violent transition from the Yuan to the Ming dynasty in the mid-fourteenth century, the first Ming ruler, the Hongwu Emperor (r. 1368-98), following Kublai Khan’s example, quickly asserted authority over the porcelain industry in Jingdezhen with the establishment of a second imperial administration centre (the *yu qichang* 御器厂; usually translated as “Imperial Porcelain Factory” or “Imperial Porcelain Depot”) in 1369,

¹⁸⁷ Kerr and Wood, *Chemistry and Chemical Technology, Part 12: Ceramic Technology*, 186; Gillette, *China’s Porcelain Capital: The Rise, Fall and Reinvention of Ceramics in Jingdezhen*, 15.

¹⁸⁸ Hong Yanzu, “Observations one autumn morning in Fuliang: three poems” (*Fuliang qiuxiao shushi sanshou* 浮梁秋曉書事三首), cited in Gerritsen, “Fragments of a Global Past: Ceramics Manufacture in Song-Yuan-Ming Jingdezhen,” 119–20.

in the same area as the Porcelain Bureau.¹⁸⁹ The authority of this institution continued to grow under subsequent Ming rulers, especially the Yongle Emperor (r. 1402-1424), and by the sixteenth century Wang Shimao (王世懋; 1536-1588), another government official who travelled to the city, could assert that

... all the potteries in the land are gathered [in Jingdezhen] and the people are numerous and the wealthiest in the whole province ... the noise of tens of thousands of pestles thundering on the ground and the heavens alight with the glare from the fires kept me awake all night.¹⁹⁰

Increases in production during the Yuan and Ming dynasties were accompanied by a corresponding expansion of trade, both within and beyond China's borders, culminating in the "golden age" of the long eighteenth century, under the Qing Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong emperors. As part of a Mongol empire spanning the Asian continent, Yuan emperors were very attentive to the development of the export industry, devoting large amounts of government revenue to the expansion of overland and maritime trade routes.¹⁹¹ In *A Brief Record of Island Barbarians* (*Daoyi zhilue* 島夷志略), an account by the traveler Wang Dayuan (汪大渊; fl. 1311-1350) of journeys to Southeast Asia and Africa published in 1349, forty-five countries are listed as recipients of Chinese ceramics, from the Philippines to the East African coast.¹⁹² While the reach of this trade followed

¹⁸⁹ Gillette, *China's Porcelain Capital: The Rise, Fall and Reinvention of Ceramics in Jingdezhen*, 17; Margaret Medley, in "Ching-Te Chen and the Problem of the 'Imperial Kilns,'" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 29, no. 2 (June 1966): 326–38, discusses at length the problems of translation associated with this Ming-dynasty institution and the long-held assumption that wares were produced there in a factory-like setting. She asserts instead that it was more likely a centre for administrative oversight, like the earlier institution.

¹⁹⁰ Wang Shimao, *Memorials of Fujian province* (*Minbushu* 閩部疏), cited in Michael Dillon, "Transport and Marketing in the Development of the Jingdezhen Porcelain Industry during the Ming and Qing Dynasties," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 35, no. 3 (1992): 278.

¹⁹¹ Kerr and Wood, *Chemistry and Chemical Technology, Part 12: Ceramic Technology*, 716–17.

¹⁹² Carswell, *Blue & White: Chinese Porcelain around the World*, 60–63; Gerritsen, "Fragments of a Global Past: Ceramics Manufacture in Song-Yuan-Ming Jingdezhen," 121–22.

the pattern set in previous centuries, Wang's records indicate a substantial increase in the number of trading partners and the volume of goods traded.

The most notable development of the export industry during the Ming dynasty was the entry of the European powers into the China Trade, initiated in the late fifteenth century by the voyages of Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama (c.1460-1524) and that nation's founding of colonies at Goa (1510), Malacca (1511), and Macau (1557). These colonial encroachments were followed by Spanish colonisation of the Philippines from 1565 and inauguration of the annual Manila Galleon, carrying merchandise from China, India and Southeast Asia between Manila and Acapulco, from where they were trans-shipped to Seville and distributed across Europe. The seventeenth century saw the rise of the East India Companies, the two most powerful of which were founded by England in 1600 and the Netherlands in 1601, followed by the establishment of a Dutch colony on Java in 1619.¹⁹³ By the inauguration of the Qing dynasty in 1644, then, Chinese ceramics and particularly blue-and-white could be found across the world and had become one of the most widely-traded and desired commodities circulating within the new global empires, setting the stage for what has since been identified as a high-point in the production and trade of porcelain during the long eighteenth century.

Ai Weiwei's Blue-and-white moonflask (1996), Breaking of two blue-and-white "Dragon" bowls (1996), and the profitable fiction of a resuscitated history

Like the originary authority of the Han dynasty, the enshrining of this century, usually defined as spanning from the accession of the Kangxi Emperor in 1654 to the death of the Qianlong Emperor in 1799, has been a recurrent subject of critique in Ai Weiwei's

¹⁹³ Carswell, *Blue & White: Chinese Porcelain around the World*, 126–28.

oeuvre. A year after *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn*, in 1996 Ai created a series of porcelain works in which, rather than destroying an (alleged) artefact, he precisely replicated the forms and motifs of Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong era blue-and-white vessels. Like his photographic triptych, these works were inspired by Ai's browsing of the ceramics sold in Beijing's markets, where he found the products of the historical reproduction industry then beginning to flourish in Jingdezhen on sale beside genuine antiques. Under his brother's expert supervision, he gained an appreciation of the subjective methods by which the distinctions between replica and genuine ceramics could be observed:

It's like a secret code ... all those judgments are not based on scientific principles so much as personal feelings ... whereby the touch or eye can be so refined and attuned ... This is such a mystery. So, I thought, why not make a few copies according to all that knowledge.¹⁹⁴

Travelling to Jingdezhen, Ai commissioned local artisans with a reputation for producing the most accurate and high-quality reproductions to create works like *Blue-and-white moonflask* (1996; fig. 24), an imitation of the characteristic Qing-dynasty *bianhu* (扁壺) or *baoyueping* (宝月瓶; fig. 25), complete with a Qianlong reign mark on the base. The imitation is so accurate that the vase would likely pass the visual examination conducted by collectors and curators to establish authenticity, only detectable as a reproduction using thermo-luminescence testing.¹⁹⁵ The dating of the vessel is made more difficult and ambiguous when it is considered that, during the Qing dynasty, such vessels were often produced as imitations of earlier Ming-dynasty wares (fig. 26) which were in turn adaptations of the ancient pilgrim flask form apparent in many forms across the Asian

¹⁹⁴ Ai Weiwei, cited in Merewether, *Ai Weiwei - Works: Beijing 1993-2003*, 29.

¹⁹⁵ Shang, "Multiply It and Fake It: On Ai Weiwei," 44.



Figure 24: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Blue-and-white moonflask, 1996, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, 53 x 36.8 x 7.6 cm.



Figure 25: Moonflask [bianhu], Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign, 1661-1722, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, 21.5 cm (height); British Museum, London.



Figure 26: Moonflask [bianhu], Ming dynasty, Yongle reign, 1402-24, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, 22 cm (height); British Museum, London.

continent.¹⁹⁶ Ai's work not only calls into question the enshrining of ceramics as cultural artefacts, then, but also pays homage to the history and the contemporary revival of the reproduction industry in Jingdezhen, implying the existence of a network of influence and imitation, creation and recreation that defies chronological classification. As in his more destructive photographic performances, the contingency of historical narrative is exposed, and the imbrication of the antique within the currents of a lived existence is made clear, in this case through its replication/rebirth rather than ritualistic destruction.

The destructive impulse in Ai's practice resurfaces, however, in a photographic work that can be read as a counterpoint to *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* (fig. 2): his *Breaking of two blue-and-white "Dragon" bowls* of 1996 (fig. 27). In this work, a photograph of the artist on a leather couch in his studio, several of his earlier New York "readymade" works mounted on the wall behind him, Ai is shown presumably immediately after the eponymous breaking of the bowls, hammer in hand, with ceramic fragments suspended in the space between a fabric-draped stool and the floor of the studio. Like *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn*, then, this is presented as a record of the act of destruction in process, though reduced to a single frame. The artist is again notable for his apparent lack of emotion, enhancing the sense of empirical detachment fostered by the monochrome palette of the image and subsequent implication that this is a candid, straightforward record of the titular event. Yet the calculated staging of the scene, the immobility of the hammer in contrast to the blurred motion of the airborne fragments, and the inclusion of Ai's readymades, with their implications of artistic selection and fabrication, cast into doubt the image's authenticity. Three supplementary photographs exist as records of this performance: one of the bowls prior to their destruction, in which they're identified

¹⁹⁶ Pierson, "Historical and Cultural Contexts for Ceramics in China," 101.



Figure 27: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Breaking of two blue-and-white "Dragon" bowls, 1996, photograph.



Figure 28: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Breaking of two blue-and-white "Dragon" bowls, 1996, photograph.



Figure 29: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Breaking of two blue-and-white "Dragon" bowls*, 1996, photograph



Figure 30: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Breaking of two blue-and-white "Dragon" bowls*, 1996, photograph

as artefacts of the Kangxi era (fig. 28); a second showing a (technically incorrect) Kangxi reign mark inscribed on the base of one bowl (fig. 29); and a third showing the gathered pieces of a broken bowl (fig. 30). While these photographs could be read as evidence of the authenticity of the bowls and the reality of their destruction, like the shards shown in the third photograph their reassembly as fragments of an incomplete whole must be acknowledged: there is no definitive means to prove that each image shows the same pieces, or to demonstrate that they are genuine Qing bowls and not contemporary reproductions. Even documentation of the performance could be an artful construction, a staged scene to which pieces of broken porcelain have been added in the studio by a skilled image-manipulator. Again, as in *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* and the *Blue and White* series of replicas, the apparent certainty of historical “fact” is exposed as fiction, vulnerable to destruction and deceit.

Shifting focus from the ceramic (or ceramics) represented in *Breaking of two blue-and-white “Dragon” bowls* to the instrument of their destruction, a further parallel can be noted here with *Ghost Gu coming down the mountain* (figs. 19-23). In both of these pieces there is an indirect allusion to the world of art auctions: the vessel imitated in *Ghost Gu* is chiefly known for the unprecedented price it achieved when sold at auction, while the literal positioning of Chinese ceramics “under the hammer” in the photograph conjures an immediate association with this value-oriented sphere of artistic activity.¹⁹⁷ One reading of this play on words could be that both works imply the perpetration of a certain violence to the object when reduced to a monetary figure – in one work an exceptional Yuan-dynasty jar is transformed into a mass-reproduced commodity, while in the other two Qing-dynasty bowls are broken into pieces. They invoke the question:

¹⁹⁷ This association has previously been noted also in Merewether, “Made in China,” 150; and in Wilson and Van der Zijpp, *Ai Weiwei*, 9.

‘[is] value today ... based on the unique aesthetic, the one-of-a-kind historical object, or on the appraised money worth,’ leading one commentator to identify them with ‘[a] resistance against neo-liberal concepts for the new China.’¹⁹⁸ Yet a broader set of issues is brought into play here in relation to the concepts of historical authority, value and authenticity with which all the works discussed in this chapter engage, from a range of different perspectives.

These issues are brought into focus by the events surrounding another record-breaking auction: the sale on 11 November 2010 of a Qing-dynasty, Qianlong-era *famille rose* vase at Bainbridge’s, in Ruislip on the outskirts of London, for £43 million. As in the case of the *Guigu xia shan* jar, media coverage predominantly focused on the unprecedented sale price rather than any cultural or historical significance, though the discovery of the vase ‘in a dusty attic’ where it had been stored since the 1930s attracted comment.¹⁹⁹ When the winning bidder, an anonymous Chinese collector, failed to conclude the sale, however, public speculation became increasingly sensational, with many doubting the authenticity of the vase before conclusion in January 2013 confirmed ‘the consensus ... that it was the best object of its type to be seen on the market in decades.’²⁰⁰ The events prior to and surrounding this sale, and the rapid fluctuation of popular opinion in the years between auction and final settlement, provide a striking illustration of historical contingency. For almost a century, this vase remained unknown and unrecognised, then in 2010 it was abruptly transformed into an invaluable relic, ‘a very, very important, rare

¹⁹⁸ Davidson, “Affirmative Precarity: Ai Weiwei and Margarita Cabrera,” 138.

¹⁹⁹ See, for example: John F. Burns, “Qing Dynasty Relic Yields Record Price at Auction,” *New York Times*, November 12, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/13/world/europe/13vase.html?_r=1; and Anon, “Sensational £43m Record for Chinese Work of Art in Ruislip,” *Antiques Trade Gazette*, November 15, 2010, <http://www.antiquetrade gazette.com/news/2010/nov/15/sensational-%C2%A343m-record-for-chinese-work-of-art-in-ruislip/>.

²⁰⁰ Ivan Macquisten, “Happy End to Tale of Bainbridge’s Vase,” *Antiques Trade Gazette*, January 21, 2013, <https://www.antiquetrade gazette.com/news/2013/happy-end-to-tale-of-bainbridges-vase/>.

and splendid item' to be returned with great fanfare to its place of manufacture.²⁰¹ This return became a mythic event, part of a broader trend of cultural repatriation following China's economic growth, often directly sponsored by the CCP in what Dario Gamboni terms '[a] neo-imperial re-instrumentalisation, in the service of political legitimacy, of what had been condemned.'²⁰² The *Guigu xia shan* jar, too, at its sale five years earlier was almost purchased by 'a suspected "syndicate of Chinese buyers" looking to bring the precious piece back home' but unwilling to bid higher than £10 million.²⁰³ In the case of both vessels, historical authority is determined less by any concrete meaning attached to the passage of time than by chance discovery, narratives of nationhood, and the sovereignty of wealth.

Jingdezhen's Qing-dynasty "golden age" of global trade and technical innovation, and its inevitable end

Similar tropes of national identity and abrupt changes in fortune typify conventional narratives of porcelain production and export during the Qing dynasty, to which both the Bainbridge vase and the bowls used in Ai's *Breaking of two blue-and-white "Dragon" bowls* (figs. 28, 29) have been dated. In 1654, the eleventh year in the reign of the first Qing ruler, the Shunzhi Emperor (r. 1644-1661), the Imperial Porcelain Factory was re-opened after several decades of inactivity when widespread conflict and resistance to Manchu authority had temporarily halted imperial patronage in Jingdezhen.²⁰⁴ Further disruptions arose in 1673, under the Shunzhi Emperor's son and successor the Kangxi Emperor, with the eruption of the anti-Manchu Revolt of the Three Feudatories (*Sanfan*

²⁰¹ Anonymous Chinese translator, cited in Anon, "Sensational £43m Record for Chinese Work of Art in Ruislip."

²⁰² Gamboni, "Portrait of the Artist as an Iconoclast," 92.

²⁰³ Tinari, "The Leopard and the Tiger," 134.

²⁰⁴ Gillette, *China's Porcelain Capital: The Rise, Fall and Reinvention of Ceramics in Jingdezhen*, 22–23.

zhi luan 三藩之亂, 1673-1681). Writing of this conflict in his *Survey of the times* (*Yue shi bian* 閱世編, 1688), scholar-official Ye Mengzhu (葉夢珠; 1623-1693) lamented that ‘Jiangxi province was full of robbers and vagrants,’ while the price of porcelain, already ‘ten times more expensive’ during the Shunzhi reign, became further inflated despite declining quality.²⁰⁵ By 1676, at least half the kilns in Jingdezhen had been destroyed and hundreds of the city’s porcelain workers killed.²⁰⁶ The revolt was at last suppressed in 1681 and the Kangxi Emperor moved rapidly in the same year to re-establish control of the local porcelain industry, initiating over a century of innovation and prosperity now enshrined as a “golden age” for the Porcelain Capital.

During the remaining decades of the Kangxi Emperor’s rule and throughout the reigns of his son, who assumed authority in 1723 as the Yongzheng Emperor and his grandson, the Qianlong Emperor, Jingdezhen dominated porcelain production for both domestic and overseas markets. A series of new glazes were developed, often associated with one of the series of three scholar-officials appointed by the emperor himself to oversee the production of porcelain, the prestige of which challenged the previous dominance of blue-and-white. Zang Yingxuan was the first official to serve as Director of the Imperial Porcelain Factory in 1683 and is credited with the invention of several globally-renowned glazes, including the lustrous “peach-bloom” and *clair-de-lune* monochrome tones long prized by European collectors.²⁰⁷ Lang Tingji (1663-1715) succeeded Zang in 1705 and is celebrated for the invention of “Lang ware” (*Lang yao* 郎窑), evocatively

²⁰⁵ Ye Mingzhu, *Survey of the times* (*Yue shi bian* 閱世編), cited in Hsu Wen-Chin, “Social and Economic Factors in the Chinese Porcelain Industry in Jingdezhen During the Late Ming and Early Qing Period, ca. 1620-1683,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 1 (1988): 150.

²⁰⁶ Hsu, 140–41.

²⁰⁷ Lan and Zheng, *Ching-Te-Chen T’ao-Lu or The Potteries of China*, 11–12, 49–50; Yuan Tsing, “The Porcelain Industry at Ching-Te-Chen 1550-1700,” *Ming Studies*, no. 1 (January 1978): 46–47.

termed “*sang-de-boeuf*” (“ox-blood”) by Jacquemart.²⁰⁸ Liu Jianhua applied his typically virtuosic approach to this Qing glaze in his *Container* series of *trompe l’oeil* porcelain sculptures (2009; fig. 31), part of the range of restrained celadon works discussed above.

Like Ai Weiwei’s *Ghost Gu coming down the mountain*, Liu’s *Containers* are calculated to deceive viewers – they appear at first to be relatively unremarkable vessels, filled with an unctuous red liquid that resembles blood, yet on closer inspection this is revealed to be an unbroken porcelain extension of the sides of the sculpture. When inverted, it is revealed that the base of each vessel is open (fig. 32), rendering ambiguous the usually clear distinction between foot and mouth and exposing the internal void concealed beneath an impression of overflowing abundance. As in *Regular-Fragile* (fig. 11), this deceit draws attention to the impermanence of material things – an impression reinforced by the visceral awareness of fragility that accompanies the lifting of one of the vessels to reveal that the porcelain walls are disconcertingly thin despite their apparent solidity and weight. Echoing the parallel between Liu’s use of a Song-dynasty *qingbai* glaze in *Regular-Fragile* and the shifting fortunes of that imperial era, a correspondence could be noted here with the transience of power and prosperity by which the first four reigns of the Qing dynasty are defined. In both series, the apparent certainty of historical “fact” is exposed as a hollow illusion, and the grand narratives of a mythic past are undermined by the irresistible passage of time.

The porcelain industry in Jingdezhen is widely believed to have attained its fabled peak during the consecutive reigns of the Yongzheng and Qianlong Emperors, when the range

²⁰⁸ Dillon, “A History of the Porcelain Industry in Jingdezhen,” 44.



Figure 31: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), Container, 2009, porcelain, celadon and sang-de-boeuf glaze, dimensions variable; Beijing Commune, Beijing.

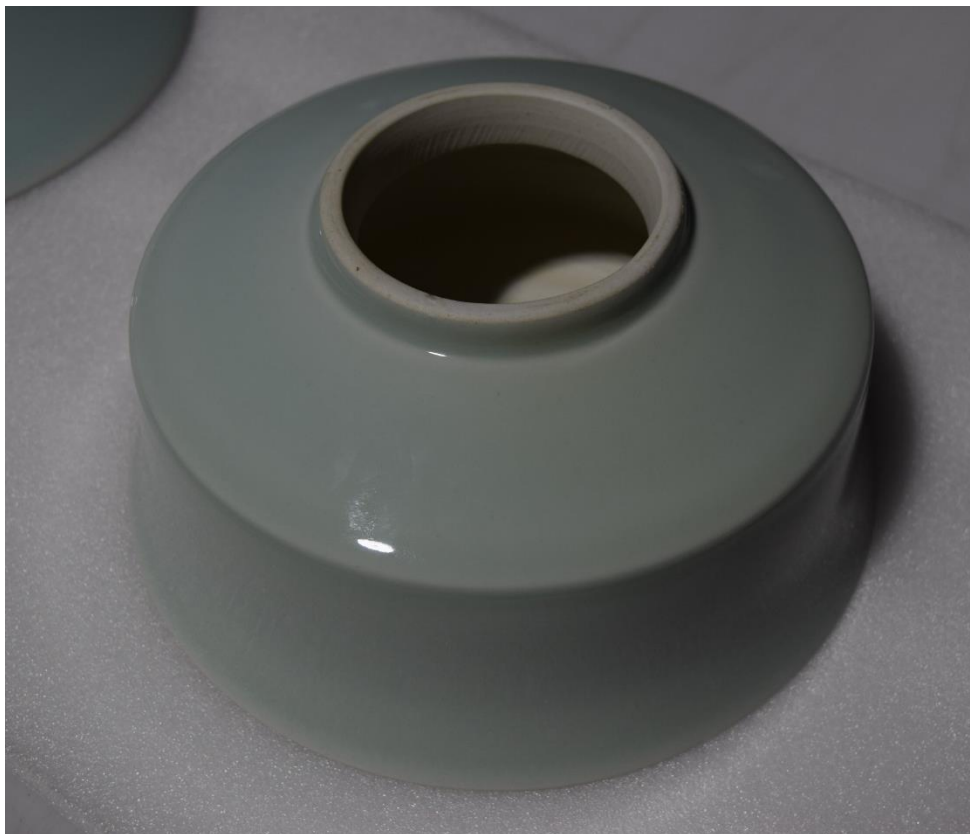


Figure 32: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), Container, 2009, porcelain, celadon and sang-de-boeuf glaze, 23.7 x 10.7 cm; White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney.

of overglaze enamels now usually referred to as *famille verte*, *famille noire* and *famille rose* were brought to perfection. Overglaze decoration first gained widespread use in Jingdezhen during the reign of the Ming-dynasty Chenghua Emperor (r. 1464-1487) with the *doucai* (斗彩) or “joined colours” style, in which thin outlines of cobalt blue painted under the glaze are “filled in” with red, yellow and green enamels.²⁰⁹ During the reign of the Kangxi Emperor, under the Imperial Factory Directorship of Zang Yingxuan, Ming *doucai* was refined to include a more diverse palette of entirely enamel colours in which green predominated – hence the European designation *famille verte*.²¹⁰ The term *famille noire* arose to describe a parallel style in which black dominates. The subsequent development of *famille rose* was accomplished under the administration of Tang Ying (1682-1756), during whose term as Director of the Imperial Factory from 1736 until his death, the porcelain produced in Jingdezhen is recorded to have attained ‘the acme of classical refinement.’²¹¹ Lan and Zheng write in *A Record of Jingdezhen Ceramics* that:

[Tang] selected with care all the materials, and everything he touched was fine, lustrous, and wholly without spot ... The ability displayed in his prolific output is without exception abundant and all-embracing ... It was at this time that the factory attained its peak.²¹²

Although the *famille verte* and *famille noire* styles remained popular and achieved a high degree of refinement under Tang’s guidance, innovation was inspired by the limitations of the pigments. None of these, aside from red, could be used to create tonal contrasts, blending or varied densities of colour, so a new range of enamels was developed, most

²⁰⁹ Scott, *Elegant Form and Harmonious Decoration: Four Dynasties of Jingdezhen Porcelain*, 11.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 12.

²¹¹ Lan and Zheng, *Ching-Te-Chen T’ao-Lu or The Potteries of China*, 48.

²¹² Ibid, 49.

notably including a dusky pink that inspired the naming of *famille rose*, or *fencai* (粉彩) ware.²¹³ Like blue-and-white, the *famille verte*, *famille noire* and *famille rose* styles have been extensively adapted by contemporary artists. Many examples of these palettes can be found, for example, throughout Ah Xian's *China china* series (fig. 33) and Liu Jianhua's *Games* series of *qipao*-clad women "served-up" on dishes and plates (fig. 34). Like blue-and-white, the appeal of these decorative styles for contemporary artists likely derives above all from their historical pedigree and the narratives of industrial ascendancy with which they are associated in canonical histories of Jingdezhen.

Though it seemed to promise an end to instability, however, the prestige and prosperity of the Qing Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns, like those of their predecessors, inevitably succumbed to the passage of time. Deterioration was partially symptomatic of social and political problems: the rule of the Manchu emperors, never entirely secure, faced mounting anti-Qing sentiment and ever more frequent insurrections, made worse by rapid population growth. In addition to the difficulty of controlling so many subjects, demand for arable land weighed heavy on the environment as swamps were drained and forests cleared, causing flooding, mudflows and droughts. Employment prospects, too, experienced crisis, with the number of labourers overtaking available positions.²¹⁴ Inextricably associated with Imperial power and patronage, the porcelain industry in Jingdezhen could not long remain immune to these changes. Ultimately, however, it was a shift in the dynamics of the global ceramics export trade that seemed to extinguish the industry entirely. Demand from Europe started to decline following the manufacture of

²¹³ Scott, *Elegant Form and Harmonious Decoration: Four Dynasties of Jingdezhen Porcelain*, 12.

²¹⁴ Keay, *China: A History*, pp. 452-453.



Figure 33: Ah Xian (b. 1960), China china: bust 24, 1999, porcelain with famille noire overglaze enamel decoration, 38 x 40 x 20 cm.



Figure 34: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), Games, 2000-02, porcelain with famille verte overglaze enamel decoration, 52 x 52 x 10 cm.

a suitable porcelain substitute by Johann Friedrich Böttger (1682-1719) and Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus (1651-1708) to satisfy Saxon monarch Augustus the Strong's (1670-1733) notoriously insatiable desire for porcelain. Although Jingdezhen retained a monopoly in domestic, Southeast Asian and American markets, increases in taxation and cuts to government spending during the nineteenth century exercised a negative impact further exacerbated by a loosening of restrictions on overseas manufacturers, primarily English and Japanese, who were permitted first to sell then to produce their wares in China.²¹⁵ Unable to compete with mechanised processes of mass-production developed by these new manufacturers, or to match their greater financial resources, Jingdezhen seemed destined to follow the Qing emperors who had funded the industry for almost three hundred years before the formal dissolution of imperial rule in 1912.

The enduring appeal of historical narratives like the Qing-dynasty apex and decline of the porcelain industry are central to the medium's appeal for Ai Weiwei, Liu Jianhua and other Chinese artists. Rather than enhancing or supporting such narratives, however, these artists introduce a new recognition of the slippages between fact and fiction that casts even the most recalcitrant assumptions into doubt. Ai generates such uncertainty through the parallel strategies of destruction and "preservation" employed in *Untitled* (1993; fig. 6), *Tang-dynasty courtesan in bottle* (1994; fig. 7), *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* (1995; fig. 2), *Breaking of two blue-and-white "Dragon" bowls* (1996; figs. 27-30), *Souvenir from Beijing* (2002; fig. 8), *Dust to dust* (2009; fig. 9) and *Spouts* (2015; fig. 10). In these works, the shattering, smashing and pulverising of alleged antiques is presented as a liberating return to the currents of lived existence, while museological preservation

²¹⁵ Gillette, *China's Porcelain Capital: The Rise, Fall and Reinvention of Ceramics in Jingdezhen*, 32–35.

or typological classification becomes a form of confinement and isolation. In *Blue-and-white moonflask* (1996; fig. 24) and *Ghost Gu coming down the mountain* (2005-06; figs. 19-23), destruction and preservation are combined in the act of replication which, by meticulously imitating the forms of the past, exposes their original fabrication and the distortions of perspective on which they depend.

Ai's replicas are just one manifestation of a longer history of reproduction in Jingdezhen that Liu Jianhua has also brought into focus with *Regular-Fragile*. In the versions of this project created for the Venice Biennale (fig. 11), inaugural MC1 International Biennial of Contemporary Chinese Art, and the first Singapore Biennale (fig. 13), Liu drew on the historic associations of *qingbai* as a highly desirable Song-dynasty export ceramic and the affective capabilities of contemporary slip-casting to compel a realisation of the fragility of the grand narratives structuring our lives. In celadon-glazed sculptural works created for "Horizon" and "Liu Jianhua" (figs. 16, 17), he revived a literati emphasis on aesthetic "blandness" in his "no meaning, no content" approach, exposing the ethereal vacuity of national and cultural narratives of history. Both artists chose to use porcelain primarily for its historical associations, though the authority of history is recast in their work as a form of transexperience: an accumulation of images and events between the past as lived reality or retrospective artifice, and the present as the point from which this artifice is formulated to reflect current realities, desires and power relations.

Chapter 2: Mass-production, modularity and the multiple

Alongside the replication and reconstruction of the past, modular and mass-production are also dominant themes in the history of Jingdezhen and export ceramics, while access to the factory facilities involved in such production is central to the appeal of medium and city for many contemporary artists. Most of the works by Ai Weiwei and Liu Jianhua analysed above were manufactured by teams of specialised artisans whose labour is central to the meaning of the finished objects as allusions to both the history of export and contemporary market for antique replicas. Another aspect of this artistic attraction to Jingdezhen's inexpensive labour, materials and equipment can be identified in the creation of large-scale or multi-part works that would be difficult to produce elsewhere, and for which the idea of abundance and excess are unifying premises. Liu's *Regular-Fragile* (figs. 1, 11, 13) is once again a leading example of this tendency, deriving much of its potency from the sheer number of components included and the overwhelming scale of their display. However, while Liu highlights the industrial origins of his replicated objects by presenting them as vast mounds of interchangeable assembly-line products, in installations like *Discard*, *Dream* and the iteration of *Regular-Fragile* created for the Venice Biennale he sublimates this modularity and mass-production into an interpretive multiplicity. On one hand, the work can be read as an attempt to come to terms with his early career as a factory ceramicist, and a revaluation of the mass-production techniques that have been central to Jingdezhen's industrial ascendancy. On the other hand, such methods are "elevated" beyond the denigrated realm of industry through Liu's emphasis on the concepts underlying his work, creating tension between "artisanal" and "artistic" uses of ceramics that parallels that between historical fact and fiction discussed above, and that is likewise central to the definition of New Export China.

The tension between revival of an illustrious history and critique of its authority can also be found in a later variation of Liu's project installed at the 15th-century Oxburgh Hall in Norfolk, England (figs. 35-40), and an installation of works by Ai at Blenheim Palace in Woodstock, Oxfordshire (figs. 45-50). These exhibitions invite comparison with massed displays of porcelain created by European royal and aristocratic collectors during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, intended to signal the extent of their wealth and global power to visiting relatives and foreign dignitaries. Yet neither installation adhered uncritically to the narratives of national and cultural ascendancy from which porcelain rooms derived their symbolic power. In Oxburgh Hall, Liu's *qingbai* replicas occupied the house like an unwanted guest, spilling across the carpeted floors and rendering furniture unusable to such an extent that other visitors, and even the owners were made to feel confined and constricted. In such an environment, the tropes of national and cultural identity on which the authority of the estate and those who call it home have historically been constructed were forcibly overturned and obscured. At Blenheim Palace, although less overtly intimidating, Ai Weiwei's work was no less subversive despite the organisers' stated desire to employ his reputation as a critic of the CCP to augment the reputation of the estate as a monument to English democracy. Inconspicuously displayed alongside pieces from the existing ceramics collection, Ai's calculated imitation of past styles and forms exposed the artificiality of such notions of national and cultural identity, perhaps inspiring viewers to examine their surroundings with a more critical eye.

In addition to their unsettling of historical narratives, these and other works by Liu and Ai, notably including the latter's large-scale installation *Sunflower seeds* (2010; fig. 51), indicate another defining aspect of New Export China: an uneasy relationship between artistic and artisanal/industrial production. The making, display and interpretation of

Sunflower seeds frame the Jingdezhen-based artisans commissioned to manufacture the seeds as little more than anonymous labourers, or *gongren* (工人). Other contemporary artists have attempted to surpass such negative categorisations with a more egalitarian, dynamic model of artist-artisan interaction in which the latter can claim agency as active subjects, or *gongmin* (公民). *The vase project: Made in China – Landscape in blue* (2004-06; figs. 52-54), an installation of one hundred and one blue-and-white vases painted in Jingdezhen and led by North American ceramicist Barbara Diduk, in collaboration with Jingdezhen-born ceramicist and academic Zhao Yu, is one prominent example of such attempts. Liu Jianhua offers another point of comparison with his more spontaneous and informal artist-artisan relationships, most of which arose from his former career as an assembly-line ceramicist in a collective factory. Ai, Diduk and Liu, alongside other contemporary artists who have worked in Jingdezhen, can be situated on a continuum of relationships with artisans that shifts between extremes of exploitation on one hand, and empowerment on the other, again introducing a disruptive ambiguity into what seems at first to be a straightforward relationship of supply and demand.

[Liu Jianhua's early career as an assembly-line ceramicist and his cultivation of material and conceptual modularity in *Regular-Fragile* \(2001-10\)](#)

Liu Jianhua's *Regular-Fragile* project, in addition to its historical connotations discussed above, is also one of the earliest and most significant contemporary artistic projects to meaningfully engage with the modular production of porcelain. Nevertheless, in line with the defining characteristics of New Export China proposed in this thesis, Liu's use of mass-production methods is "elevated" beyond the denigrated realm of the artisanal by an emphasis on conceptual over aesthetic or technical dimensions of meaning. In his

insightful survey of mass-production in China, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (2000), art historian Lothar Ledderose identifies modularity as a central aspect of Chinese culture, tracing its use from the prehistoric to the modern era in calligraphy, bronze-casting, architecture, print-making, and ceramics. Ledderose cites seven key traits of modular production: quantity, interchangeability, division of labour, additive growth, standardisation, proportional scale, and the creation of the new through adaptation of the old, with the overarching aim being '[to] produce objects ... in large quantities and of great variety.'²¹⁶ Each of these can be clearly noted in the many iterations of *Regular-Fragile*, the components of which Liu produced over several years in collaboration with a team of artisans in Jingdezhen who are heirs to a long tradition of mass-production in that city in which Liu too has been intimately embedded since his apprenticeship as an assembly-line ceramicist at the age of ten. His installations can be interpreted on one hand as an effort to reconnect with and reinterpret this chapter of his life, which the artist rejected and chose to ignore for many years: a revaluation of the techniques for ceramic mass-production in which he was trained. On the other hand, however, the highly conceptual nature of the work in the Venice Biennale, MC1 and Singapore Biennale installations discussed above obscures the "artisanal" or industrial aspects of these processes in favour of more "artistic" aims.

A genealogy of mass-production in Jingdezhen and Liu Jianhua's factory experience

Like historical reproduction and replica-making, modular and mass-production have long been central to porcelain-making in Jingdezhen, and to other artisanal industries

²¹⁶ Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6.

across China. Ledderose finds evidence for the mass-production of ceramics as early as the Neolithic era though he traces the elaboration of such methods to the seventeenth century, when he asserts that it was modularity above all else that enabled Chinese merchants 'to flood the entire world with porcelain [in] almost unlimited quantities.'²¹⁷ During this time, it is recorded in the *Jiangxi provincial annals* (*Jiangxi sheng dazhi* 江西省大志, 1597) that workshops in Jingdezhen were organised into a complex hierarchy of roles, from the four kiln-supervisors who occupied the highest position and their thirty-nine assistants, to the sixteen master and eighty-six apprentice throwers, twenty-three painters, six enamel painters, five inscribers and twenty-seven saggar-makers.²¹⁸ Archaeological traces also show increasing labour specialisation, indicating that such workshops would have been divided into four main buildings facing a central courtyard to enable central supervision, and divided in turn into different areas for each task.²¹⁹ Yet Ledderose and other historians of mass-production in China have neglected the work of contemporary artists like Liu, for whom these forms of manufacture remain potent sources of inspiration, and even contemporary manufacturing in general.

Liu created his porcelain replica commodities during several trips to Jingdezhen from 2001 to 2002, working in the same factory in which he had trained as an assembly-line ceramicist in the 1970s and 1980s. He began this training at the age of twelve, in 1974, when his father sent him to the Porcelain Capital from his birthplace in nearby Ji'an to apprentice with his uncle Liu Yuanchang, a master ceramicist who gave the younger Liu

²¹⁷ Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, 85–89.

²¹⁸ Margaret Medley, "Organisation and Production at Jingdezhen in the Sixteenth Century," in *The Porcelains of Jingdezhen*, by Rosemary E. Scott (London: Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, 1993), 75–78.

²¹⁹ Elias, "In Search of China's Ceramic Past: A Visit to Jingdezhen and Laohudong," 148.

employment at the Sculpture Factory (*Diaosu Cichang* 雕塑瓷厂, abbreviated from now on as SF).²²⁰ Liu Yuanchang became an employee at this factory in 1964, eight years after its founding by the central government as one of many collective enterprises established in the city during the 1950s. He remained there for his entire career, eventually securing the esteemed position of director and, in 1996, the state-administered title of “national-level master artisan” (*guojiaji gongyi meishu dashi* 国家级工艺美术大师).²²¹ Liu Jianhua too received several awards while employed at the SF, though he has since described his employment there as deeply unfulfilling, especially when he came to realise that he would remain on the assembly-line for the rest of his life if he continued to follow the conventional career path, and so, unlike his uncle, he resigned in 1985 to study at the JCI. Here, he turned away from ceramics in favour of sculpture in bronze and plaster, which he considered to be a more “genuine” form of art, and found inspiration in the work of European modernist sculptors Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), Antoine Bourdelle (1861-1929), Aristide Maillol (1861-1944) and Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957), rather than the Chinese ceramic traditions in which he had been trained.²²² By 1998, however, he had once again taken up porcelain for reasons explained below, and returned to the SF to make use of the professional connections he had established as a young adult.

Regular-Fragile can therefore be positioned as the first work in which Liu revisited and sought to reassess the assembly-line processes of ceramic production through which he first became acquainted with the medium, and these processes are in turn central to the meaning of the work across its various incarnations. As noted in the first chapter, Liu

²²⁰ Jin, «刘建华: 给艺术做减法» [Liu Jianhua: An Art of Subtraction], 89.

²²¹ Gillette, *China's Porcelain Capital: The Rise, Fall and Reinvention of Ceramics in Jingdezhen*, 102.

²²² Liu Jianhua and Zhu Qi, «如果迷茫的话, 我会不知所措 - 对刘建华的访谈» [If You're Confused, Then I Have No Idea - an Interview with Liu Jianhua], Shanghart, March 23, 2001, n.p., <http://www.shanghart.com/texts/LJH-interview-c.htm>.

used the technique of slip-casting to produce his replica consumables, which allows for rapid mass-production of identical forms that echoes their original creation as functional commodities. He was assisted in this process by former co-workers as well as newly-hired artisans, effectively recreating the conditions of collective manufacture with which he had once been so familiar, though with the aim of producing a work of contemporary art rather than the archaic and Socialist Realist sculptures produced in the factory.²²³

For Eugene Tan, Director of the National Gallery of Singapore, this site of manufacture and the formal reduction of consumables to their most basic outline once again recalls Duchamp's use of a mass-produced urinal for *Fountain*. Echoing the above-mentioned comparison drawn by Garth Clark between Duchamp's ready-made and Ai Weiwei's *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn*, Tan asserts that the French artist's removal of the urinal from a utilitarian to an aesthetic context is mirrored in Liu's re-packaging of functional consumables as "useless" objects for aesthetic appreciation.²²⁴ Like Duchamp, Liu was partially motivated by a desire to remove "sculptural concepts" from his work, replacing personal taste with standardised forms in a manner that presages his "no meaning, no content" approach.²²⁵ Yet this is where the similarities between *Fountain* and *Regular-Fragile* end. While Duchamp deliberately removed his urinal from the conditions of its manufacture, Liu draws attention to the industrial origins of his chosen objects, not only by presenting them as identical, interchangeable (i.e. modular) artefacts of assembly-line production, but also by participating in this production rather than adopting the isolated role of artist-curator. The significance of Duchamp's work consists entirely in its

²²³ Gillette, *China's Porcelain Capital: The Rise, Fall and Reinvention of Ceramics in Jingdezhen*, 55, 72. Liu Jianhua, email communication, 16 January 2018.

²²⁴ Eugene Tan, "Transformation of the Everyday," in *Liu Jianhua: Regular-Fragile*, ed. Dan Dang (New York: Arario, 2008), n.p.

²²⁵ Yan and Liu, «嬗变中的刘建华: 艺术转变的内在逻辑 - 阎玉婷对话刘建华» [The Evolution of Liu Jianhua: Internal Logic for Art Transformation – Yan Yuting in Dialogue with Liu Jianhua], 42.

re-contextualisation – the “original” urinal was so unimportant that the artist didn’t even seek to reclaim it after its display in 1917 – while, conversely, it is precisely through their materiality and manufacture that Liu’s objects gain meaning. As doubly reproduced commodities, the components of his *Regular-Fragile* installations are directly connected to his employment as an assembly-line ceramicist and the industrial processes of mass-production in which he was trained.

Elevating material modularity to conceptual multiplicity

The familiarity of Liu’s replica porcelain commodities and their various configurations in different contexts of display, however, opens *Regular-Fragile* to a range of affective and conceptual associations beyond this absolute materiality, generating what could be described as a modular form of interpretation. Curator and art dealer Pi Li, a co-founder of Boers-Li Gallery, Beijing, like Eugene Tan, has noted the erasure of obvious meaning in Liu’s abstraction of his chosen objects as a defining aspect of their artistic significance. Approaching the work through a semiotic framework, he compares the commodities to words removed from syntactical structure, cast adrift in arbitrary combinations in which the logic of the sentence dissolves into a series of fragments, each legible in isolation but lacking mutual coherence. Rather than denying communication, however, Pi asserts that this fracturing ‘[allows] viewers from different cultural backgrounds [to] create their own ... interpretations according to their different life and cultural experience.’²²⁶ Like Duchamp’s urinal, the replica commodities in *Regular-Fragile* have been removed from their intended context and the functionality that once gave them meaning. Liu has even

²²⁶ Pi Li, “Presence of Matter and Absence of Personality,” in *Regular-Fragile - Liu Jianhua*, trans. Karen Smith (Shanghai: ShanghART, 2003), n.p.

further extended this dislocation by remaking his appropriated objects in a material that renders them completely unusable, in contrast to the eminent suitability of the thick-bodied porcelain of the urinal for its intended purpose, and the possibility that it could therefore be restored to function. As Pi Li observes, however, Liu's replica commodities retain some traces of their former meaning: just as the word "fragile" in the title carries affective associations, so a discarded child's toy or single shoe evoke for most viewers a feeling of abjection and impermanence that reinforces the presentation of the work in the Venice Biennale, MC1 and the Singapore Biennale as a meditation on transience and disorienting catastrophe. Liu has also noted this potential for multiple responses to his work, writing in 2014 that

... the different configurations of the work, in different contexts and display spaces, [were intended to inspire] a wide range of viewer experiences, [to] create completely different affective sensations – [from] joy, pain, excitement, fantasy [and] secrecy, [to] fear.²²⁷

These objects, then, like words released from syntax, are not rendered meaningless by their abstraction and isolation but are opened to new associations that might not have emerged within a defined context. Their material modularity is reflected by a conceptual multiplicity as parts of a more complex whole that can be arranged and rearranged to create an almost infinite number of narratives.

This proliferation of meaning in Liu's work reinforces the transexperiential aspects of its artistic significance, while knowledge of the process of its manufacture adds a further temporal dimension to this interpretation. Australian art-historian Francis Maravillas

²²⁷ Liu, «思维的连贯性: 关于我这些年的作品» [Collected Thoughts: About My Work over the Years], 77.

has provided a useful means to understand this new layer of meaning in his concept of “haunted cosmopolitanisms”, or the palimpsest of experiences accrued over time by those whose lives are marked by movement between contexts. Although writing about Chinese artists in Australia, Maravillas’ concept can be readily applied here not to Liu himself but to the objects he has replicated, all of which have journeyed from their place of manufacture (in many cases, China) to points of sale and use around the world, then, following their “translation” into another material, to a comparably global range of exhibition venues as works of art rather than functional commodities. A parallel could also be drawn with Liu, who returned to his adolescent place of employment to create these pieces and travelled between Jingdezhen and his new home in Kunming during the years of their making. Maravillas argues that the work of artists who move between contexts in this manner should be regarded not only as a product of their immediate surroundings but also of the ‘transnational forms of imagining and living’ that they have experienced.²²⁸

Maravillas privileges the concept of Chineseness, externally imposed or self-defined, as central to this framework, describing it as an implicit influence or ‘*spectral* entity that both haunts, and is haunted by, the work and [the artists’] identity,’ where memory and translation converge.²²⁹ Extending this interpretive model to *Regular-Fragile*, it is not the spectre of Chineseness that opens Liu’s project to the associative currents of memory and translation – though his use of porcelain definitely lends a “Chinese” inflection – but rather the phantoms of his objects’ past lives, the evocations of places distant in space and time that they conjure for viewers, and of Liu’s life as an assembly-line ceramicist. This ghostly quality is reinforced by the material properties of the *qingbai* glaze: pale

²²⁸ Maravillas, “Haunted Cosmopolitanisms: Specters of Chinese Art in the Diaspora,” 254.

²²⁹ Ibid, 254–55.

and translucent, fragile and otherworldly, Liu's replicas are 'ghosts of the things they imitate.'²³⁰ In addition to his critique of grand narratives and desire to draw attention to the impermanence of the material world, Liu's *Regular-Fragile* installations are also images of a multiple existence, open to a range of associations, and dispersed across space and time as ghostly echoes of lives outgrown or forgotten.

In addition to its conceptual associations, modular production is central to Liu Jianhua's *Regular-Fragile* project in all its many variations. Most importantly, to return to the traits of modularity and mass-production defined by Ledderose, the meaning and making of the work are both characterised by emphasis on quantity: Liu's porcelain consumables are mass-produced and almost always shown *en masse*. The increasing number included in each installation also clearly illustrates the principles of additive growth and, as their configuration is adapted to different contexts and functions, proportional scale. This is possible because the components are standardised and interchangeable: many identical casts are created in the same moulds, taken from everyday objects designed to be easily replaced; even casts of different objects, when assembled into a larger whole, can be switched without altering the overall meaning. Interchangeability and standardisation allow for a division of labour in the production of the work: because each component is identical with many others, their creation can be split into several stages delegated to a team of artisans and repeated *ad infinitum*, if desired. Finally, the underlying premise of the project, as expressed most clearly in its installation as *Discard* (fig. 1), rests entirely in the creation of the new through adaptation of the old: the material and form of the

²³⁰ Edward Lucie-Smith, "Foreword: Liu Jianhua," in *Liu Jianhua: Regular-Fragile*, ed. Dang Dan (New York: Arario, 2008), n.p.

components are “old” artefacts given new meaning by their combination, multiplication and transposition to different contexts. Liu continually creates a tension between the binaries of original and imitation, antique and contemporary, transient and permanent, dreams and despair, global and local. What remains certain throughout all variations of *Regular-Fragile*, however, and especially in *Discard*, is his assertion that the apparent abundance of our world of things is a fragile illusion that will inevitably find its end in a landfill of unwanted remains.

[Liu Jianhua and Ai Weiwei’s restaging of aristocratic tastes for massed display of Chinese porcelain at Oxburgh Hall \(2007\) and Blenheim Palace \(2014-15\)](#)

The temporal dimension of transexperience apparent throughout Liu’s *Regular-Fragile* project is most clearly expressed in two instances of its installation: *Discard*, discussed in the previous chapter (fig. 1), and an exhibition in 2007 at Oxburgh Hall, a 15th-century Tudor estate in Norfolk, England (figs. 35-40). The latter is considered here alongside an exhibition of works by Ai Weiwei staged seven years later, in 2014-15, at the eighteenth-century estate of Blenheim Palace in Woodstock, Oxfordshire (figs. 45-50). Both evoke parallels with the history of massed porcelain display in aristocratic residences across Europe. As with Ai’s reproduction of historic Yuan and Qing blue-and-white, however, as well as Liu’s engagement with Song *qingbai* and celadon, this history is not uncritically revived but is instead subjected to varying levels of critique and transformation.

In Liu’s installation at Oxburgh Hall, massed arrangements of his replica commodities populated the austere interiors of the house like an occupying force, provoking feelings of intrusion, confinement and constriction that likely left viewers with a profound sense of dislocation – of being out of place. In contrast to the regimented ranks of vases and

dishes found in the “porcelain rooms” of the eighteenth century, the components of Liu’s installation spilled across floors and furniture, transgressing their usual ornamental function and even rendering certain areas unusable or inaccessible. At Blenheim Palace, on the other hand, a more understated insertion of Ai’s ceramics alongside existing displays of porcelain appeared to complement the narratives of wealth and privilege these were once intended to reinforce. On closer inspection, however, the provocative content of some works and Ai’s calculated imitation of past forms, like the artist’s earlier replica works, undermined the authority of these narratives and exposed their inherent artificiality. Both displays interrogated the ideals of English national identity of which estates like Oxburgh and Blenheim are a potent reminder. On a more general level, however, these exhibitions also conveyed their own form of idealisation, acknowledging but ultimately effacing the material reality of mass-production in which ceramics are produced in favour of the conceptual role that the artists bestowed upon them.

“Liu Jianhua: Regular/Fragile” (2007) at Oxburgh Hall, Norfolk

As a contemporary “intervention” into a heritage site, the curatorial rationale for “Liu Jianhua: Regular/Fragile” and the history of its location are central to any understanding of this display which, though intended and received as a subversive statement, drew on a rich historical context for the display of porcelain in the aristocratic estates of England and Europe. The exhibition was organised by then-emerging Korean curator Lee Sook-Kyung, now employed in a senior role at the Tate Research Centre: Asia-Pacific, and was divided between Oxburgh Hall and King’s Lynn Arts Centre, a community-focused arts institution dedicated to fostering local artists and promoting tourism. It was the second of two displays planned to attract visitors to the Tudor estate of Oxburgh Hall, founded

in 1482 and donated to the National Trust just under five centuries later in 1952.²³¹ The first of these displays, “Fresh Interventions,” showcased works by local emerging artists commissioned to respond to the history of the estate, and inspired by several months of collections-based research.²³² The curatorial rationale behind the choice of *Regular-Fragile*, on the other hand, lay in Lee’s desire to create ‘a new layer of meaning and interpretation [for the] work, as well as ... a new dimension to the visitor experience for the site.’²³³ In contrast to the extension and renewal of Oxburgh Hall’s heritage by English artists in “Fresh Interventions,” it was hoped that Liu would introduce a note of contrast and a point of entry to interrogate the issues of cultural difference suggested by the historic Chinese porcelain already in Oxburgh Hall’s collection.²³⁴ The exhibition attracted a great deal of criticism almost immediately after opening, most of which was directed at the subject and scale of the work chosen. Yet there is a precedent for the display of Chinese porcelain in aristocratic European interiors which suggests that “Liu Jianhua: Regular/Fragile” was not subversive in the manner intended by its curator and criticised by its detractors – that is, as a novel interjection into the aristocratic space of the estate – though it did depart from tradition in other respects.

Close analysis of the installation of *Regular-Fragile* at Oxburgh reveals a more dynamic potential for subversion in an important affective distinction from historic examples of massed porcelain display. The components of Liu’s installation were arranged in various

²³¹ National Trust, “History of Oxburgh Hall,” Oxburgh Hall, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/oxburgh-hall/features/history-of-oxburgh-hall>.

²³² The four artists chosen for this display were Wil Bolton, Joy Layton, Alexander Paterson and Diana Stickley.

²³³ Lee Sook-Kyung, “From Fragments to a New Entirety,” in *Liu Jianhua: Regular-Fragile*, ed. Dang Dan (New York: Arario, 2008), n.p.

²³⁴ Ibid.



Figure 35: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), *Regular-Fragile*, 2007, porcelain, dimensions variable; Oxburgh Hall, Norfolk.



Figure 36: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), *Regular-Fragile*, 2007, porcelain, dimensions variable; Oxburgh Hall, Norfolk.

configurations throughout the austere but distinguished interiors, all of which created a pervasive sense of unease, of being out of place or a stranger in someone else's domain, and of malign intrusion. Most were placed on the carpeted floors: one of the largest accumulations, for example, extended outward from the foot of a marble fireplace into the centre of a luxuriously-furnished drawing room (fig. 35). Various objects, from shoes and handbags, to motorcycle helmets, skulls, hats, vegetables and fruit, lightbulbs, hot-water bottles, hairdryers, padlocks, mobile phones, toy guitars and hammers, were sorted by type in the space between two armchairs, their monochrome *qingbai* glaze immediately drawing viewers' attention away from the subdued reds and blues of the room's décor and exaggerating the pristine whiteness of the fireplace. Although arrayed in regimented groups at first, as the objects slowly crept into the room they became increasingly dispersed, with a child's shoe placed alongside a group of hammers sitting visibly out of place (fig. 36). This likely created an impression of gradual encroachment or entropic growth, causing the mass of objects to resemble an alien substance that had perhaps dripped down the chimney and oozed inexorably across the floor.

Elsewhere in the house, the lingering unease felt after navigating this encroachment was reinforced by a menacing line of toy robots encircling a mahogany sideboard, with cans and dumbbells as makeshift ramparts (fig. 37), and a comparable retinue of fighter jets surrounding a tall mahogany wardrobe (fig. 38). Rather than ornamenting these pieces of furniture, as expected, Liu's porcelain replicas obstructed access and prevented use, both through their threatening appearance and, paradoxically, their material fragility, which would likely cause most viewers to feel reluctant to move them. This inhibition is very similar to that felt when browsing a shop stocked with china and glassware, or when



Figure 37: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), *Regular-Fragile*, 2007, porcelain, dimensions variable; Oxburgh Hall, Norfolk.



Figure 38: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), *Regular-Fragile*, 2007, porcelain, dimensions variable; Oxburgh Hall, Norfolk.

visiting the home of a relative with a taste for ornament – there is an almost involuntary restraint of bodily movement and an awareness of surroundings that inevitably leads to discomfort and stifling constriction. The same self-awareness could have been aroused by one of the more site-sensitive displays at Oxburgh: a pile of books seemingly stacked with little care on a shelf protruding from a row of bookcases (fig. 39). Again, this might have evoked the feeling of visiting another's home, navigating the tension between a lingering desire to browse their shelves, to turn the pages of an eye-catching book, and the anxiety of disrupting the order of the house or causing damage to a fragile tome. The ossification of the porcelain volumes also points, however, to another consequence of such a tense situation – the books will never be read, will never fulfil their intended purpose, and will instead remain permanently closed.

Finally, in a third style of display used throughout the house, Liu's objects were tightly arrayed without any clear organisation, much like the eponymous ceramic fragments in Ai Weiwei's *Spouts* (fig. 10), on the shelves and surfaces of pieces of furniture. The most striking instance of this was a dense accumulation of pieces atop a table in a dining room (fig. 40). Including a range of commodities, this display provided a poignant expression of the feelings of encroachment and constriction underlying the entire exhibition. Like the sideboard and wardrobe elsewhere in the house, this table was rendered completely unusable by the porcelain crowding its surface. This denied utility echoes the transition from function to ornament to which Liu's chosen commodities are subjected, though here the table was not even given the dignity of aesthetic merit and is instead relegated to the secondary status of a plinth or support. Like a parasite, the guest assumed control of the host and claimed the house for its own purposes. Unlike conventional displays of porcelain *en masse*, and in contrast to his celadon-glazed sculptures, Liu's installation at



Figure 39: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), *Regular-Fragile*, 2007, porcelain, dimensions variable; Oxburgh Hall, Norfolk.

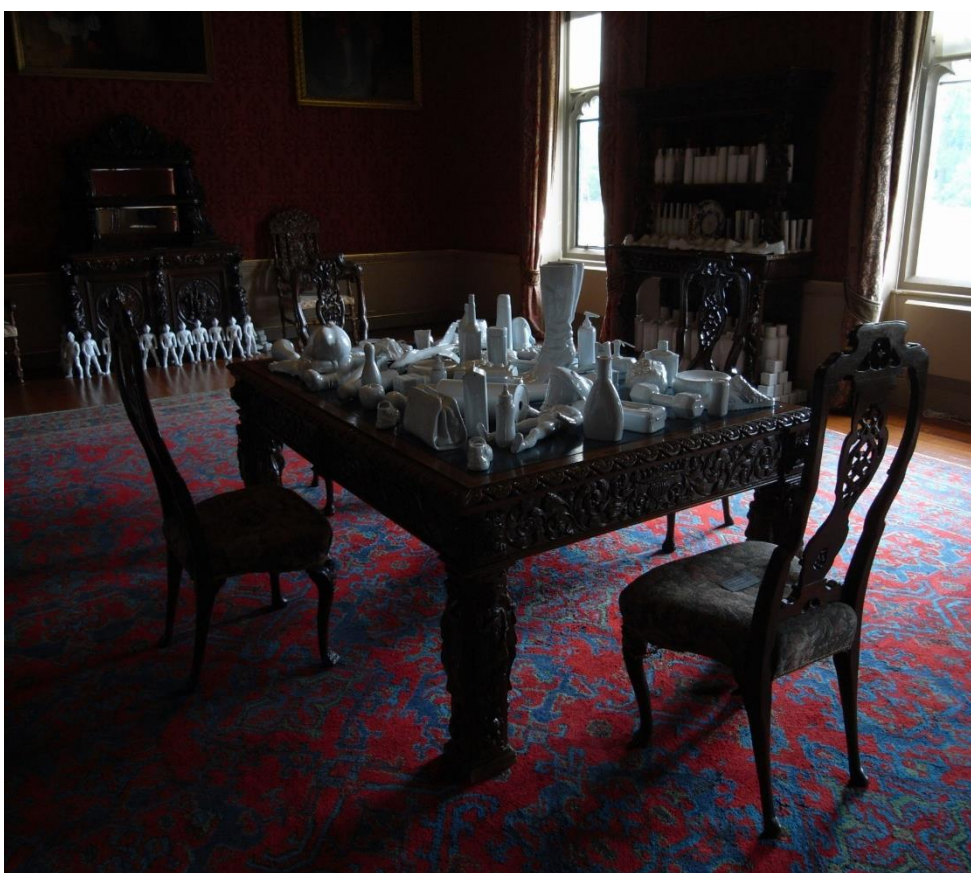


Figure 40: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), *Regular-Fragile*, 2007, porcelain, dimensions variable; Oxburgh Hall, Norfolk.

Oxburgh was neither refined nor restrained, but was instead characterised by a sense of intrusion, encroachment and unaccommodating occupation. Rather than the content of the exhibition or the selection of the artist, then, it was perhaps this affective impact that prompted the exhibition's negative reception.

On the other hand, controversy was apparent even during the planning stages of the display, when Liu and Lee were forced to make several compromises in the face of the National Trust custodians' desire to maintain a distinct association with English national identity. Liu's initial proposals following a visit to the site in April 2007 were immediately met with unease about the estimated number of components suggested for inclusion, the extent to which this might restrict visitor mobility, and the impact for conservation of the existing collection. These very practical concerns were addressed by the division of the exhibition between the estate and King's Lynn Arts Centre's Fermoy Art Gallery, yet Oxburgh Hall representatives nevertheless remained dissatisfied. Many visitors to the property also found reason to complain, leading the National Trust to request an early closure, four weeks before the agreed date.²³⁵

While the principal reasons given for this closure, like the misgivings voiced during the planning stages of the exhibition, were centred on purported issues of access and public safety, and although these complaints seem little different to those directed at most if not all exhibitions of work by a contemporary artist in a heritage building, English art critic, writer and curator Edward Lucie-Smith suggests another likely cause. In the text published following the exhibition, he asserts that its conflicted reception arose from 'narrow-minded elitism and conservatism' in the National Trust, and the overturning of visitors' expectations of a 'comfortable historical fairy story,' confronted instead with

²³⁵ Lee, "From Fragments to a New Entirety," n.p.

something provocative and unsettling.²³⁶ Iconic properties like Oxburgh Hall remain tied to an idealised view of history, and to mythologised narratives of triumphant national ascendancy. The enduring influence of this perspective can be seen in the description of Oxburgh on the National Trust website, in which the values of “survival”, “continuity”, ‘[an] unshakable Catholic faith’ and ‘[a] desire to preserve the memory of [the] ancient past’ are invoked.²³⁷ Any threat to, or subversive imposition into the narratives that give meaning to these values, then, like that posed by Ai Weiwei to Chinese national identity in *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* and other works, is likely to be perceived as a challenge or an iconoclastic gesture. Considering this viewpoint, then, it could be argued that it wasn’t the content of the exhibition that aroused the ire of the estate’s custodians and visitors, but rather the obtrusive installation of this content throughout the house and the jarring visual effect that it created. Liu’s monochrome ceramics could not but have been viewed as a profoundly unsettling counterpoint to the opulent furniture and décor surrounding and supporting them, their ashen pallor nullifying the grandeur with which such a setting would ordinarily be associated. In contrast to the more conventional porcelain pieces once displayed in Oxburgh Hall and held within the estate’s collection, Liu’s replica commodities stridently rejected the demure restraint of the ornamental, forcibly occupying the house and threatening to disrupt the time-honoured continuities of nationhood with which it had hitherto been associated.

²³⁶ Lucie-Smith, “Foreword: Liu Jianhua,” n.p.

²³⁷ National Trust, “History of Oxburgh Hall.”

The disruptive potential of *Regular-Fragile* in such a context becomes particularly clear when the Oxburgh installation is compared with historic examples of massed porcelain display created in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the second half of the seventeenth century, as the quantity of porcelain imported from China – and Japan, especially during the transition from Ming to Qing dynastic rule – rapidly increased, it gradually lost the miraculous singularity with which it had once been associated and shifted from the cabinet-of-curiosity into more expansive display settings.²³⁸ While less costly pieces were incorporated into new settings for eating and drinking, those that had been purchased at greater expense retained their function as markers of authority and wealth, liberated from the cabinet to proliferate throughout aristocratic estates. Many elite collectors set aside entire rooms for the presentation of porcelain, commissioning elaborate experiments in architectural, sculptural and ceramic profusion.²³⁹ Elsewhere, almost identical pieces were arranged on mantelpieces, lintels above doorways, shelves, console tables, pedestals and other items of furniture, often covering every surface. In contrast to the earlier display of porcelain as a unique curiosity, usually mounted in gilt-bronze to signal its rarity and enhance its visual appeal, this tendency toward excess

²³⁸ Oliver Impey, "Porcelain for Palaces," in *Porcelain for Palaces: The Fashion for Japan in Europe, 1650-1750*, by John Ayers, Oliver Impey, and J.V.G. Mallet (London: Oriental Ceramic Society, 1990), 56. "Cabinets-of-curiosity" or *kunstkammer* were descended from the *studiolo* or private studies of such Renaissance luminaries as Isabella d'Este (1474-1539) and Francesco I de' Medici (1541-1587), and became an essential means for any collector or natural philosopher of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to organise and display their collections. They were formed of two principal categories: *naturalia* or naturally-formed objects and *artificialia* or man-made objects, which together served to represent in miniature the variety of divine creation, as well as the owner's ability to own and control such multiplicity. Virginia Treanor, "'Une Abondance Extra Ordinaire': The Porcelain Collection of Amalia van Solms," *Early Modern Women* 9, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 149–51.

²³⁹ There was also an established tradition of porcelain rooms, or *chinikhaneh* in Iran, famously inaugurated by the Timurid ruler Ulugh Beg (1394-1440) and at its height during the seventeenth century, alongside the rise and flourishing of the trend at the same time in Europe. Iranian porcelain rooms, however, were generally constructed in religious and civil buildings rather than domestic interiors, and so fulfilled different symbolic functions. Pierson, "The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History," 31n88.

focused on the staging of multiplicity and stood as a monument to the owner's ability to acquire luxury goods in awe-inspiring quantities.²⁴⁰ Considered alongside this impulse, the installation of *Regular-Fragile* at Oxburgh seems entirely in keeping with the tastes of its former owners and their contemporaries.

In contrast to Liu's myth-dispelling exhibition, however, the central ideological function of "porcelain rooms" was to display power and wealth. During the seventeenth century, while the China trade remained under Portuguese control, an early porcelain display – and one of the few examples still extant – was installed in the Santos Palace, Lisbon (fig. 41). Anticipating later fusions of ceramics and architecture, though more closely tied to the Iberian heritage of Islamic architectural styles than the Northern European fashion for porcelain rooms, the steep vaulting of a pyramidal roof in this royal residence was designed to hold an eventual 261 pieces of Ming blue-and-white, added by generations of Portuguese rulers.²⁴¹ This accumulation of dishes of various sizes, situated above the heads of royal guests and displayed at an angle that takes full advantage of the lustrous quality of the glaze, enhanced by a gilded mount and the lavish frame surrounding the display, exaggerates the recessive space of the vaulting to draw viewers' eye toward a central, resplendent golden medallion. The implication is clear: like the shining ranks of blue-and-white dishes, the court of the Portuguese autocrat, his illustrious lineage, the nation over which he ruled, and even the world, were united beneath his dazzling, gilded gaze, entrusted with a sacred duty to reflect and therefore enhance his magnificence. The viewer, by extension, also takes part in this visual drama, throwing their head back in wonder to catch a glimpse of the fantastic treasures so displayed and the shining

²⁴⁰ Pierson, "The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History," 20–21.

²⁴¹ Carswell, *Blue & White: Chinese Porcelain around the World*, 129; Julie Emerson, "European Princely Collections, Enterprises, and Dynastic Marriages," in *Porcelain Stories: From China to Europe*, by Julie Emerson, Jennifer Chen, and Mimi Gardner Gates (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 2000), 135–36.



Figure 41: Ceiling of the porcelain room in the Santos Palace, Lisbon.

golden medallion to which they seem magnetically drawn in mutual admiration. The contrast with Liu's display of replica consumables at Oxburgh Hall is also clear: rather than the sacred space of the ceiling, his work was predominantly arrayed on the floor, at the level of visitors' feet, subverting normative display practice and therefore visitor conditioning (figs. 35-38). The banality of his chosen subject matter, meanwhile, and the unappealing pallor of the glaze, dull and opaque in the low lighting of Oxburgh Hall's interiors, did little to attract wonder or inspire adoration.

A more appropriate point of comparison can perhaps be found in the modest forms of porcelain display that appeared in the Spanish Netherlands following the incorporation of Portugal into the expansive dominions of Philip II of Spain (1527-1598) in 1581. Here, the lavish spectacle of the Santos Palace was tempered to suit the more intimate though no less impressive context of the cabinet-of-curiosity, while the fashion for porcelain rooms gained its most influential proponents in the ascendant House of Orange-Nassau. As early as 1632, an inventory of Noordeinde Palace in The Hague, then known as the Oude Hof (the "Old Court"), listed 283 pieces of porcelain among the contents of the royal apartments, displayed in cabinet-of-curiosity style alongside French earthenware, Roman terracotta and a rhinoceros-horn cup, as singular and unique rarities rather than a spectacular mass.²⁴² The shift from cabinet to room was famously effected by Amalia von Solms-Braunfels (1602-1675), Princess of Orange from 1625. In an addendum to an inventory of Noordeinde made two years later, it is recorded that a mantelpiece, a set of shelves and two wooden stands, all painted red and gilded, had been constructed in a gallery recently added to the royal residence for the display of Amalia's porcelain. In 1648, Amalia commissioned an entire room for her growing collection, then recorded to

²⁴² Treador, "'Une Abondance Extra Ordinaire,'" 141n1, 146-147.

contain over five hundred pieces including flower pots, pitchers, double-gourd bottles, *kendi*, mustard pots and figurines as well as the more customary plates, cups and vases. By 1673, she had amassed over 1200 pieces, displayed at Noordeinde and her summer palace Huis ten Bosch (“The House in the Woods”) in eclectic, expansive installations.²⁴³ Even more spectacular and resplendent than the ceramic displays created for her Iberian contemporaries, Amalia’s porcelain room was likewise a symbol of political power and her family’s control over the China Trade, using porcelain to signal wealth, authority and global prestige. The more eclectic contents of Amalia’s collection evoke comparison with the everyday commodities cast in porcelain for *Regular-Fragile*, while her arrangement of these within a room, rather than the confines of a vaulted ceiling or a cabinet, could be considered a precedent for Liu’s intervention at Oxburgh Hall. Yet Amalia’s porcelain room was set apart from the living spaces of her residence, a unified statement under her control and dictated only by her tastes. The Oxburgh Hall installation, on the other hand, reflected no evident aesthetic program and sprawled throughout the estate with little sense of consistent order or organisation.

This transgressive disorderliness is made even more apparent by comparison with two further historic porcelain rooms: at Kensington Palace in London, and Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin. At Kensington, eleven rooms were elaborately decorated with 787 pieces of Chinese porcelain by Queen Mary II (1662-1694), credited by writers at the time with importing the Dutch fashion for porcelain rooms when she returned to England with her husband Willem Hendrik of the House of Orange-Nassau (1650-1702) for his coronation as William III following the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688.²⁴⁴ In his *A tour thro’ the whole*

²⁴³ Treanor, “‘Une Abondance Extra Ordinaire,’” 142, 148–49; Broomhall and Van Gent, “The Gendered Power of Porcelain among Early Modern European Dynasties,” 52.

²⁴⁴ Emerson, “European Princely Collections, Enterprises, and Dynastic Marriages,” 137; Broomhall and Van Gent, “The Gendered Power of Porcelain among Early Modern European Dynasties,” 56.

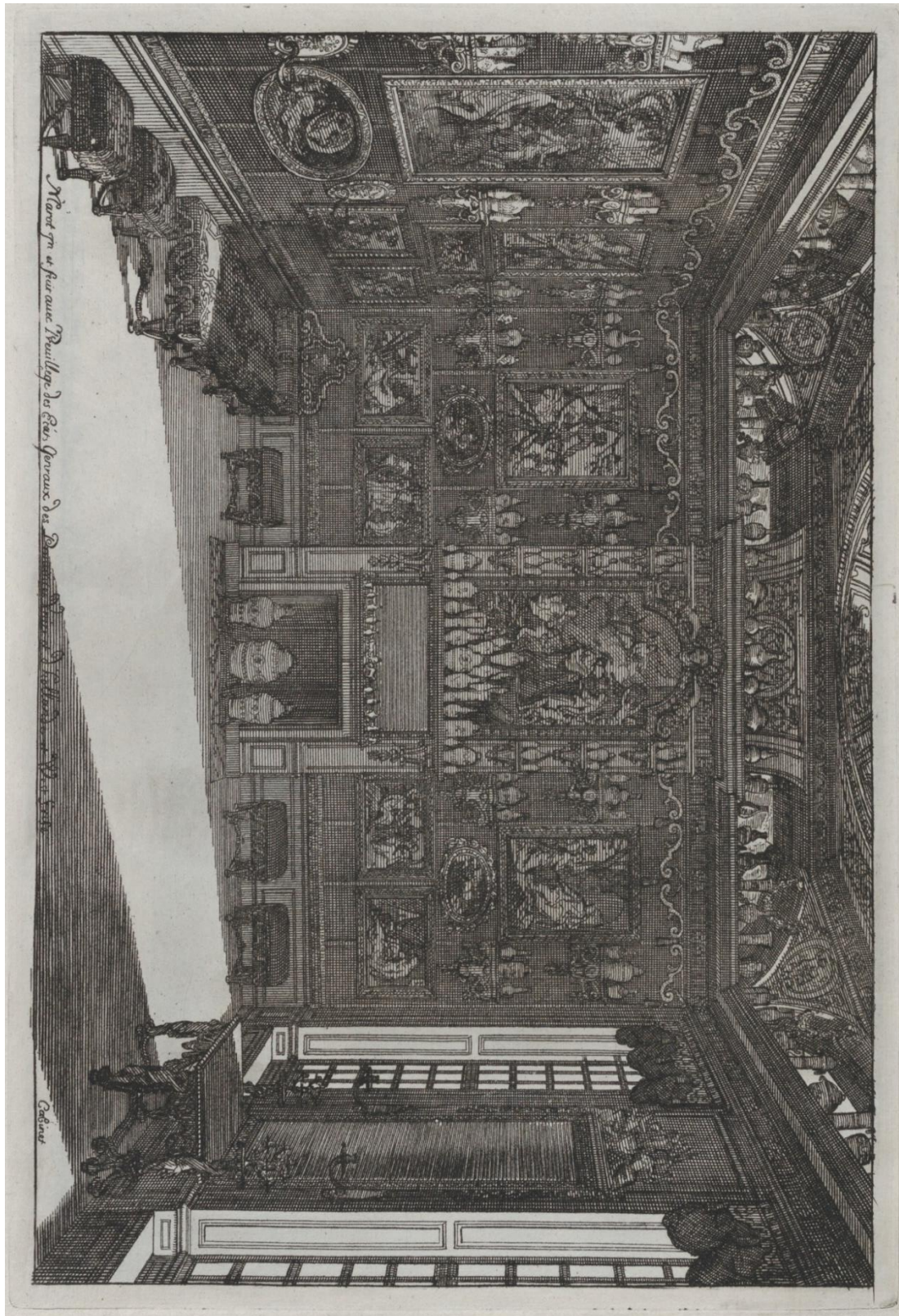


Figure 42: Daniel Marot (1661-1752), Interior of a porcelain cabinet with paintings and vases, from "Nouveau livre d'appartements", 1702, etching, 18.7 x 27.3 cm; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

island of Great Britain (1724-1727), English author Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) expressed his dismay at the introduction of this style of porcelain display:

The queen brought in the custom or humour, as I may call it, of furnishing houses with china-ware, which increased to a strange degree ... piling their china upon the tops of cabinets, [*scrutoires*], and every chymney-piece [*sic*], to the tops of the ceilings, and even setting up shelves for their china-ware ... till it became a grievance in the expense of it, and even injurious to their families and estates.²⁴⁵

The former porcelain rooms at Kensington have since been renovated but an idea of their arrangement can be gained from contemporary engravings, notably including the plan for the “Interior of a porcelain cabinet with paintings and vases” (fig. 42) published in 1702 by the Huguenot artist and designer Daniel Marot (1661-1752). In this image, echoing Defoe’s description, a mantelpiece is shown bristling with vases and jars, other vases are placed on ornamental sconces across the walls, and an orderly arrangement is distributed along a shelf below the ceiling. These are interspersed with elaborately-framed paintings that are hung in a grid-like composition and subsumed within a unified decorative scheme by rhythmic plaster and bronze curlicues, all carefully contrived to suit the architecture of the room. Marot completed many projects for William and Mary, including the construction of the porcelain rooms at Kensington, which likely resembled the style of display in this engraving.²⁴⁶ The same style was adopted at Charlottenburg, in chambers designed by Swedish architect Johann Friedrich Eosander von Göthe (1669-

²⁴⁵ Daniel Defoe, *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (London: J.M. Dent, 1962), 166.

²⁴⁶ Broomhall and Van Gent, “The Gendered Power of Porcelain among Early Modern European Dynasties,” 55–56.

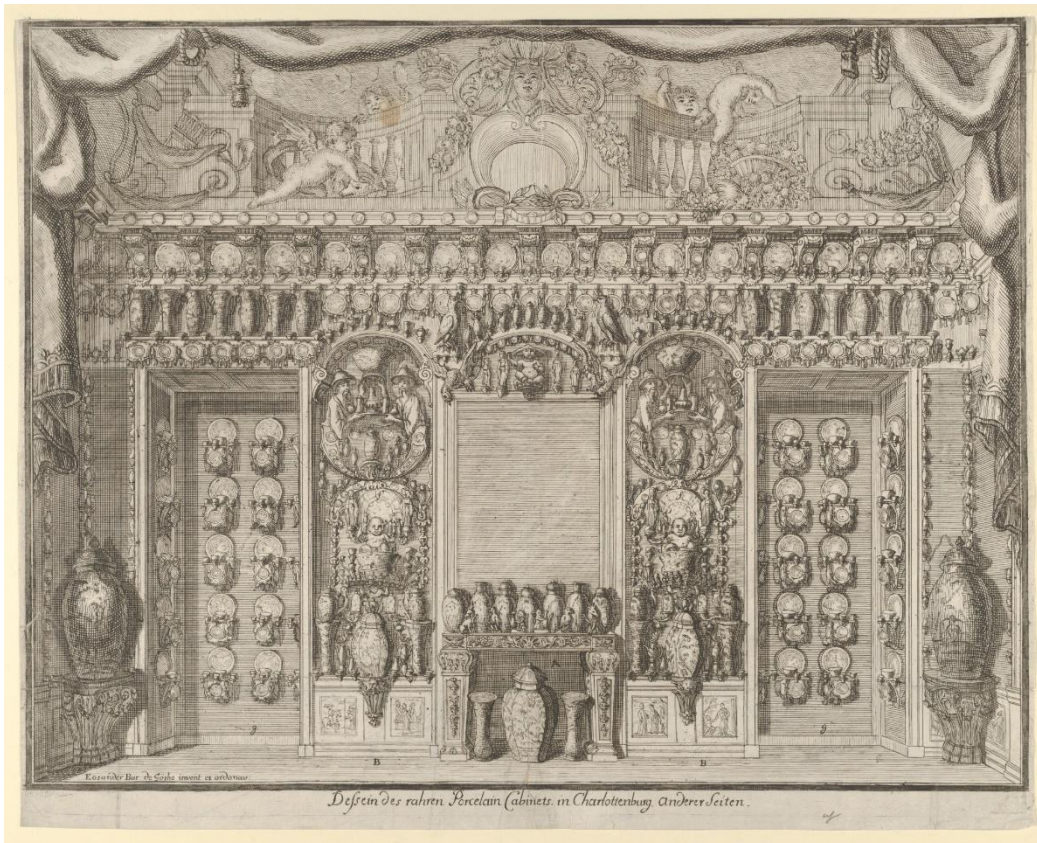


Figure 43: Martin Engelbrecht (1684-1756), Design for the porcelain cabinet at the Charlottenburg Palace, c.1711-56, etching, 34 x 43 cm; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 44: Porcelain room at the Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin.

1728) around 1710, recorded in an etching by Martin Engelbrecht (1684-1756; fig. 43).²⁴⁷

Although, as at Kensington, the display was later disassembled, it has been recreated to give some idea of its former magnificence (fig. 44).

From this restoration and the contemporary prints cited above, it can be clearly seen that the porcelain rooms at Kensington and Charlottenburg, like those at the Santos Palace (fig. 41), Huis ten Bosch and Noordeinde were designed to promote their owners' wealth and authority, in stark contrast to Liu Jianhua's unsettling contemporary installation. Visual aspects of porcelain were emphasised, displayed *en masse* to create a rhythmic seriality of design and complemented with gilt ornaments, paintings, glass and mirrors to enhance the lustre of the glaze and jewel-like brilliance of the cobalt-blue decoration. In each case, spectacular abundance was contained and organised, principally by size and shape, while pieces were usually fixed to the wall or sequestered to the mantelpiece and fireplace. Though the visual impact and experience of the display would likely have been overwhelming, in contrast to Defoe's exaggerated critique, there would have been no sense of imposition on the viewer or intrusion into their space. Although the walls of such rooms, as the designs created by Marot and Engelbrecht show, would occasionally take on sculptural forms, creating a play of convex and concave, recessed and protruding surfaces, the porcelain pieces they were created to contain remained fixed and exposed for scrutiny, entirely passive and essentially benign. In Liu's contemporary installation at Oxburgh Hall, on the other hand, Defoe's fears were realised – porcelain slipped the bounds of its confinement, detaching from the walls and leaving the fireplace to occupy the centre of the room and even the surfaces of furniture

²⁴⁷ Impey, "Porcelain for Palaces," 60–61; Broomhall and Van Gent, "The Gendered Power of Porcelain among Early Modern European Dynasties," 57.

in use (figs. 39, 40). The effect of this, as Defoe predicted, was ‘injurious to ... families and estates,’ seizing control of the house from its owners and interrupting the continuity of their authority through the imposition of an unsettling and alien presence. Even the ornamental role of the porcelain room was disrupted and denied by Liu’s contemporary porcelain pieces: warped, cracked and sagging imitations of everyday household items substituted for the resplendent blue-and-white vases and dishes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their ghostly pallor and malign intrusion into Oxburgh’s interiors were a potent subversion, an overwhelming mass of porcelain that likely left viewers feeling confined, constricted and, above all, profoundly out of place.

“Ai Weiwei at Blenheim Palace” (2014-15)

The retrospective exhibition “Ai Weiwei at Blenheim Palace,” held at the English estate in 2014-15 (figs. 45-50), was a relatively less provocative reimagining of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century massed porcelain displays. Aside from their different locations and distance in time, there is a further distinction between these exhibitions that should be noted: Liu Jianhua was closely involved in the installation of his work at Oxburgh, while Ai was forbidden by the CCP to leave China and so unable to oversee preparations at Blenheim Palace. Furthermore, Ai’s exhibition included pieces in a range of media in addition to porcelain, though seventeen of the fifty works chosen by curator Michael Frahm were ceramics – including six new commissions.²⁴⁸ “Ai Weiwei at Blenheim

²⁴⁸ The ceramic works included in the exhibition were: the extant works *Bowl of pearls* (2006), *Watermelon* (2006), *Ruyi* (2006), *Oil spill* (2006), *Pillar* (2007), *Bubble* (2008), *Cube* (2009), *Waterdrop* (2009), *Rock* (2009), *Western Screech Owl habitat/Owl house* (2010), *Hexie* (2012), and commissioned works *Wave plate* (2014), *Han-dynasty vases in auto paints* (2014), *Small plate with flowers* (2014), *Sunflower seeds stool* (2014), *Han-dynasty vase with Coca-Cola logo* (2014) and *Han-dynasty vase with Caonima logo* (2014). Edward Spencer-Churchill et al., *Ai Weiwei at Blenheim Palace* (Woodstock: Blenheim Palace, 2015).

Palace” was the first in a series of contemporary interventions into the estate organised by the Blenheim Art Foundation (BAF), a fund initiated earlier in 2014 by Lord Edward Spencer-Churchill, whose eminent ancestor John Churchill (1650-1722) oversaw the building of Blenheim in the first decades of the eighteenth century. BAF was created with the intention to bring new life to the estate while also providing a new context for selected artists’ works, outside of the maligned “white box”.²⁴⁹ In addition to the distinction of being the first display of contemporary art within Blenheim’s walls, this exhibition was also the first retrospective of Ai’s work held in the UK, and the largest selection from his *oeuvre* ever shown in one venue in that country. In contrast to the controversy surrounding the installation of Liu’s work at Oxburgh Hall, then, “Ai Weiwei at Blenheim Palace” was initiated, directed and overseen at all stages by both staff and ancestral owners of the estate, with little involvement from the artist, so its aims and effects were predictably more affirmative of Blenheim’s historic associations.

Like Oxburgh, Blenheim Palace – the only non-royal and non-episcopal estate in England with the title of palace, is closely tied to patriotic ideals that the organisers of “Ai Weiwei at Blenheim Palace” enthusiastically embraced. Set aside for royal use during the reign of King Henry I (1068-1135), the estate was later gifted to John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough, in 1705 following his victory at the Battle of Blenheim, a pivotal moment in the rise of what would soon become the United Kingdom, the dominant European power of the time.²⁵⁰ The estate was therefore embedded within a narrative of national power even before it became associated with the most famous member of the Churchill

²⁴⁹ Rory Ross, “1,000 Ceramic Crabs and Porcelain Watermelons - inside the Flamboyant World of Blenheim Palace,” *Telegraph*, October 8, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/1000-ceramic-crabs-and-porcelain-watermelons---inside-the-flamb/>; Edward Spencer-Churchill, “Introduction,” in *Ai Weiwei at Blenheim Palace*, by Edward Spencer-Churchill et al. (Woodstock: Blenheim Palace, 2015), 18.

²⁵⁰ Spencer-Churchill, “Introduction,” 11; James Legard, “Queen Anne, Court Culture and the Construction of Blenheim Palace,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 37, no. 2 (2014): 185–86, 190.

dynasty: Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1874-1965) who, like his illustrious ancestor, was celebrated for his role in curbing the ambitions of a European power and has since been enshrined as an icon of English national identity. In the text published following the exhibition, Ai is directly associated with these two moments in the history of the estate. The iconoclastic architect chosen by John Churchill to design the Palace, John Vanbrugh (1664-1726), is described by arts writer Emma Crichton-Miller as ‘a man after Ai’s heart’ who was devoted to the defence of parliamentary democracy and intended Blenheim to be a monument to ‘Britain as a defender of democratic freedom.’²⁵¹ Echoing these remarks, Spencer-Churchill imagines a ‘conversation between Weiwei and Sir Winston,’ comparing the latter’s fight against Nazism with Ai’s antagonism toward the CCP, with no consideration of the glaring differences between the two – above all, the fact that Ai is Chinese while Churchill wasn’t German, and the latter’s position at the top of the political hierarchy in contrast to Ai’s role as an independent artist/activist.²⁵² In contrast to the openly confrontational approach adopted by Liu Jianhua at Oxburgh Hall, the display of Ai’s works at Blenheim was consciously framed as a means to augment the estate’s associations with English cultural, national and political identity, reinforcing rather than questioning dominant narratives.

While drawing these comparisons, however, the same writers claim throughout the text that many of Ai’s works also critiqued and suggested a reassessment of these ideals. Yet the elements of criticism inherent to these works were rarely directed at the estate’s history or occupants and more often focused instead on the authoritarian policies of the CCP, thereby embellishing the time-honoured vision of Blenheim as a grand monument

²⁵¹ Emma Crichton-Miller, “Ai Weiwei: A Dialogue with Tradition,” in *Ai Weiwei at Blenheim Palace*, by Edward Spencer-Churchill et al. (Woodstock: Blenheim Palace, 2015), 28, 32.

²⁵² Spencer-Churchill, “Introduction,” 19.



Figure 45: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Han-dynasty vase with Coca Cola logo and Han-dynasty vase with Caonima logo, 2014, earthenware, synthetic pigments, 40 x 25 x 34 cm (Coca Cola), 40 x 25 x 35 cm (Caonima); Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire.



Figure 46: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Hexie, 2012, porcelain, variable dimensions; Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire.

to democratic freedoms. *Han-dynasty vase with Coca-Cola logo* (2014) and *Han-dynasty vase with Caonima logo* (2014), for example, both commissioned pieces, were displayed on an ornate, marble-topped console table in the Great Hall, beneath a family portrait of the 1st Duke and Duchess of Marlborough (c.1698; fig. 45). Crichton-Miller argues that this placement cast doubt on the solidity of dynastic identity, drawing a comparison between the Churchill name and Coca-Cola brand, while also suggesting an irreverence toward history in Ai's act of defacing apparently genuine artefacts.²⁵³ Ai's substitution of the Coca-Cola logo with the Chinese word *Caonima* on the second vase, however, directs criticism elsewhere. Once a slur (*caonima* 禽你妈, "fuck your mother"), this word gained an additional layer of meaning in 2009 when a homophone (*caonima* 草泥马, "grass mud horse") was used in an online blog to satirise internet censorship.²⁵⁴ The primary target of Ai's critique, then, is not the Churchill dynasty but the CCP.

The same is true of *Hexie* (2012), a mass of one thousand porcelain river-crabs (*hexie* 河蟹) piled on the floor of the Red Drawing Room and surrounded by Churchill portraits (fig. 46). Like *caonima*, the significance of the term "river-crab" lies in its satirical use as a homophone for *hexie* (和谐), a term meaning "harmonious" or "harmonise" that has been adopted by the CCP to refer euphemistically to censorship.²⁵⁵ Ai's materialisation of this term was prompted by the government demolition of his studio in Shanghai in 2010, and so again the burden of criticism falls on Chinese rather than English systems of power. The controversy that these and other pieces arouse, then, is innocuous and even *de rigueur* among English viewers for whom "China" represents a distant, abstract

²⁵³ Crichton-Miller, "Ai Weiwei: A Dialogue with Tradition," 37.

²⁵⁴ Wang Xuan, Kasper Juffermans, and Du Caixia, "Harmony as Language Policy in China: An Internet Perspective," *Language Policy* 15, no. 3 (August 2016): 311–14.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 303–4, 310.



Figure 47: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Wave plate, 2014, porcelain, celadon glaze, 51 x 14 cm; Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire.



Figure 48: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Small plates with flowers, 2014, porcelain with overglaze enamel decoration, 30 x 3 cm (each); Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire.

threat to democratic ideals of free speech. Their attachment to their own country's myths, on the other hand, remains unchallenged.

The failure of these controversial works to inspire critique of the ideals that Blenheim embodies can be contrasted with those that were assimilated almost imperceptibly into the estate's existing ceramics collection and which, like Ai's blue-and-white replicas of the 1990s, thereby exposed the artificiality of all such displays of wealth and authority. Blenheim is home to a significant collection of 2,534 Chinese, Japanese and European ceramics gifted to the 4th Duke of Marlborough, George Spencer (1739-1817), in the final decades of the eighteenth century by the Reverend Samuel Smith Spalding. It is now prominently displayed throughout the house in cabinets, on console tables, and laid out as if ready for dining.²⁵⁶

Four of Ai's works were positioned either alongside these pieces or in imitation of their display. *Wave plate* (2014; fig. 47), a reinterpretation of his earlier Hokusai-influenced sculpture *The Wave* (2005; fig. 78) in a more conventional form, sits in the centre of a dining table in the Saloon, surrounded by functional tableware. A series of *Small plates with flowers* (2014; fig. 48) were arranged in a cabinet in the China Ante-room, beside another cabinet filled with Meissen dinnerware. Their dense floral decoration recalls the *famille verte* and *famille rose* designs that inspired the extravagant *Indianische blumen* ornamenting most Meissen products in the first half of the eighteenth century, gradually superseded after 1740 by the locally-inspired *Deutsche blumen* seen in the Blenheim collection.²⁵⁷ A pair of *Sunflower seeds stools* (2014; fig. 49), another reinterpretation of an earlier work, were placed on the floor beside a door in the same room, with yet more

²⁵⁶ Crichton-Miller, "Ai Weiwei: A Dialogue with Tradition," 34.

²⁵⁷ Dawn Jacobson, *Chinoiserie* (London: Phaidon, 1993), 102.



Figure 49: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Sunflower seeds stools, 2014, porcelain, celadon glaze, 45 x 45 cm (each); Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire.

Meissen plates above. All three pieces were commissioned for this exhibition, perhaps with their display alongside existing pieces in the collection in mind. Finally, two *Western Screech Owl habitats/Owl Houses* (2010; fig. 50), composite objects that fuse the form of a Ming-dynasty ceramic garden stool with the function of a Ming bird-feeder to serve as a nest for the titular bird, were placed on a small console table in the Great Hall. Each of these subtle interventions in the interiors of Blenheim Palace, perhaps inadvertently, drew attention to the production of both the contemporary works and the historical pieces they resemble, reminding viewers that opulence and prestige are little more than artful constructions, and encouraging them to subject their surroundings to scrutiny, to discern the distinction between fiction and reality.

Both “Liu Jianhua: Regular/Fragile” (2007) at Oxburgh Hall (figs. 35-40) and “Ai Weiwei at Blenheim Palace” (2014-15; figs. 45-50) evoke comparison with the history of massed porcelain display in aristocratic residences across Europe, subjecting this and the ideals of English national identity that porcelain rooms once embellished to varying levels of critique. In contrast to the ideological function of porcelain rooms to advertise power and wealth, as achieved to great effect at the Santos Palace (fig. 41), or to contain and classify the exotic, as at Huis ten Bosch, Noordeinde, Kensington and Charlottenburg (figs. 43, 44), Liu’s installation at Oxburgh championed the broken and banal, defying any consistent classification. Its subversive impact derived primarily from the manner in which *qingbai* replicas were displayed as an invasive, threatening presence, occupying the estate and stridently rejecting the demure restraint of the ornamental.

“Ai Weiwei at Blenheim Palace,” organised by the custodians of the estate rather than an independent curator and so more affirmative of Blenheim’s entrenched associations



Figure 50: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Western Screech Owl habitats/Owl houses, 2010, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, 42 x 30 x 22 cm; Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire.

with national pride, was less immediately confrontational though nevertheless exerted a subversive effect. Much of the criticism inherent in Ai's works was directed at the CCP rather than the politics of English national and cultural identity, though the artificiality and imitation in *Wave plate* (2014; fig. 47), *Small plates with flowers* (2014; fig. 48), *Sunflower seeds stools* (2014; fig. 49) and the *Western Screech Owl habitats/Owl houses* (2010; fig. 50), as in Ai's earlier blue-and-white reproductions, exposed the comparable artifice of opulence and prestige through which the authority of the estate is conveyed. Both exhibitions can be read simultaneously as revivals of a historic form of porcelain display and, at the same time, a subversion of the mythologised narratives of nation and culture once supported by material extravagance.

The exploitation and/or empowerment of artisans hired to produce Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower seeds* (2010) and Barbara Diduk's *The vase project* (2004-06)

It is to the anonymous makers of porcelain that the final sections of this chapter are dedicated, moving from massed display to mass-production, though retaining a focus on the multiple and modular. In addition to their ambiguous appropriations of historical precedent, both Liu Jianhua and Ai Weiwei express a comparably ambivalent attitude toward the material conditions in which their works are created, generally privileging the conceptual content of porcelain over the more prosaic aspects of its making. This separation is even more apparent in another installation by Ai held in England during the years between "Liu Jianhua: Regular/Fragile" and "Ai Weiwei at Blenheim Palace": *Sunflower seeds*, first displayed at the Tate Modern, London, in 2010-11 (fig. 51).²⁵⁸ Both

²⁵⁸ A version of the following discussion of *Sunflower seeds* and *The vase project* was presented at the 2017 Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ) Conference, held at the Australian National University, 5 December 2016.

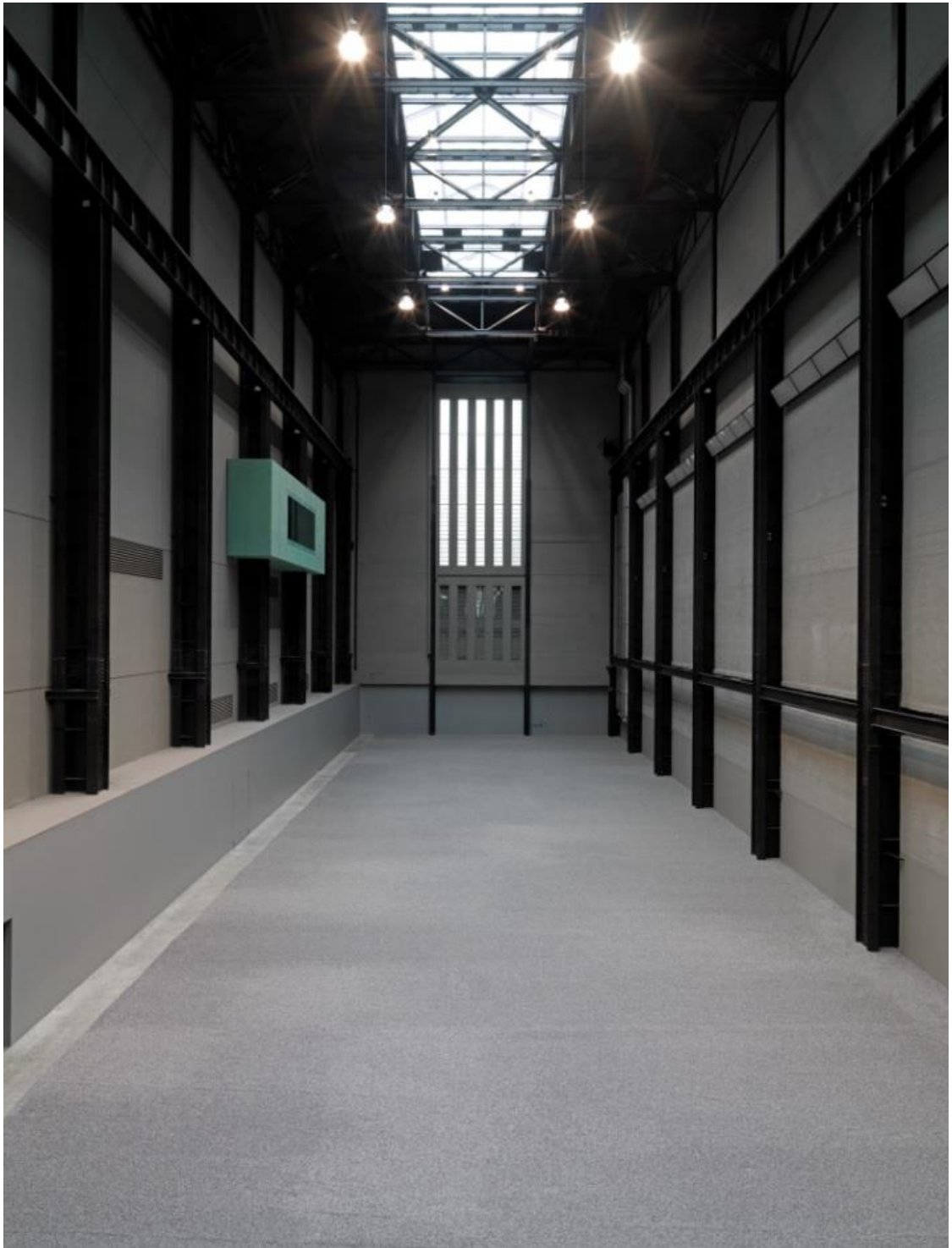


Figure 51: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Sunflower seeds, 2010, 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds; Tate Modern, London.

the conceptual content and affective impact of this installation were intimately tied to the overwhelming quantity of its component parts and their display as an awe-inspiring mass, though in contrast to the workshop-style production and visible signs of making in Liu's *Regular-Fragile* (fig. 11), *Sunflower seeds* adhered to a factory-style model of manufacture in which any trace of those who made the work is effaced.

The erasing of production in *Sunflower seeds* can be read as an attempt to divide the installation between two spheres of meaning: the first limited to practical and economic concerns, and the second to the symbolic content of the work and the artist's intentions. This reflects a broader division in the field of contemporary ceramic art between those artists who hire artisans with little thought for their conditions and those who actively seek to engage with the artisan's social position, analysed here through the dualities of worker/citizen and enterprise/entrepreneurship to suggest a continuum of artist-artisan interaction from exploitation to empowerment. *Sunflower seeds* follows the worker-enterprise model of production, while the citizen-entrepreneurship model can be seen in the making of *The vase project* (2004-06; figs. 52-54), another porcelain installation founded on ideas of modularity and the multiple overseen by North American ceramicist Barbara Diduk. Although far from ideal, this project displays an attempt to foster more equitable relationships with artisans, emphasising independent artistic expression, the sharing of creative duties, and the opportunity to gain some measure of recognition, in contrast to voiceless anonymity.

Separation of manual and conceptual labour in Sunflower seeds

Sunflower seeds was the eleventh work commissioned for the Tate's Turbine Hall as part of their Unilever Series, marking the tenth anniversary of not only this commission but

the Tate itself.²⁵⁹ It consisted of one hundred million porcelain sunflower seeds scattered across a 1000m² area of the Turbine Hall to a depth of 10cm.²⁶⁰ The most frequently-cited intention underlying *Sunflower seeds* was to reflect on the role of the individual within society, and on the extent to which we maintain our individuality in tension with a collective identity that can at times seem all-consuming. Like the various iterations of Liu's *Regular-Fragile* project, the meaning and impact of *Sunflower seeds* was intimately tied to the quantity of its components, and their display as an overwhelming mass. One distinction between these installations, however, is their making: while Liu personally created most of his porcelain replicas with the assistance of a small team of peers and former colleagues, *Sunflower seeds* was created by over 1600 Jingdezhen-based artisans hired by Ai to work under his indirect supervision – a delegation of labour often adopted for large-scale contemporary installations and associated most notably with artists like Damien Hurst and Jeff Koons. Yet this also represents a quintessential instance of the conscious distancing from artisanal production that is so central to the definition of New Export China.

Sunflower seeds offers a consummate example of mass-production, adhering in almost every respect to the definition of what Ledderose has termed “factory art”. In contrast to a workshop, defined as ‘a small establishment run by a master craftsman’ – and therefore closer to the model of production followed by Liu – the defining traits of a factory model are an organised workforce, division of labour, production in multiples, standardisation of products, and emphasis on quality control. The factory supervisor is usually not an artisan and may have no knowledge of production at all, their role being to source materials and equipment, oversee the workers, determine production quotas,

²⁵⁹ Paul Polman, “Sponsor’s Foreword”, in Bingham, *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*.

²⁶⁰ Juliet Bingham, “Introduction”, in *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*, 23-24.

and handle financing. On the other side of the equation, factory employees are given set working hours, clearly-defined duties, and are expected to complete a set amount of work each day.²⁶¹ Almost all these traits were apparent in the production of *Sunflower seeds*. The 1600 artisans constituted a highly organised work-force, within which several different units held responsibility for the twenty to thirty types of work involved, from the refining of raw clay and press-moulding of each seed, to their firing and naturalistic decoration with grey-black stripes to imitate the appearance of a sunflower seed in its shell. For the latter, the most time-consuming task, artisans were expected to work eight-hour days for a wage just above the minimum hourly rate in the city at the time of about ¥6, or 90 cents – the same as that earned for inscription-writing, one of the more highly-skilled aspects of porcelain production. They worked in a pair of re-purposed residential buildings, ‘hunched over plywood tables,’ emptying sacks of unpainted seeds in a haze of ink fumes and porcelain dust.²⁶² The supervisor of this work – not Ai himself, but his Jingdezhen-based collaborator Liu Weiwei – directed the provision of supplies, overseeing and payment of artisans, and quality-control, ensuring that only the highest-quality seeds were retained while those less satisfactory were likely dumped in a landfill like that replicated in *Discard* (fig. 1).²⁶³ In contrast to the workshop methods followed

²⁶¹ Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, 4, 75–76.

²⁶² Simone Hancox, “Art, Activism and the Geopolitical Imagination: Ai Weiwei’s ‘Sunflower Seeds,’” *Journal of Media Practice* 12, no. 3 (December 2011): 282; Davidson, “Affirmative Precarity: Ai Weiwei and Margarita Cabrera,” 136; Brendan McGetrick, “Everything Is Necessary,” in *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*, ed. Juliet Bingham (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 68–70. Calculation of hourly wages based on the exchange rate for British Pound (GBP) to Chinese Yuan (CNY) on 12 October 2010. Anon, “British Pound to Chinese Yuan (GBP CNY) for 12 October 2010 (12/10/2010),” *Exchange Rates*, November 6, 2016, http://www.exchangerates.org.uk/GBP-CNY-12_10_2010-exchange-rate-history.html.

²⁶³ McGetrick, “Everything Is Necessary,” 68–70. Ai first met Liu Weiwei during the 1990s at one of Beijing’s antique markets, where Liu owned a stall selling porcelain. In 2001, Liu moved from sales to production, opening a workshop in Jingdezhen and introducing Ai to the city in the process. He now ‘fires his kilns for only two reasons, for Ai’s work and to produce convincing forgeries ... that are inserted into auction sales.’ Clark, “Mind Mud: Ai Weiwei’s Conceptual Ceramics,” 68–69.

by Liu Jianhua, then, *Sunflower seeds* adhered to a factory style of creation defined by delegation, mass-production and standardisation.

In addition to this difference in the making of the work, another important distinction between *Sunflower seeds* and *Regular-Fragile* is the extent to which the processes of production are visible in the finished installation. In the various versions of Liu's project, marks of making are always apparent in warping, exposed moulding seams and sagging forms, while the subject of the work itself – mass-produced consumables – reinforces visual evidence and prompts viewers to reflect on the factory origins of such everyday items. In *Sunflower seeds*, on the other hand, two and a half years of assembly-line work were only made visible in a 15-minute documentary screened on two video monitors next to the installation. Photographs and stills from the video were also included in the exhibition text, with details of manufacture and some brief testimony from one of the artisans, but this was supplementary to the display and likely read by a small proportion of the total visitors. Ai takes the central role throughout the video, explaining his artistic intentions in detail while only briefly summarising the stages of production. The footage is recorded primarily in English, with Ai as almost sole speaker and those involved in the making of the seeds shown absorbed in their work, silent except when asked a direct question. They are not credited by name and are instead entirely circumscribed by their role as hired labourers, with no opportunity for personal expression. Although central to the making and meaning of the work as an accruing of mass-produced components, artisans involved in this production remain anonymous and as undifferentiated as the seeds that make up the installation.

Writing about the labour involved in *Sunflower seeds*, Beijing-based artist Zheng Bo has criticised Ai's video documentary as an attempt to split the installation between two spheres of meaning. The first of these, evoked in the video by scenes of production, is limited to practical and economic concerns, including consideration of employment contracts and manufacturing, but with a conspicuous absence of potentially sensitive elements like wages and working conditions. The second sphere of meaning is fashioned around the symbolic content of the work and therefore focuses above all on its aesthetic and political dimensions, communicated in the video through scenes of Ai in a gallery talking directly to the camera about his intentions. In this way, Zheng argues, not only are the anonymous artisans who created *Sunflower seeds* deprived of individual identity or recognition for their creative efforts, but they are also removed from the "higher" function of the installation as a work of art rather than just work, relegated to the mines and factories of a distant industrial centre.²⁶⁴ The finished installation on one hand, then, and the labour involved in its making on the other, are presented as two entirely discrete entities, one implicitly deemed more worthy of interest than the other. This division of meaning within the documentary is reinforced by the video's display at the Tate Modern as a supplement to the main installation rather than an important medium through which to consider its broader socio-cultural significance.

The separation of making from meaning is also apparent in most reviews and scholarly analyses of *Sunflower seeds*, the authors of which routinely focus on the aesthetic or political associations of the work, giving its production only a passing mention. In brief, the symbolism of the installation has principally been identified with the relationship between the individual and the collective in contemporary society, highlighting the

²⁶⁴ Zheng Bo, "From *Gongren* to *Gongmin*: A Comparative Analysis of Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* and *Nian*," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 11, no. 2/3 (December 2012): 117–33.

tension between the quantity and uniform appearance of the seeds, and their subtle idiosyncrasies as hand-made objects. The mass-production of the work does play a role in this interpretation, though it is not the details of manufacture that are discussed but rather the act of mobilising such a large number of people toward a single aim, cited as evidence of the creative potential of collaboration and the virtues of contributing to a shared goal.²⁶⁵ Several commentators, and Ai himself, have written of the symbolism of the sunflower seed as a snack in China, a humble source of comfort, camaraderie and community.²⁶⁶ This relational theme was reflected in the original interactivity of the installation, which had been open for visitors to walk across, sit within and play with, encouraged to make patterns in the seeds, to feel the texture of their unglazed surfaces and form an experiential impression of their overwhelming quantity. For some writers, this ability to touch the seeds fostered a crucial empathy between the exhibition's viewers and its producers, an "affective" connection.²⁶⁷ Only two days after the opening of the exhibition, however, barriers were installed and visitors were prevented from walking on the seeds after rising clouds of porcelain dust and pigment residue in the air prompted public health concerns, as a toxic respiratory irritant and a leading cause of chronic silicosis.²⁶⁸ Ironically, artisans in Jingdezhen are constantly exposed to this dust, with little protection against its harmful effects – the act of cordoning off the installation,

²⁶⁵ See, for example: Ai Ai, Bingham, and Daniel, "A Conversation," 76, 80–81; Bingham, *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*, 8, 19; Rachel Campbell-Johnston, "A Seedbed to Celebrate the Downtrodden Individual and Vastness of the Masses," *Times*, October 12, 2010, 16.

²⁶⁶ See, for example: Ai, Bingham, and Daniel, "A Conversation," 79; John Jervis, "Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds," *ArtAsiaPacific*, no. 72 (April 2011): 133; Lu, "Ai Weiwei's Relevance," 42; McGetrick, "Ai Weiwei: Cultural Evidence," 57.

²⁶⁷ Hancox, "Art, Activism and the Geopolitical Imagination: Ai Weiwei's 'Sunflower Seeds,'" 282–83; Davidson, "Affirmative Precarity: Ai Weiwei and Margarita Cabrera," 139.

²⁶⁸ Valentine Low, "Tate Modern 'Seeds' Artwork Closed Off as Health Risk," *Times*, October 16, 2010, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/visualarts/article2768933.ece>; Kyle Chayka, "Ai Weiwei's Sunflower Seeds Prove Hazardous to Visitors and Staff," *Hyperallergic*, October 19, 2010, <http://hyperallergic.com/11132/ai-weiwei-seeds-hazardous/>; Clark, "Mind Mud: Ai Weiwei's Conceptual Ceramics," 47.

then, served only to reinforce the divide between its display and production, confirming the separation of artisan and viewer.

Politically, *Sunflower seeds* has been interpreted on several different levels, some of which are more overtly acknowledged than others but all of which position the display as critical of CCP authoritarianism, drawing an additional divide between the place of the work's making and its display along broadly ideological lines. Above all, the seeds have frequently been read as a reference to Cultural Revolution images of Mao Zedong as a radiant red sun, surrounded by sunflowers representing the Chinese people with their faces turned irresistibly upwards in adoration.²⁶⁹ In the same vein, they have also been described as an allusion to the CCP's deportation in 1957, following the disastrous Hundred Flowers Campaign, of over 500,000 students and intellectuals to prison-camps in Manchuria and Xinjiang – including Ai Qing.²⁷⁰ For these authors, the inversion of the seeds' usual role in the blossoming of new life brought about by their reproduction in porcelain is a poignant allegory for this stifling of popular opinion.²⁷¹

Current European evaluations of the PRC as a totalitarian dictatorship underline both of these interpretations. From this perspective, *Sunflower seeds* was routinely praised as a subversive statement in support of human rights – intentionally or not, the exhibition opened four days after prominent Chinese democracy activist Liu Xiaobo was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize and less than a month before the UK Prime Minister at the time,

²⁶⁹ See, for example: Ai, Bingham, and Daniel, "A Conversation," 84; Voon Pow Bartlett, "The Harmonisation of Ai Weiwei," *Yishu* 10, no. 1 (February 2011): 84; Davidson, "Affirmative Precarity: Ai Weiwei and Margarita Cabrera," 134–35; Daniel Hjorth and Robin Holt, "It's Entrepreneurship, Not Enterprise: Ai Weiwei as Entrepreneur," *Journal of Business Venturing Insights* 5 (June 2016): 52.

²⁷⁰ Frank Dikötter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962-1976* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 6–8.

²⁷¹ See, for example: Ai, Bingham, and Daniel, "A Conversation," 76; David Barrett, "Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds," *Art Monthly*, no. 343 (February 2011): 24.

David Cameron, made his first official visit to China.²⁷² Ai himself published an article in *The Guardian* to coincide with this visit, in which he called on the UK and other European nations to condemn the CCP for human rights abuses.²⁷³ His highly-publicised arrest by the CCP on 3 April 2011, two months before *Sunflower seeds* was scheduled to close, further reinforced political interpretations of the exhibition, which soon became a focus-point for protesters calling for his release.²⁷⁴ Reflecting the separation of production in Jingdezhen from its consumption in London, then, and like the *Han-dynasty vase with Caonima logo* (fig. 45) and *Hexie* (fig. 46) in the Blenheim Palace exhibition, *Sunflower seeds* strengthened the alleged divide between China as a bastion of authoritarianism and repression, and Europe as an outpost of democracy and human rights.

The dualities of worker (gongren) and citizen (gongmin), enterprise and entrepreneur, and the continuum of artist-artisan relationships that these models indicate

All these careful separations in the display and reception of *Sunflower seeds* reflect a broader division in factory art: a divergence in attitudes separating those artists who hire artisans with little thought for their conditions, from those who seek to engage with the artisan's position within society. For the first group, including Ai Weiwei, the artisan is little more than a worker or *gongren*, and the act of hiring their services is a private enterprise motivated above all by economic interests. At a time when the numbers of migrant workers in China, their exploitation by multinational corporations and abuse at the hands of the Chinese government are all spiralling out of control, the term *gongren* has lost the heroic connotations it held during the Maoist era and has become a label

²⁷² Hancox, "Art, Activism and the Geopolitical Imagination," 285.

²⁷³ Ai Weiwei, "David Cameron, as You Visit China Please Listen to Us," *Guardian*, November 8, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/nov/07/david-cameron-china-listen>.

²⁷⁴ Richard Brooks, "Tate to Pile High Seeds of Solidarity for Detained Artist," *Sunday Times*, May 1, 2011, http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/uk_news/Arts/article615984.ece.

for the voiceless and disenfranchised.²⁷⁵ The term *gongmin*, on the other hand, literally meaning “public person” and used to refer to politically-aware and active citizens, has become a badge of honour, conferred on those who assert their rights and stand against the authoritarian excesses of state control.²⁷⁶ For artists in the second group outlined above, it is the potential of the *gongren* to become a *gongmin* that takes precedence, while the act of collaboration between artist and artisan is motivated on their part by an entrepreneurial desire to transform existing social conditions, or to foster new social networks – though this is often an abstract ideal with little real-world impact. Both pairs – *gongren/gongmin* and enterprise/entrepreneurship – have been invoked to describe Ai’s work, though the relationship between them and their implications for the role of modular or mass-production in contemporary Chinese art have yet to be considered.

Enterprise/entrepreneurship and *gongren/gongmin* are parallel and equivalent pairings, indicating opposing extremes of a continuum that extends from passive exploitation to active empowerment. Enterprise and entrepreneurship have been widely discussed in the field of economic theory, but only recently applied to artistic practice by Daniel Hjorth and Robin Holt, in a 2016 article about the making of *Sunflower seeds*. Hjorth and Holt define these concepts by their respective emphases on the social and economic, whereby the latter is emphasised in enterprise and the former takes precedence for an entrepreneur. They associate enterprise with a self-centred orientation toward value and preference for quantifiable results, like the generation of profit. Entrepreneurship, on the other hand, emphasises open-ended social outcomes and the questioning of conventions.²⁷⁷ The second pair of concepts, *gongren* and *gongmin*, have been defined

²⁷⁵ Zheng, “From *Gongren* to *Gongmin*: A Comparative Analysis of Ai Weiwei’s *Sunflower Seeds* and *Nian*,” 119.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, 119–20.

²⁷⁷ Hjorth and Holt, “It’s Entrepreneurship, Not Enterprise,” 50–54.

by Zheng Bo in the article cited above as denoting two models of artistic production. *Gongren*, Zheng explains, are part of an art-world system in which ‘silent labour’ is exploited to create large-scale sculptures or installations (like *Sunflower seeds*), echoing the flows of global capital.²⁷⁸ This model is identical to that which remained in place in Jingdezhen throughout its history as a porcelain production centre, and continues to generate profit for multinational corporations both here and in other industrial centres across the world. On the other hand, Zheng argues, a *gongren* can become a *gongmin* by working on projects that engage with social conditions and that create platforms for participants to express their creativity. Inequalities of power and resources can and usually do remain, but this model does at least aspire to the development of a more equitable relationship.²⁷⁹ Considering these conceptual categories in relation to each other, then, the economics-driven model of enterprise is intrinsically tied to the silent labour of *gongren*, while the entrepreneur as initiator of social transformation is an ideal companion for the activist and politically self-aware *gongmin*.

Ai’s employment of artisans in Jingdezhen conforms unequivocally with the enterprise model of artistic production: the artisans he commissioned to produce the seeds were relegated to the anonymous status of the *gongren* and regarded as little more than an economically viable means to an end.²⁸⁰ Hjorth and Holt, on the other hand, argue that

²⁷⁸ Zheng, “From *Gongren* to *Gongmin*,” 119.

²⁷⁹ Zheng, “From *Gongren* to *Gongmin*,” 119–20.

²⁸⁰ A parallel could be drawn here with Ai’s earlier project *Fairytale* (2007), for which he brought 1001 Chinese citizens to Kassel, Germany, to create a work of “relational” art for *Documenta 12*. Although for many of those participating this journey was their first experience of Europe, even their first trip outside of China, the potential for personal growth or transformation that they gained should be set against the relative lack of follow-up and essentially passive role to which participants were relegated as little more than “extras” within Ai’s overarching artistic conception, subordinate to his leading role as master-artist. Additionally, John Clark observed in his review of *Documenta* for *Asian Art News* that some participants in *Fairytale* had a good knowledge of German while several others had even studied art history, belying their ‘much-touted naïveté’ and Ai’s alleged role as their only point of connection to the world outside China – as usual, the reality of transcultural exchange is much more complex and ambiguous than its idealised portrayal. John Clark, “Uncertain Identity,” *Asian Art News* 17, no. 5 (October 2007): 89. For a more generous interpretation of *Fairytale* that also provides a case-study in the critical tendency to seek

the installation is a quintessential example of entrepreneurship and they praise Ai as a socially-engaged artist determined to encourage both the viewers and producers of his work to contemplate their respective social roles. They assert that *Sunflower seeds* challenged the stereotypical image of China as workshop of the world by enabling 'plural voices to be heard, in multiple ways, without the dominance of a single perspective.'²⁸¹ Many European and North American interpreters echo this endorsement of *Sunflower seeds* as a platform for social change, arguing that it enabled the conservation of 'traditional craft production in ... small-scale, village-led workshops,' that it 'promoted satisfying employment for people in a faded region,' 'provided work for two thousand or so people in this now almost derelict town,' and 'revitalised ... a manufacturing sector [that has] become redundant,' to cite only a few of the more ebullient statements.²⁸²

There are many problems with this analysis of Ai's installation. Above all, the claim that the making of the work served to revive the porcelain industry in Jingdezhen conjures an image of an ailing provincial outpost that immediately dissolves when set against the reality of the city's historic importance, and its recent rebirth as a thriving artistic hub. Furthermore, there is no evidence that *Sunflower seeds* improved the welfare of artisans in the Porcelain Capital or the ceramics industry in general. Citing official production figures, Zheng reveals that Ai's economic contribution comprised less than one percent of the city's total annual revenue from ceramics. Even if the cost to produce each seed is set at ¥16, their current sale price on Chinese Internet shopping giant Alibaba – and we know that Ai paid much less – the ¥160 million generated over two and a half years

ancient Chinese precedents for post-modern artistic strategies discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, see: Zhou Yanhua, "Ai Weiwei's Fairytale: A Unique Social Engagement," *Journal for Cultural Research* 21, no. 1 (2017): 76–91.

²⁸¹ Hjorth and Holt, "It's Entrepreneurship, Not Enterprise," 52–53.

²⁸² Barrett, "Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds," 25; Christie Davies, "The Unilever Series: Ai Weiwei," *New Criterion* 29, no. 5 (January 2011): 53; Bartlett, "The Harmonisation of Ai Weiwei," 90; Sarah Maloney, "Ai Weiwei," *Border Crossings* 30, no. 4 (December 2011): 99.

would only have made up about 0.6% of the total ceramics output of ¥10 billion in 2009 and ¥16 billion in 2010.²⁸³ While this is undeniably an admirable economic contribution from one person, it is not enough to substantiate the claims that Ai single-handedly revived the industry and, moreover, it was a short-term, non-ongoing investment. Even Liu Weiwei was unable to rely on Ai to support his workshop during this time, while not a cent of the US\$1.3 million amassed through licensed sales of the seeds before May 2012 to arts institutions around the world, including the White Rabbit Gallery in Sydney, was passed on to artisans involved in their making.²⁸⁴

It could be argued that this measure of social impact is couched in economic terms, and that the project had a more intangible benefit as a point of access to the global art-world. Yet while this access was indeed greater than any afforded to artisans by their usual work, it too was extremely limited by the separation of the seeds' making from their meaning. Further reinforcing this division, the workforce that Ai employed were not even aware of either the purpose or the destination of their efforts. An unnamed artisan, when asked about the function of the seeds and where they were to be shipped, is recorded in the exhibition text to have replied 'No, we don't know, but we know they'll be used to make money,' speculating that they were perhaps intended to be used as an "adornment".²⁸⁵ Ai himself has justified this enforced ignorance by stating that these workers '[would] never understand what they're for ... they wouldn't understand that it's for an exhibition,' and so there was no reason to tell them.²⁸⁶ To deny this knowledge to his workforce, however, is also to deny their potential as *gongmin*, and thereby to enforce their continued anonymity as voiceless *gongren*.

²⁸³ Zheng, "From *Gongren* to *Gongmin*," 120-121, 121n1.

²⁸⁴ Gillette, *China's Porcelain Capital: The Rise, Fall and Reinvention of Ceramics in Jingdezhen*, 117, 130.

²⁸⁵ McGetrick, "Everything Is Necessary," 70.

²⁸⁶ Ai, Bingham, and Daniel, "A Conversation," 89.

Rather than an example of entrepreneurship, then, *Sunflower seeds* is an ideal case-study for the opposing model of private enterprise. Far from moving away from 'the dominance of a single perspective' toward the inclusion of a greater multiplicity of voices, as Hjorth and Holt assert, the installation is entirely based on Ai's personal vision and serves only to enhance his reputation as a global contemporary artist. It is primarily 'a hubristic exercise, a warlord bragging about the size of his army ... [and a statement] of power on the part of the artist and his host.'²⁸⁷ As Ledderose explains, the methods of mass-production discourage plurality, as the standardisation and division of labour required to establish and perpetuate a modular system inevitably correlate with an emphasis on social, cultural and political homogeneity, curtailing personal freedoms.²⁸⁸ Regarding Hjorth and Holt's other claim, that *Sunflower seeds* challenges China's status as a workshop for the world, it is evident that the installation and its making perpetuate this image by following the pattern established by the export trade, whereby enormous shipments were produced for European clients by artisans with little knowledge of their destination. The manufacture of the seeds also reflects the role of overseas labour in maintaining the flow of consumer goods in contemporary society, further reinforcing the binary of China-as-producer, Europe-as-consumer endorsed by global capital.

The question inevitably arises: what approach could Ai have followed to move closer to the entrepreneurship/*gongmin* model of production? One solution to this problem would have been to dismantle, or at least reduce the separation of the work's making and meaning by granting greater visibility to production processes in the installation on one hand and, on the other, explaining the purpose and destination of the seeds to the artisans. The latter could also have been granted greater access to the products of their

²⁸⁷ Clark, "Mind Mud: Ai Weiwei's Conceptual Ceramics," 68.

²⁸⁸ Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, 5.

labour, not necessarily by funding a trip to London – a form of support that Ai provided for one thousand Chinese visitors to Kassel for *Fairytale* – but potentially by providing a live video feed of the exhibition, or gifting a (Chinese-language) exhibition text to each worker. This publication could have been enriched by the inclusion of interpretation from select named artisans, opening a perspective on their opinions and experience for readers in the UK. Following Liu Jianhua's example, Ai could also have taken a more active role in the production of the seeds by working alongside his employees rather than supervising through a bureaucratic structure of intermediaries. Finally, a more attractive incentive than minimum wage could have been provided for artisans that would enable them to turn their involvement to their advantage, and to enhance their social position; for example, a certificate of participation to show future employers, who would undoubtedly be impressed to learn of their role in creating a globally-acclaimed work of contemporary art. Any of these strategies could have greatly enhanced the potential for social transformation and the opportunities for the *gongren* involved to claim their independence as *gongmin*. In the end, however, another question must also be asked: why would Ai, as an independent artist, desire the development of such a socially equitable model? What would be his motivation? On the other hand, and like other artists associated with the definition of New Export China, a desire to separate his concept-based installation from the conditions of its making, to shed the denigrated status of artisanal or industrial production in favour of a more prestigious identification as artistic practice, constitutes a much clearer and more pressing motivation.

Another large-scale porcelain installation in which many of these strategies for fostering social transformation are apparent, and which therefore more closely adheres to the defining traits of the entrepreneurship/*gongmin* model is *The vase project: Made in China – Landscape in blue*, completed several years before *Sunflower seeds* through a similar combination of mass-production and artistic supervision. *The vase project* was first exhibited in Jingdezhen in 2006, at the Great China Museum (fig. 52), travelled to North America in 2011, and has subsequently been almost constantly on display.²⁸⁹ Like *Sunflower seeds* and *Regular-Fragile*, it brought together a large quantity of individual pieces of porcelain produced by a group of artisans under the supervision of a single artist – US ceramicist and ceramics educator Barbara Diduk. However, while thousands of replica consumables were produced for *Regular-Fragile* and *Sunflower seeds* included one hundred million identical pieces, Diduk's project is made up of a relatively modest one hundred and one vases. Furthermore, in contrast to the *qingbai* glaze saturating Liu's installations and the restrained grey-black stripes on Ai's seeds, each of these vases is adorned with a design comprising similar elements but unique in its composition.

The vase project also differs in its making. While the only acknowledgement of artisans in Ai's project was their appearance in his documentary video, the participants in Diduk's project have played a central role in each of its various incarnations. At the Great China Museum, named photograph portraits of almost every artisan, with an image of the vase they painted, were displayed at the entrance to the exhibition, and in both this and later

²⁸⁹ In the US and Canada, *The vase project* installation was shown first at Lafayette College, Pennsylvania, from 2 April - 21 May 2011; then at Flatten Art Museum, Minnesota, 28 October - 11 December 2011; Washington State Convention Center, during the 46th annual National Council for Education in the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference, 28-31 March 2012; the Gardiner Museum, Toronto, 11 October 2012 - 13 January 2013; North Dakota Museum of Art, 9 November 2014 – 14 January 2015; and most recently at Dickinson College, Pennsylvania, 30 October 2015 - 20 February 2016.



Figure 52: Barbara Diduk and Zhao Yu, The vase project: Made in China - Landscape in blue, 2006, 101 porcelain vases with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration; Great China Museum, Jingdezhen.

displays each vase was labelled with the name of its painter.²⁹⁰ This attribution reflects a profoundly different view of commissioned labour driven by an emphasis on individual artistic expression rather than economy of production and inspired by Diduk's personal experience of creating ceramics in Jingdezhen. Her first ideas for the project emerged in 2002, while she was undertaking one of many residencies in Jingdezhen. Two years later, her colleague and friend Zhao Yu, then a student at the JCI, introduced Diduk to Wang Zhangliu, a master-artisan specialising in porcelain for export who she commissioned to paint two vases with scenes of the city's industrial landscape (fig. 53), focusing above all on the kiln-chimneys that once pierced the horizon but, following the adoption of gas to replace wood- or coal-firing kilns, were becoming increasingly scarce – the vases, then, were intended partially as a commemoration of this aspect of the city's past. Following standard practice for such commissions, Diduk provided several preparatory sketches to Wang (fig. 54), who was free to interpret and augment these as he wished.²⁹¹ In contrast to *Sunflower seeds*, *The vase project* grew from interactions between artist and artisan in which creative duties were shared, rather than resting solely with Diduk.

This initial collaborative act was then reflected in the production of the remaining vases. After selecting one of Wang's designs, Diduk and Zhao sought other painters to produce their own interpretations. In addition to a radio advertisement, they relied above all on word-of-mouth, personally visiting painters in their places of work over two and a half years, from 2004 to 2006 – the same length of time taken to produce *Sunflower seeds* –

²⁹⁰ Ronald Kuchta, "Invention Within Tradition," in *The Vase Project: Made in China - Landscape in Blue*, by Barbara Diduk and Zhao Yu (Easton, PA: Lafayette College Williams Centre Gallery, 2012), 12; Barbara Diduk and Zhao Yu, *The Vase Project: Made in China – Landscape in Blue* (Easton, PA: Lafayette College Williams Centre Gallery, 2012), 57.

²⁹¹ Barbara Diduk, "The Vase Project: Made in China - Landscape in Blue," in *The Vase Project: Made in China – Landscape in Blue*, by Barbara Diduk and Zhao Yu (Easton, PA: Lafayette College Williams Centre Gallery, 2012), 7-9; Barbara Diduk and Zhao Yu, "The Idea," *The Vase Project: Made in China - Landscape in Blue*, accessed November 10, 2016, <http://thevaseproject.com/idea/>.



Figure 53: Wang Zhangliu, Vase 1, from The vase project: Made in China - Landscape in blue, 2004, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration.

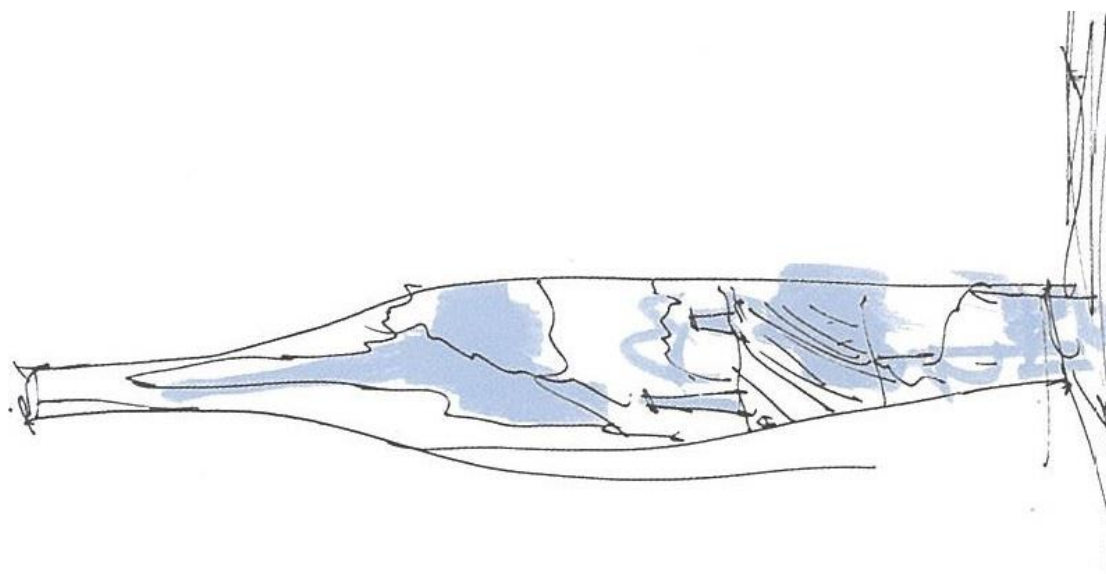


Figure 54: Barbara Diduk, Preliminary sketch, for The vase project: Made in China - Landscape in blue, 2004.

and making sure to invite artisans of all ages, genders, levels of employment and stylistic schools.²⁹² The vases used were modelled on an unattributed wheel-thrown piece that Diduk and Zhao found discarded on a factory floor and then paid to have reproduced in bulk, using the same slip-cast process that Liu used for *Regular-Fragile*. Following the pattern set by Wang's interpretation of Diduk's sketches, each participating painter was given two vases: a blank for their design and the piece decorated by the artisan before them, from which they were asked to draw inspiration.²⁹³ Artisans therefore retained a degree of creative freedom, effectively collaborating with Diduk and Wang in a call-and-response that drew the content of Diduk's sketch in unexpected directions.

This process of decorating the vases reflects some of the characteristics of modularity defined by Ledderose – characteristics which are also evident in designs on export ware. Writing of the blue-and-white porcelain salvaged in 1985 from the wreck of the Dutch *Geldermalsen*, a ship that sank *en route* from Canton for Amsterdam in 1752, Ledderose observes that all 150,000 pieces on-board were painted with variations of the same key elements in different configurations and degrees of complexity. The simplest design, for example, is petal motif in the centre of a batch of teacups, developed into a peony on coffee cups; two peonies and a pomegranate on soup plates; a garden with a willow tree, rocks and a fence on a group of saucers; and so on, until it eventually mutates into an intricate landscape composition on the most ornately embellished pieces. Decoration therefore follows an additive pattern of growth in which motifs are variously combined and adapted, and in which the painter, although required to adhere to a clearly-defined repertoire, nevertheless enjoyed some creative freedom.²⁹⁴

²⁹² Diduk and Zhao, "The Idea"; Diduk and Zhao, *The Vase Project*, 7.

²⁹³ Diduk and Zhao, *The Vase Project*, 7–8.

²⁹⁴ Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, 90–96.

In much the same manner, though artisans selected by Diduk and Zhao were presented with a design on which to base their work, they were free to interpret and rearrange the elements of this design to suit their personal tastes and style – a freedom evident in the broad range of designs that adorn the vases. Yet the conceptual origins and intended context for these vases was very different to those of the wares found in the wreck of the *Geldermalsen*. The producers of the latter, like the artisans commissioned to create *Sunflower seeds*, were anonymous and disinterested assembly-line workers, while Diduk and Zhao emphasised the artistic intent of their project and the equal involvement of all creative actors.

In addition to this relative creative autonomy, another point of distinction between *The vase project* and *Sunflower seeds* is the remuneration that artisans received for their services and the channel through which this was provided. In contrast to Ai, who decided the rate at which artisans would be paid in advance and delegated payment to a subordinate, Diduk and Zhao allowed painters themselves to specify their rates and then personally paid participants. Furthermore, while most painters requested a standard piece-rate of only twenty cents, or about ¥1.60 in 2006, Diduk and Zhao offered US\$5-10, or about ¥40-80, generally paying the highest price.²⁹⁵ Thus, for a single vase, artisans involved could earn not only as much as fifty times their usual piece-rate, but an amount equal to that which those employed by Ai were paid for two eight-hour days of back-breaking labour. It could be argued that the latter still received more remuneration in the long-term than *The vase project* participants, though it should be noted that the sheer number of artisans that Ai employed suggests a high turnover rate, especially as

²⁹⁵ Diduk and Zhao, "The Idea." Based on the monthly exchange rate average for Chinese Yuan (CNY) to US Dollars (USD) for January 2006. Anon, "Monthly Average: Chinese Yuan Renminbi per 1 US Dollar Monthly Average," *X-Rates*, November 11, 2016, <http://www.x-rates.com/average/?from=USD&to=CNY&amount=1&year=2006>.

the majority would likely have been migrant workers staying in Jingdezhen for little more than a few days. The monetary amount is also not the salient point – the important distinction lies in the fact that Diduk and Zhao negotiated on the artisans’ terms and to the artisans’ advantage, as collaborators rather than employers. The work that they offered was more fulfilling and creatively stimulating, in stark contrast to the monotony of painting two to three lines of grey-black ink on thousands of identical seeds.

One of the defining qualities of entrepreneurship as defined by Hjorth and Holt is the ability of the entrepreneur to link social potential with economic realities, rather than focusing only on the production of profit. The entrepreneur can thereby establish new modes of social behaviour, extending, challenging and even overturning the dominance of previous norms.²⁹⁶ With *Sunflower seeds*, Ai Weiwei did little to alter existing labour roles beyond assigning artisans to produce an unconventional commodity. In *The vase project*, on the other hand, several interventions were achieved. Above all, every artisan was acknowledged by name. Furthermore, their works were shown first in Jingdezhen, to an audience of family, friends and colleagues, rather than a gallery on the other side of the world for people with no relation to, or understanding of their point of origin. The exhibition was even televised and received attention from local newspapers and the arts press.²⁹⁷ In contrast to the labourers employed by Ai to create his one hundred million seeds, then, participants in *The vase project* were able to contribute not just to the making but also the interpretation and reception of the work, uniting the productive and discursive spheres of meaning so decisively separated in the display of *Sunflower seeds*.

²⁹⁶ Hjorth and Holt, “It’s Entrepreneurship, Not Enterprise.” 51-53.

²⁹⁷ Diduk and Zhao, *The Vase Project*, 9.

These aspects of *The vase project* show the potential for social transformation within an entrepreneurial model of artistic production. It seems entirely possible that the artisans' experiences could have fostered, following Hjorth and Holt, 'a widened and richer sense of possibility,' inspiring self-confidence and a desire to explore new applications and contexts for their expertise.²⁹⁸ Those who in the past produced only standard designs – much like the natural and landscape motifs that adorn the blue-and-white *Geldermalsen* pieces – gained an opportunity to experiment with another set of images, to express their creativity with less restraint, and to see that a receptive audience for such work does exist, in Jingdezhen and globally. Furthermore, the project also had the potential to foster broader innovation and renewal within the community of porcelain painters, 'a spilling over from the orthodox ways of doing things.'²⁹⁹ As Ingrid Furniss observes in the exhibition publication, the adaptations of Diduk's sketch on many of the vases show derivation from classical Chinese landscape techniques and conventions. At the same time, the painters did not directly imitate past styles, but creatively combined different approaches with their own, breathing new vitality into convention and expanding their artistic horizons, as well as the boundaries of their craft.³⁰⁰ The possible creative and career advantages that the artisans involved may have gained from their participation are unknown, though it seems likely that their interpretations of Diduk's motifs may have been incorporated into the ever-evolving modular system of decoration, inspiring further experimentation into the future.

²⁹⁸ Hjorth and Holt, "It's Entrepreneurship, Not Enterprise," 53.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ingrid M. Furniss, "101 Vases: Remembering an Old China, Collecting a New One," in *The Vase Project: Made in China - Landscape in Blue*, by Barbara Diduk and Zhao Yu (Easton, PA: Lafayette College Williams Centre Gallery, 2012), 39-40.

The entrepreneurship of *The vase project* is also apparent in Diduk's resistance to the East-as-producer, West-as-consumer stereotype, proposing a more collaborative, even lateral engagement. While Ai conformed in *Sunflower seeds* with the unidirectional bias of global capital, Diduk embraced the responsibility of the entrepreneur to

make others passionate ... working on their energy and willingness to participate and creating awareness of transformative potential [with] ... no scripted endpoint, no known output ... opening up possibility without known ends.³⁰¹

Although the final number of vases produced was limited to one hundred and one, the project could have been continued indefinitely, developing in unpredictable directions to create what Diduk describes as a "chain letter" of making.³⁰² The extent to which this relational model of production contradicts stereotypes of the Chinese artisan as lacking creative agency is made visible by the range of interpretation to which Diduk's modular motifs were subjected. For instance, while the central kiln-chimney is present on each vase, it appears in several guises, sometimes abstracted, viewed from a different angle, completely transformed or even, as in two particularly idiosyncratic examples, reduced to a background design in a bird-and-flower painting.³⁰³ Both these and the less dramatic modifications of the design on other vases reveal the deliberate absence of control over artisans' decisions, and the open-ended potential with which *The vase project* was subsequently invested. In contrast to the validation of the stereotype of China as the workshop of the world in the making of *Sunflower seeds*, then, *The vase project* set out to showcase the creative rather than merely productive abilities of porcelain-painters.

³⁰¹ Hjorth and Holt, "It's Entrepreneurship, Not Enterprise," 51-53.

³⁰² Diduk, "The Vase Project," 8.

³⁰³ Furniss, "101 Vases: Remembering an Old China, Collecting a New One." 39-40.

Finally, just as *The vase project* exemplifies the entrepreneurial model of production, it also fostered the social capacity of *gongmin* over the bonds of anonymous servitude. Unlike Ai Weiwei, Diduk diligently strove to engage with participating artisans, to cite Zheng, ‘not as workers silently producing objects for export, but as citizens with rights to speak.’³⁰⁴ She saw them not only as a source of cost- and time-efficient labour, but as individuals with their own experiences, perspectives and desires. A certain sense of hierarchy did remain in the structure of the project – ownership of the completed vases and the circumstances of their exhibition were fully under Diduk’s control, and the fact that her sketch was used to initiate the “chain letter” means that it was never an entirely organic creative endeavour.³⁰⁵ Nevertheless, the direct and open interaction between the parties involved sets a valuable example for future collaborations between artists and artisans in Jingdezhen, demonstrating the potential for innovation and inspiring new confidence, both personal and artistic, among assembly-line ceramicists.

In this respect, *The vase project* was also valuable for its modelling of what feminist theorist Nancy Fraser has termed a “counterpublic”: an association of representatives from disempowered social groups who collectively ‘invent and circulate ... oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.’³⁰⁶ In *The vase project*, such a counterpublic can be seen in the network of inspiration and collaboration that Diduk established between the participating vase-painters, brought together not by class, age, gender or employment level – all of these social divisions were deliberately transgressed in the selection of participants – but by a shared commitment to artistic expression.

³⁰⁴ Zheng, “From *Gongren* to *Gongmin*,” 130-131.

³⁰⁵ I would like to thank Claire Roberts for making these observations after my presentation of this research at the 2016 AAANZ Conference.

³⁰⁶ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80.

Beyond their usual assigned role as anonymous *gongren*, artisans gained an opportunity to explore their role as public citizens, forming a community of like-minded peers within the broader social sphere of the ceramics industry in Jingdezhen. Once again, however, it should be stressed that there were no follow-up activities or events organised in Jingdezhen after the creation of the vases and their initial exhibition, while their ongoing display in North America is profitable only for Diduk, not for her workforce. *The vase project*, then, cannot be considered an ideal example of the *gongmin*/entrepreneurship model of artistic production, but rather only as an initial step on the path to attaining a more equitable relationship between artists and artisans. And, above all, it should be noted that the conceptual continues to take precedence over the technical or aesthetic, privileging the status of “artist” over that of “artisan”.

Sunflower seeds and *The vase project* demonstrate two models of interaction between artists and artisans that can be situated at opposing ends of a continuum from results-oriented exploitation to open-ended collectivism. A professional relationship that falls somewhere between these extremes is a defining characteristic of New Export China, so discussion of these and other more nuanced models of interaction recurs throughout this dissertation. Even in this chapter, a third model of interaction can be found in the making of *Regular-Fragile*, which drew from Liu’s personal experience as an assembly-line ceramicist and the skills and connections that he gained during that time. To an even greater extent than *The vase project*, this is a model defined by collaboration and casual friendship and yet, in contrast to the participants in Diduk’s experiment, Liu’s assistants are not credited – this is neither a collectivist utopia, then, nor a profit-driven contract of convenience. Nevertheless, despite their various approaches to the hiring of labour,

one quality that remains consistent across these artists' projects is the desire to distance the finished work from the circumstances of its making. Although fascinated by mass-production, modularity and the multiple, and although the installations and exhibitions discussed here all rely on the visual impact of overwhelming quantity, Ai Weiwei, Liu Jianhua and Barbara Diduk attempt to separate the presentation and reception of their works from the manufacture of their component parts.

Chapter 3: A porcelain renaissance

Contemporary artists like Ai, Liu and Diduk, enticed by the ready access to materials, equipment and labour that Jingdezhen provides, are an increasingly familiar presence in the city, leading many ceramicists and students of ceramics history to place this locality at the heart of a new “porcelain renaissance”.³⁰⁷ The “Jingdezhen phenomenon”, as one Chinese art historian has termed it, is primarily defined by interaction fostered between visiting artists and local artisans in projects like *Sunflower seeds*, *The vase project* and *Regular-Fragile*, although, as discussed above, this interaction can take many forms, not all of which are beneficial to artisans in the area.³⁰⁸ Artists’ motivations for travelling to Jingdezhen are comparably diverse. The appeal of the city for European, Australian and North American visitors is partially derived from the *frisson* of an “exotic” culture and the opportunity to diversify their practice. The time-honoured association of china, the material with China, the county, long considered the heartland of the medium, has also contributed to the current appeal of Jingdezhen for such artist-tourists.

For Chinese-born artists, however, especially those who currently live outside of China, Jingdezhen and porcelain in general offer access to a different form of “renaissance”: a place and a material in which they can rediscover and recreate what they view as a lost cultural inheritance. Sin-ying Ho and Ah Xian, for example, now living respectively in New York and Sydney, have spoken and written about Jingdezhen and porcelain alike as

³⁰⁷ The term “porcelain renaissance” is cited here from an article by North American ceramicist Colin Martin, a prolific writer on ceramics who it is worth quoting at length for his evocative and hyperbolic analogy: ‘In the early 20th century, Paris was a magnet for expatriate writers and artists ... a crucible within which modern art and literature [were] forged. It’s not too fanciful to regard Jingdezhen as a 21st century equivalent, where West meets East in a porcelain renaissance fired in the city’s kilns.’ Colin Martin, “International Ceramic Artists Working in China,” *Craft Arts International*, no. 86 (January 2012): 99.

³⁰⁸ The term “Jingdezhen phenomenon” (*Jingdezhen xianxiang* 景德镇现象) is cited here from Chen Jie, «景德镇陶瓷的民间审美样式与当代艳俗艺术» [Folk Aesthetics in Jingdezhen Ceramics and Contemporary Gaudy Art], *大众文艺: 学术版*, no. 2 (February 2012): 40.

conduits for their re-engagement with an aspect of their identity from which they feel alienated. Other artists, like Caroline Cheng and Li Jianshen, based in China but resident for extended durations overseas, have applied an entrepreneurial spirit to such visions of Jingdezhen. Alongside their artistic practice, Cheng and Li have each established art residency programs for a primarily non-Chinese clientele that have opened the city to greater numbers of overseas visitors and reinforced the impression of an artistic rebirth.

All four artists have found, however, that the “China” they once sought has no concrete existence – like the fantasies of classical Greece and Rome envisioned by the European painters, sculptors and architects to whom the term “renaissance” was first applied, this China is an imagined ideal, a composite image assembled from fragmented memories of home and heritage. As such, it only gained meaning for these artists when they found themselves separated from their memories by time and distance. The return that they envisioned as a triumphant homecoming, a making-whole of split identities, forced them to abandon their search for roots and embrace the idiosyncrasies of a transexperiential existence. At the same time, however, these artists have all used their in-between status to their advantage, reconstructing their own visions of cultural identity as a patchwork of ornamental and linguistic codes (Ho), a profoundly personal web of relationships (Ah Xian), a utopian ideal (Li) and a quality inherent in certain materials and communities that can be taken up or discarded at will (Cheng). For each of these artists, porcelain is the vehicle of their realisation and their reconstructions of Chineseness, and Jingdezhen is the crucible (or rather, the kiln) in which their personal visions of China take form.

The fracturing of cultural codes in Sin-ying Ho's *Identity* (2001) and *Gibberish no. 3* (2005)

For Sin-ying Ho, whose first visit to Jingdezhen coincided with her return to China after moving from Hong Kong to Canada, both the city and the porcelain produced in its kilns seemed to offer a point of access to a lost Chineseness. However, although Ho initially viewed this journey as a return to her ancestral homeland, she came to realise that her cultural identity had been complicated by her birth in Hong Kong and subsequent global travel, and that even culture itself is a complex, artificial construct. Her multiple cultural identifications were nevertheless an advantage in Ho's pursuit of artistic knowledge – it was her fluency in English, Cantonese and Mandarin that earned her the opportunity to visit Jingdezhen where, conversely, her overseas credentials and affiliation with a Canadian ceramicist gave her authority.

Ho's fractured sense of culture is the primary subject in her earliest exhibited work in porcelain, *Identity* (2001; fig. 55), an apparently unremarkable blue-and-white jar that is revealed on closer inspection to be a complex palimpsest of sources and influences, combining text, artistic motifs, and reproduced identification documents. The self that she constructs in this work is not entirely personal but also a social and cultural subject, representing a desire for broader transcultural symbiosis in Ho's *oeuvre*. She first worked with porcelain in Hong Kong but only fully embraced the medium in Canada, where she discovered an abiding interest in the history of global porcelain export and transcultural exchange, developing a characteristic combination of underglaze cobalt blue painting and digital decal transfer to suggest the merging of cultural spheres that she envisions as the end-point of globalisation. The same synthesis of cultural elements is apparent on *Gibberish no. 3* (2005; fig. 60), in which text and ornament are again combined, but with emphasis on the breakdown of meaning and the misunderstandings

that can arise when translation fails. The presence of the universal digital language of binary code, however, suggests a new unity in which the exclusivity of language and culture dissolve within an amorphous, yet still heterogeneous global culture.

Sin-ying Ho's experiences of migration and her subsequent search for a lost Chineseness during her first trip to Jingdezhen

Even before Sin-ying Ho first visited Jingdezhen in 1996, the city represented a key to the re-discovery of her cultural identity. This journey four years after her departure from Hong Kong for Toronto in 1992 was also her first return to a Chinese context, and her first experience of mainland China. Although Ho's father was born in Guangzhou, he fled to Hong Kong following the 1949 inauguration of the PRC. As the son of a land-owner, he realised the enforced poverty and persecution he would likely face if he remained on the mainland, and so chose to swim across the South China Sea to the New Territories, under English colonial rule.³⁰⁹ His search for asylum is a crucial episode within Ho's self-mythology, positioned as a motivation and counterpoint to her "return" to southern China, 'the land of her parents and grandparents,' searching for her roots and 'keys to understand herself as a whole and unique human being.'³¹⁰ Ho had not previously visited Jingdezhen, yet she envisioned it as part of her birthright, a gateway to a heritage from which she had long felt separated.

On arriving in the Porcelain Capital, however, Ho came to realise the extent to which her sense of Chineseness had been complicated by migration and the intricacies of culture

³⁰⁹ Ho, 2017 School of Art & Design Artist Residency, Australian National University, Interview with Alex Burchmore, Part 1.

³¹⁰ Michele Vicat, "Sin-Ying Ho - Binary Codes: From Cobalt to Coca-Cola," 3 Dots Water: A Virtual Publication on Contemporary Chinese and Global Art, 2012, <http://www.3dotswater.com/sin-yingho.html>.

within a global context. She travelled to Jingdezhen in the company of her mentor at the time, famed Canadian ceramicist Walter Ostrom (b. 1944). Ho first met Ostrom in 1995 at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD), where he held directorship of the ceramics department from 1969 to 2008, exerting a profound influence on generations of students.³¹¹ Ostrom had long been fascinated by Chinese ceramics and travelled to China and Jingdezhen regularly after his first visit in 1976.³¹² This fascination prompted the JCI to present him with a year-long honorary professorship to oversee an exchange program for NSCAD students.³¹³ Although Ho was ineligible to enrol because she had not yet completed required EFL courses, she convinced Ostrom to employ her as a translator – using to her advantage the fluency in English, Cantonese and Mandarin that a Hong Kong education had provided.³¹⁴ Rather than a prodigal daughter welcomed back with open arms, Ho therefore returned to China as a “foreign” intermediary between her Canadian mentor and their Chinese hosts, defined more by the diversity of her cultural background than any sense of shared Chineseness.

Ho was forced to negotiate these complexities throughout her short stay in Jingdezhen, often finding herself caught at an indeterminate point in-between the many facets of her cultural identity. She found that her memories of Hong Kong, while in many respects comparable with the experiences of the people she met, were far from identical – the

³¹¹ North American ceramicist Naomi Clement holds Walter Ostrom to be one of ‘the most widely acknowledged names within the internationally recognised ceramics department at NSCAD,’ whose aesthetic inclinations and interests have shaped the current educational focus of this institution. Naomi Clement, “Function, Form and Process: Walter Ostrom and the Female Potters of NSCAD,” in *Utopic Impulses: Contemporary Ceramics Practice*, by Ruth Chambers, Amy Gogarty, and Mireille Perron (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2007), 5–19.

³¹² Gotlieb, *Go East: Canadians Create in China*, n.p.

³¹³ The Jingdezhen Ceramics Institute (*Jingdezhen Taoci Xueyuan* 景德镇陶瓷学院) was founded by the city government of Jingdezhen in June 1958, following a central government directive to accelerate the Great Leap Forward. It was temporarily closed from December 1968 until April 1973, during the height of the Cultural Revolution, but has since maintained continuous operation and has become an influential presence in the cultural and economic climate of the city. Gillette, *China’s Porcelain Capital: The Rise, Fall and Reinvention of Ceramics in Jingdezhen*, 57, 67–68, 75.

³¹⁴ Ho, 2017 Interview Part 1.

China that she remembered was not the China in which they and their families lived. At the same time, she valued the privileges that her uniquely in-between status afforded her, later noting that she was treated with great respect when in Ostrom's company:

I knew that I could go to Jingdezhen myself at any time, but ... in the mid-90s, if I went to Jingdezhen by myself to study, I wouldn't learn anything, everyone would just treat me as one of the local little girls ... And I was proven right – I was treated very well when I was with him, but then when I was by myself ... nobody would pay any attention.³¹⁵

Paradoxically, then, though her Chinese background gained Ho the opportunity to travel to Jingdezhen, once she arrived these aspects of her identity were less useful, and even obstructive – it was her experience overseas that held value. Neither completely Chinese nor entirely North American, Ho found herself caught between both cultural spheres, using each to her advantage.

Writing the self into the symbolic and the merging of text and motif in Identity (2001)

Ho's feeling of shuttling between different cultures found expression in her earliest work in porcelain, in which the constant movement and accumulation of cultural detritus that Chen Zhen has termed transexperience is apparent in subject matter, material and form. *Identity* (2001; fig. 55) is the clearest manifestation of these ideas, as well as the first in which she created an artistic statement in porcelain, using the combination of cobalt blue underglaze decoration and digital decals that later became her signature style. The

³¹⁵ Ho, 2017 Interview, Part 1.



Figure 55: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1963), *Identity*, 2001, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals, 28 x 30.5 cm.



Figure 56: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1963), *Identity (detail)*, 2001, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals, 28 x 30.5 cm.

basic form and initial impression of the work are distinctly Chinese: it appears to be a relatively unremarkable blue-and-white *guan*, a jar with spherical body, broad shoulders narrow collared mouth produced in China for centuries (fig. 55) – much like the Yuan jar replicated in *Ghost Gu coming down the mountain* (fig. 18). It is densely decorated with a mixture of floral motifs, foliate medallions, a wave-pattern band, and the ubiquitous *fu lu shou* (福祿壽) wish for prosperity, status and longevity around the collar. Ho has written that this apparent conventionality was intended, that she wanted ‘nobody [to] notice it, [to] say ... it’s just another export ware.’³¹⁶

I densely paint motifs from both East and West on classical porcelain vessels [that] are familiar, traditional transformed into an unfamiliar and unidentified sculptural form to illustrate the intercourse of East and West, new and old.³¹⁷

A correlation could be drawn here with the dismissive attitudes she encountered in Canada, where many people blithely categorised her as simply “Chinese” based entirely on appearance, without considering more complex facets of identity below the surface.

Identity, too, is far more complex than it appears at first. Most notably, the contrasting red images around the belly of the jar stand apart from the conventional surrounding motifs as official identity documents, rendered indistinct and partially obscured by their reproduction within five of the six foliate medallions (fig. 56). Each of the documents reproduced is one of the various forms of identification that Ho gathered on her travels: a Hong Kong ID card, British National (Overseas) passport, Chinese travel visa, Canadian passport, and US Green Card. The sixth medallion stands empty, to indicate the potential

³¹⁶ Ho, cited in J. Penney Burton, “Tradition in Flux,” *Cahiers Metiers d’art* 1, no. 1 (Summer 2007): 33.

³¹⁷ Sin-ying Ho, cited in Glenbow Museum, “ArtPad: A Collection. A Connection,” Glenbow Museum, accessed May 5, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170222151020/http://www.glenbow.org:80/artpad/en/look/gallery/details.html?controller=ArtGalleryController&action=loadArtwork&artworkid=12>.

for further identification acquired on future journeys. Closer inspection also reveals the bands separating the horizontal panels of decoration to be a repetition of the word “CASSANDRA”, written in a pseudo-classical Greek script. This is Ho’s chosen English name, adopted during high-school and retained for convenience: Hong Kong residents with English names gained better treatment from officials and employers under colonial rule.³¹⁸ Although more difficult to discern, the motifs that cover *Identity* also incorporate text, spelling out “Sin-ying Ho” in both Chinese characters and English letters. Finally, these motifs are themselves complicated in origin: the peacock-feather pattern on the shoulder is derived from Italian *majolica*, the foliate medallions around the belly from ancient Greek terracotta, and the floral medallions around the foot from Qing-dynasty porcelain. Ho did not adapt these from past examples, however, but from illustrations in *The Grammar of Ornament*, the anthology of designs compiled in 1856 by prominent English architect and designer Owen Jones (1809-1874; figs. 57, 58, and 59).³¹⁹ Each motif is several times removed from its origin, blurring authenticity with fabrication and resisting unequivocal identification with a “pure” cultural essence. What appears to be historical is revealed to be contemporary, what appears to be image is text, and what appear to be signs of Chineseness are Renaissance Italian, ancient Greek, and Qing Chinese ornament seen through the eyes of a nineteenth-century English architect, then adapted by a North American-Chinese migrant.

An apparently unremarkable Chinese jar is therefore deeply personal, while its aesthetic unity is a carefully-constructed artifice. By creating this contrast between an apparent superficiality and a deeper complexity, as indicated by the work’s title, Ho points to the

³¹⁸ Ho, 2017 Interview, Part 1.

³¹⁹ *ibid*; Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1982). This edition of *The Grammar of Ornament* is likely the same version that Ho consulted.

RENAISSANCE

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TAPEL LXXXI

PL LXXXI



Figure 57: Owen Jones (1809-74), Plate LXXXI: "Renaissance No. 7", from *The Grammar of Ornament*, 1856.



Figure 58: Owen Jones (1809-74), Plate XVIII: "Greek No. 4", from *The Grammar of Ornament*, 1856.



Figure 59: Owen Jones (1809-74), Plate LXII: "Chinese No. 4", from *The Grammar of Ornament*, 1856.

intricacies of her personal identity – though many people would at first glance label her “Chinese”, her experiences of migration have fostered a more complex sense of culture. At the same time, by literally writing herself into the motifs, Ho unites these disparate elements of her personality within the visual logic of the composition. Though dense and chaotic, they co-exist in relative harmony, each contributing to a unified whole that embodies Chen Zhen’s view of travel (physical and imagined) as ‘a special process of experience-accumulating.’³²⁰ In *Identity*, travel is intimately tied to the development of the self as it moves through different situations, gathering new forms of identification, new names, and new means of expression in a ceaseless process of creative adaptation. Yet this is not an entirely personal process: the self that Ho constructs is a social and cultural subject, represented by official documents and names, as well as by the motifs in which these are embedded and a relationship with stereotyped regional ornament. *Identity* alludes, then, not only to a personal resolution of conflicting cultural allegiances but also to a desire for broader transcultural symbiosis. The narrative of travel explored in the work is not limited to Ho’s own journey but holds meaning for all global drifters. Ho has written and spoken of the difficulties she encountered as a migrant in Canada and the US, compelled to navigate new environments, and to negotiate cultural and linguistic differences.³²¹ Even before immigrating, ‘growing up in a colony like Hong Kong [generated] a sense of displacement ... a constant negotiation of my identity,’ causing her to feel that she ‘was never a member of any kind of cultural group.’³²²

³²⁰ Chen Zhen, *Transexperiences* (Kitakyushu: Centre for Contemporary Art Kitakyushu, 1998), 1–3.

³²¹ Ho, cited in James Tarrant, “The Medium Is the Message,” *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, no. 64 (2006): 27. 27–28.

³²² Tarrant, 27; Sin-Ying Ho, “Artist Statement,” *Artasiamerica*, 2010, <http://artasiamerica.org/documents/7687/514>.

My experiences with cross-culturalisation [sic] began in ... Hong Kong, where I witnessed the dominance of a colonial society by a foreign culture. To fit into society, I changed my Chinese name to an English one, use[d] an English identity card, stud[ied] the English language, sample[d] Western foods and [went] to a Christian church.³²³

Ho asserts that such dislocation is now ‘a universal phenomenon’ that heralds a global society in which ‘many nationalities and cultures will merge ... into an unknown global culture.’³²⁴ In *Identity* and later works, Ho casts this drive toward synthesis not as one of loss or homogenisation, but a multiplying of opportunities for mutual understanding, merging previously isolated elements into a new, more complex whole.

Sin-ying Ho’s combination of underglaze cobalt blue gongbi painting with overglaze iron red decals as a reflection of cultural juxtaposition and synthesis

The oscillation between cultural spheres in *Identity* is central to Ho’s choice of porcelain as her primary medium. She first experimented with ceramics during the mid-late 1980s, taking classes at the first Pottery Workshop (*Letian taoshe* 乐天陶社; literally, “Carefree Pottery Society”), then a small studio in Hong Kong, to relax with fellow enthusiasts. She attended these classes intermittently for four years, during which she viewed ceramics as no more than a pleasant diversion. Following her relocation to Toronto, however, Ho decided to take her interest further by enrolling in a diploma-level ceramics program.³²⁵ Although she first worked with porcelain in Hong Kong, then, her later embrace of the medium and her decision to become an artist were prompted by moving overseas. Ho

³²³ Sin-ying Ho, cited in Judith S. Schwartz, *Confrontational Ceramics: The Artist as Social Critic* (London: A&C Black, 2008), 58.

³²⁴ Ho, “Artist Statement.”

³²⁵ Ho, 2017 Interview, Part 1.

has since explained that the strong connection of porcelain with Chinese culture and its use throughout history as ‘a tool for communicating’ across cultural boundaries also motivated her decision, again highlighting the impact of her feeling of Chineseness in Canada.³²⁶ Like Jingdezhen, porcelain assumed significance for Ho as a connection with her heritage, as well as a material with a history of transcultural exchange that paralleled her own movement between cultures.

Considering Ho’s view of porcelain, it is unsurprising that blue-and-white became her preferred style, that most quintessentially “Chinese” commodity that is at the same time so emblematic of global trade. Ho studied the history of blue-and-white and its markets before travelling to Jingdezhen, where she hoped to learn to create conventional wares and to use the *gongbi* (工笔) or “fine-line” painting technique adapted for porcelain in the Ming dynasty, thereafter enshrined as an industry standard.³²⁷ Through Ostrom, she enrolled in classes at JCI, learning *gongbi* and overglaze enamel techniques alongside local students. In contrast to the latter, however, Ho did not have to attend afternoon lessons on Mao Zedong Thought and Chinese history, and was not required to maintain a strictly regimented routine – another indication of her privileged in-between status.³²⁸ She and other international students were housed in the JCI’s “Foreigner Compound”, furnished with private lodgings and studios in which they could pursue independent projects, while local students reproduced set forms and designs and were expected to master classical models before indulging personal ideas.³²⁹ The training in *gongbi* and other conventional techniques that Ho received during the year she spent in Jingdezhen

³²⁶ Ho, cited in Vicat, “Sin-Ying Ho - Binary Codes: From Cobalt to Coca-Cola.”

³²⁷ Chiho Tokita, “Sin-Ying Ho: Garden of Eden,” *Fusion* 34, no. 3 (September 2010): 18.

³²⁸ Ho, 2017 Interview, Part 1; Sin-Ying Ho and Philip Read, “Studying Ceramics in Jingdezhen,” *Contact*, no. 112 (Spring 1998): 18.

³²⁹ Ho and Read, “Studying Ceramics in Jingdezhen,” 18–19.

is apparent in *Identity*, on which it is strategically deployed as a marker of Chineseness, juxtaposed with impositions of the foreign and unfamiliar. Through this juxtaposition, Ho re-enacted the global trajectories of blue-and-white export ceramics, on which conventional techniques and motifs likewise co-exist with other cultural forms.

Ho's principal means for inducing juxtaposition is the technique of digital decal transfer, as used for example to replicate identification documents on *Identity*. The difference in colour and style sets up a contrast between hand-painted and mechanically applied elements, yet also recalls historic instances of a comparable aesthetic contrast between blue and red.³³⁰ When fired, the iron particles in the printer ink oxidise and take on a red hue like that achieved with copper- and iron-based pigments. Ho studied this technique at Louisiana State University (LSU), where she received an MFA in 2001, and it became a signature characteristic of her work that she associated with conflict between 'old and new ... technology and hand tools.'³³¹ The visual parallel with underglaze red wares, however, complicates this in the same way that appropriation of motifs from Jones' *The Grammar of Ornament* confuses singular cultural signification. Rather than a conflict between old and new, as in *Discard* (fig. 1) and Ai Weiwei's *Blue-and-white* series of reproductions (fig. 24), Ho's iron-red digital decals suggest a symbiotic combination of historic and contemporary, a continuity with the past that simultaneously acknowledges the need for change and adaptation.

³³⁰ Digital decal transfer is a technique for applying designs to glazed and fired porcelain, analogous to over-glaze enamel decoration though, rather than painting in mineral-based pigments, motifs are designed on a computer (or appropriated from pre-existing sources) and printed using a laser printer in black on sheets of acetate. These are then soaked in warm water to detach the image, which can be transferred to a fired ceramic surface using a rubber printer's brayer, or roller. Finally, the ceramic is coated with a transparent glaze and refired in a low-temperature kiln to fuse the design to the surface. Glenbow Museum, "ArtPad: A Collection. A Connection."

³³¹ Burton, "Tradition in Flux," 27; Ho, "Artist Statement."

This combination of past and present is particularly apparent in Ho's elaboration of the hybrid language/ornamentation first seen on *Identity* into another signature aspect of her work. In *Gibberish no. 3* (2005; fig. 60), the third in a series of four vases, Chinese characters and English letters are again deployed in decorative bands around the body of an otherwise unremarkable vessel – in this case, a *meiping* (梅瓶) or “plum vase”. While the text on *Identity* is disguised by its “ornamentation”, the letters, characters and symbols on *Gibberish* are prominently displayed. In the central and largest band, covering almost the entire body of the vase, partial sections of a classical poem, “Prelude to Water Melody” (*Shui diao ge tou* 水调歌头) by the Song scholar Su Dongpo (1037-1101), are written vertically, right-to-left in Chinese characters, with English translation given horizontally left-to-right.³³² Both are obstructed by horizontal lines of the titular gibberish – symbols and letters in no clear order, interspersed with seemingly arbitrary combinations of words. These enigmatic phrases and the gibberish from which they emerge were derived from the corruption of emails sent by the artist's sister, typed in Chinese characters that Ho's computer could not display without a language pack and so rendered as an algorithmic approximation.

Ho was inspired to combine gibberish with meaningful characters by an improvisation exercise that she performed with the Chung-Ying Theatre Company in Hong Kong during the 1980s, in which one participant would speak in a language of their own making and

³³² Lines 1-7 of the first verse are written in Chinese characters: ‘明月几时有? / 把酒问青天。 / 不知天上宫阙, / 今夕是何年。 / 我欲乘风归去, / 又恐琼楼玉宇, / 高处不胜寒。’ The entire first verse and line 1 of the second verse are written in English: ‘How long will the full moon appear? / Wine cup in hand, I ask the sky. / I do not know what time of the year / It would be tonight in the palace on high. / Riding the wind, there I would fly, / Yet I'm afraid the crystalline palace would be / Too high and cold for me. / I rise and dance, with my shadow I play. / On high as on earth, would it be as gay? / The moon goes round the mansions red ...’

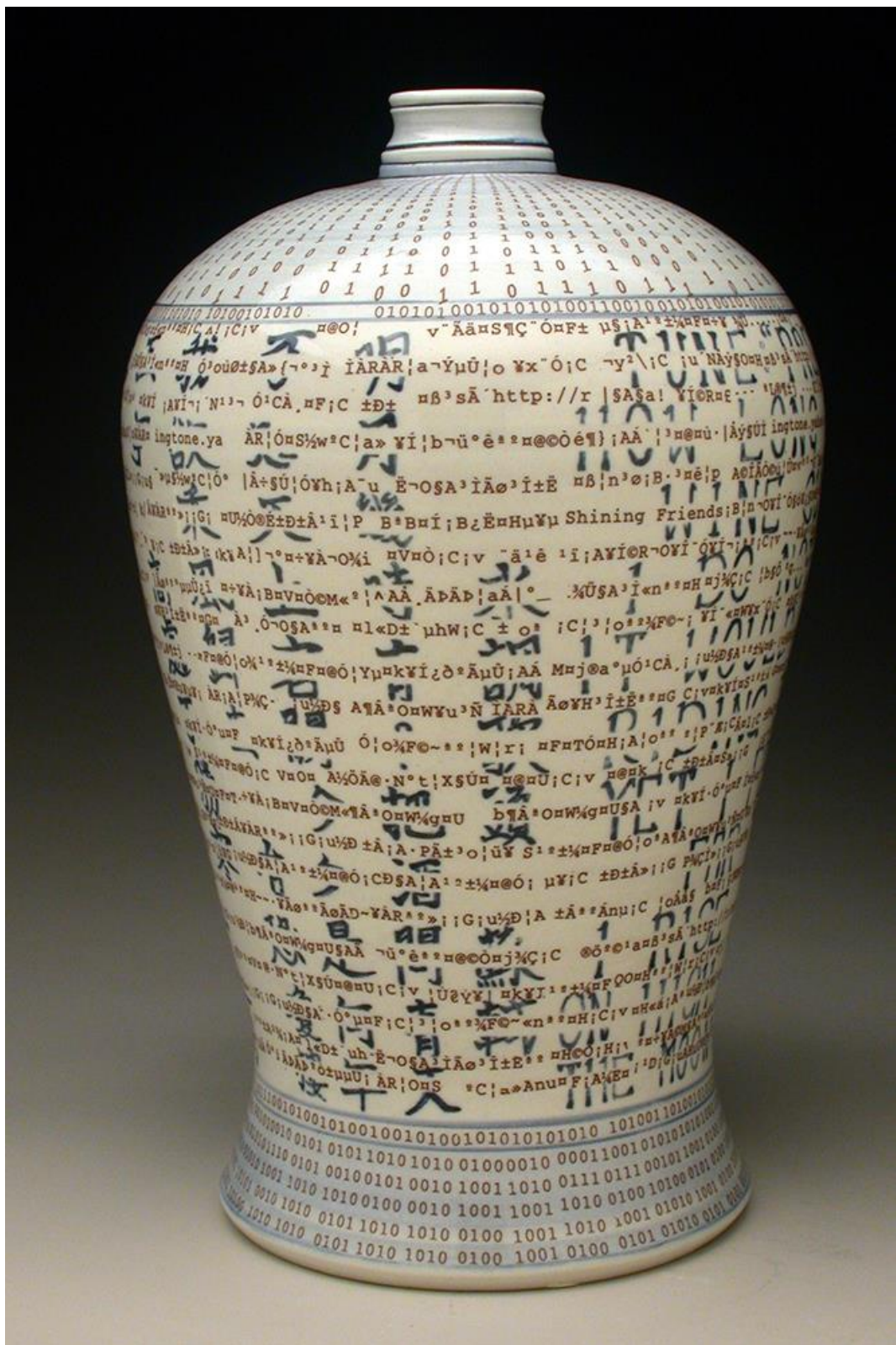


Figure 60: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1962), Gibberish no. 3, 2005, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decal, 39 x 25.5 cm.

then other performers would respond with nonsensical sounds. The poem, on the other hand, is one that Ho memorised at school in Hong Kong, but has since admitted that she never completely understood.³³³ She therefore draws a connection in this work between rote memorisation, repetition and the collapse of meaning.³³⁴ Lines of binary code on the foot and shoulder reinforce the connection with technology. As in *Identity*, meaning is disguised and fractured, while disparate cultural elements – as well as a “universal” digital language – are brought together within an all-encompassing compositional unity. Linguistic elements on *Identity* are disguised as ornament (fig. 56); in *Gibberish* language is ornament. No floral motifs, foliate medallions or wave-pattern bands conceal the text, and it would be difficult to confuse this piece with a vase produced for export. The shift in emphasis from image to text evokes the linguistic aspects of migration and cultural adaptation alluded to but not directly addressed in *Identity*: the need to translate and the inevitable slippages in meaning that result. Ho has explained that language had long been a source of confusion and contention for her, even when growing up in Hong Kong, where various aspects of her life were defined by different languages: English at school, Mandarin in public, and Cantonese at home.³³⁵ Her complex relationship with language was further confused after her relocation to Canada where linguistic difference assumed greater consequences:

... you say that you fit into society, you learn all the systems, you try to be the best, but you cannot compete with others, people whose English is [their] native language ... that kind of social tension ... is very strong in ... Canada, in the US.³³⁶

³³³ Glenbow Museum, “ArtPad: A Collection. A Connection.”

³³⁴ Ho, 2017 Interview, Part 1.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Ho, cited in Burton, “Tradition in Flux,” 29.

In such a competitive socio-cultural context, Ho has written that language becomes a coded system that is only completely accessible to those who have learned to master its logic.³³⁷ For those without knowledge – like a computer without the necessary language pack – symbols, letters and characters are little more than gibberish. Beyond their coded meaning, however, Ho acknowledges that ornament and language function symbolically as a source of identity – whether personal, like her various names on *Identity*, or cultural, like a classical poem:

Gibberish uses language as composition and metaphor to express collisions between cultures ... which are central to my experience [of] journeying between cultures and language. Images and text can be viewed simply as ... symbols, but their personal characteristics connect the intimacy of memories specific to each language.³³⁸

Most viewers of *Gibberish*, even if unable to translate the poem – and translation is obfuscated by intruding nonsensical symbols – can recognise the characters as Chinese, the letters as English, and so infer the blending of these cultural spheres. It is not the meaning of the text that is most important, but what it represents as the marker or “ornament” of contact between apparently distinct cultural contexts. As in *Identity*, culture is revealed to be a complex synthesis of various elements, though here the unity of these components, provisional and never clearly defined, approaches disintegration, while any semblance of coherent meaning is fractured and obscured.

³³⁷ Ho, cited in Burton, "Tradition in Flux," 32-33.

³³⁸ Sin-ying Ho, cited in Schwartz, *Confrontational Ceramics: The Artist as Social Critic*, 58.

Li Jianshen's idealised visions of classical China in his *Neo-guan* ceramics and his directorship of the Sanbao International Ceramics Village

Li Jianshen, or Jackson Li (as for Sin-ying/Cassandra, a case of multiple names), is another contemporary artist-traveller who creates porcelain works of art in which fragments of an idealised past are merged within a distinctly contemporary aesthetic. Li was born and grew up in Jingdezhen, though in 1993 he left China for the US, where he became the first Chinese-born recipient of an MFA from Alfred University's New York State College of Ceramic Arts.³³⁹ Although he subsequently returned to his hometown, Li's experience in New York and then in Nova Scotia, Canada, when he assumed directorship of NSCAD's ceramics department while Ostrom was resident with Ho at the JCI, inspired him to travel regularly between China and North America. His concepts of home and heritage, like Ho's, were coloured by this movement between cultural spheres, though unlike the Hong Kong-born artist the view of China that Li communicates through his work is one of idealised classical "purity" rather than blending and syncretism. The highly refined vessels of his *Neo-guan* or "New Imperial" series can be read as an homage to classical Chinese aesthetics, combined with a contemporary sensibility in a manner like that seen in Liu Jianhua's Chan-inspired celadon sculptures. The extent to which Li has sought to maintain and express a classical idyll is clearest, however, in his establishment in Jingdezhen of SICV, an arts residency institution that gives form to a certain vision of China's past that can be shared with visiting artists and ceramicists.

³³⁹ Zhang Ming, «从制陶到造村: 李见深与三宝国际陶艺村» [From Making Ceramics to Building a Village: Jackson Li & Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute at Jingdezhen], 装饰, no. 8 (2014): 52–57.



Figure 61: Li Jianshen (b. 1959), Crane, 2008, porcelain with qingbai glaze and overglaze enamel decoration, 32 x 14 cm.

Li is best-known for his *Neo-guan* series emulating and updating for a contemporary audience the “official wares” manufactured during the Ming and Qing dynasties at the Imperial Factory. In *Crane* (2008; fig. 61), for example, an elongated *meiping* bears a restrained painting of the head, neck, wing and leg of a crane, long used by Chinese artists to symbolise longevity. Li’s decision to only partially represent the bird elegantly conveys one of the primary aesthetic strategies of classical Chinese art – cultivation of negative space. In both classical painting and poetry, much like the idea of “blandness” expressed in Liu Jianhua’s *qingbai* installations and celadon sculptures, absence of form has long been used to conjure a living presence in the viewer’s mind that is far more evocative than a linear or highly-detailed depiction. In *Crane*, the contours of the vase and lustre of the glaze are active elements of the composition, suggesting the curves of the crane’s body and silky down of its feathers much more immediately and effectively than a restrictive outline. A comparison can be drawn here between Li’s use of negative space and Ho’s adoption of the *gongbi* technique. Both artists draw classical conventions into the present and seek to imbue them with a new vitality.

Yet while Ho pairs *gongbi* with a contemporary digital decal technique, Li’s approach is more restrained and oriented toward continuity rather than conflict. He appropriates classical tropes with a reverent affection, preserving their integrity even while rendering them in a contemporary style. *Crane* evokes an immediate visual parallel with the type of “floating” decoration conventionally inscribed beneath a transparent glaze or painted in overglaze enamels on classical or classical-style vases and, in contrast to Ho’s *Identity*, Chineseness is here neither called into question nor exposed as an artificial construct. Instead, it is enshrined within the milky depths of a *qingbai* glaze, evoking a boundless

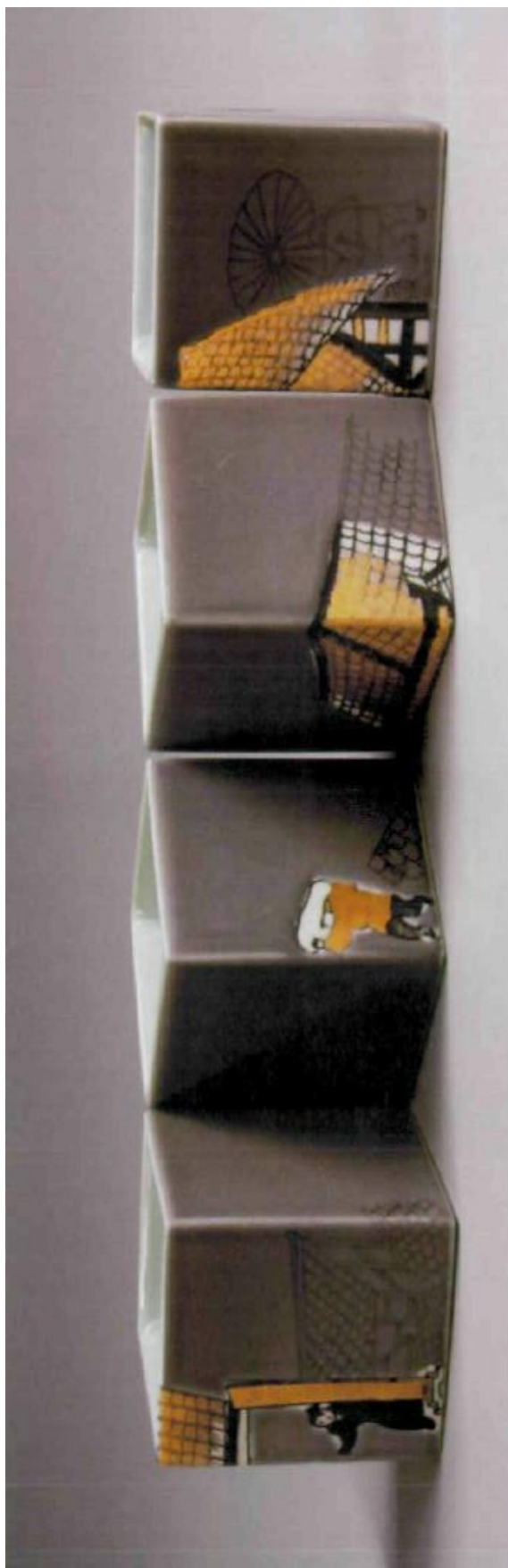


Figure 62: Li Jianshen (b. 1959), Square cups set, 2008, porcelain with overglaze enamel decoration, 8 x 8 cm (each).

realm of the imagination in which viewers can complete the image according to their mental image of the bird depicted, and their own vision of a classical China suspended in time.

A comparable effect is achieved in *Square cups set* (2008; fig. 62), in which scenes taken from the handscroll *Spring festival along the river* (*Qingming shanghe tu* 清明上河圖) by Zhang Zeduan (1085-1145), yet another Song-dynasty source, are translated onto a series of cups. As one of the most valued and culturally significant classical works of art in China, enshrined as a National Treasure and removed from storage for display only once every few years, this handscroll immediately invokes a narrative of national pride for anyone who recognises its imagery. A parallel could be drawn here with Ai Weiwei's comparable references to the function of ceramics as an emblem of Chinese national pride in works like *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn*, though this function is not critiqued or questioned in Li's work. While the compositional unity of the work is not maintained on Li's cups, a key aesthetic quality of the original – the episodic method of “reading” a handscroll from right to left, unrolling with one hand and re-rolling with the other – is carefully preserved. Yet the linear progression that such a reading would usually involve is rendered more flexible: the cups can be arranged in different combinations, with each side bearing its own partial scene. This modularity, as well as the functionality of a cup, imbues the imagery with a renewed vitality as a “living” work of art accessible for daily use, rather than an ossified emblem of the past hidden from public view.

As in *Crane*, Li's vision of classical China is only completed through active engagement with the work: turning the cups to reveal the various scenes, rearranging them, and using them. In contrast to the partial effacing of Su Dongpo's poem on *Gibberish* (fig. 60), the enigmatic yet still legible images on *Square cups set* create an abundance rather

than a breakdown of meaning. Their composition, once again making use of negative space, encourages uninhibited discovery, a focus on the subtle details of the handscroll and the narrative in which they figure. An idyllic image of classical China is held up to affectionate scrutiny but shown to be timeless in its applications.

Reconstruction of an idyllic past for global consumption at the Sanbao International Ceramics Village

The cherished image of classical China evoked by *Crane* and *Square cups set* is central to the project for which Li is most esteemed by ceramicists around the world: SICV, an artist exchange and residency initiative. Li established SICV on the site of the former farming community of Sijiali (四家里, “Four Household Village”), a cluster of Ming houses about 20km away from central Jingdezhen – a rural idyll not unlike those depicted in countless classical handscrolls. Returning to his hometown in 1995, much like Ai Weiwei after his return to Beijing two years earlier, Li was alarmed by the urban redevelopment. While Ai chose to respond with works like *Souvenir from Beijing* (fig. 8) and *Dust to dust* (fig. 9), however, in which the ambiguous relationship between preservation and destruction and the power relations underlying such redevelopment are held up for questioning, Li attempted to intervene by purchasing the three dilapidated houses remaining in Sijiali to ensure their preservation.³⁴⁰ He left the site untouched, his own personal piece of the classical past, when serving as director of the NSCAD ceramics department in 1996 but soon revealed his plans to a group of Canadian artists touring China in the following year, to mark the Shanghai opening of the exhibition *White on White: Contemporary Canadian Ceramics*. One of these artists, Paul Mathieu, recalled Sijiali at that time as ‘a field with

³⁴⁰ Zhang, «从制陶到造村: 李见深与三宝国际陶艺村» [From Making Ceramics to Building a Village: Jackson Li & Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute at Jingdezhen], 52.

three old farmhouses, nestled against a small hill,’ with very few signs of the ‘cultural masterpiece dedicated to clay’ that it would become, ‘where Western visitors would someday reside and work within a web of Chinese history and culture.’³⁴¹ Li was inspired to create this “masterpiece” by his personal experience of artist residencies in the US, determined to create similar opportunities in China at a time when such initiatives were unknown even in Beijing and Shanghai.³⁴² Like Sin-ying Ho, then, though Li saw porcelain as a point of access to his Chinese heritage, his experience overseas was crucial to the development of his artistic vision. The form that SICV would ultimately take, however, owed more to his fantasies of classical China than to any overseas precedent.

Li officially announced the opening of SICV a year later at the first Yixing International Ceramic Conference, which he co-organised with Luo Xiaoping, another JCI graduate then building his reputation in Yixing, another historic centre of ceramics production northeast of Jingdezhen in Jiangsu province.³⁴³ Sin-ying Ho, on a second short stay in Jingdezhen and still chasing her own fantasies of a lost China, was among the delegates and accompanied Li on his return journey to the Porcelain Capital to attend the opening of SICV.³⁴⁴ The much-anticipated event was marked by the interment of a ‘porcelain time capsule,’ containing an assortment of mementoes and documents related to the site.³⁴⁵ In the ensuing years, SICV itself became something akin to a time capsule itself: a lovingly preserved reminder of the area’s past filled with antiques hand-picked by Li to conjure an idyllic vision of classical China – or rather, *his* classical China. For SICV is essentially an

³⁴¹ Elaine Hardman, “Paul Mathieu: Chinese Elements,” *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, no. 63 (2006): 24.

³⁴² Zhang, «从制陶到造村: 李见深与三宝国际陶艺村» [From Making Ceramics to Building a Village: Jackson Li & Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute at Jingdezhen], 54.

³⁴³ Luo Xiaoping, “A Potter’s Journey,” *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, no. 38 (1999): 43.

³⁴⁴ Ho, 2017 Interview, Part 1.

³⁴⁵ John Stephenson, “Jackson Lee at San Bao,” *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, no. 38 (1999): 70.

extension of Li's persona and ideals, a product of the same affectionate reverence for the past found in his works of porcelain art, though on a much grander scale.

The first group of overseas artists arrived in SICV in the summer of 1998, not long after the official opening in the same year. One visitor, North American ceramicist and glass artist Michael Boylen, recalled a single habitable farmhouse, a partially-built replica of a Ming-dynasty dragon kiln, and a lone resident artisan from Jingdezhen, though plans were in place for new accommodation to house overseas visitors.³⁴⁶ SICV rapidly grew over the next two decades into a world-class residency institution, comprised not only of the original farmhouses and accommodation for visiting artists but also extensive workshop areas, several functioning reconstructions of historic kiln-types, an exhibition gallery, a commercial outlet, a restaurant, canteen and teahouse, and a private museum housing contemporary ceramics sourced from around the world.³⁴⁷ SICV now hosts around one hundred artists a year, from countries including Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Italy, Norway, Finland, Canada, the US, Japan and South Korea, and has attracted attention and investment from many international organisations, including UNESCO, the Nidec-Shimpo Corporation, and Paraxo Cultural Centre in Italy. It is one of Jingdezhen's most popular attractions for artist-travellers, who are drawn not only by its reputation but also by its appeal as a repository of Chinese cultural heritage that is open and accessible to overseas visitors – a “negative space” of unplumbed imaginative depths, awaiting the projection of their flights of fancy.

The fantasy of classical China that SICV can furnish, however, is not the transparent window on the past that many overseas visitors might imagine. Like Ai's *Blue-and-white*

³⁴⁶ Michael Boylen, “Alfred China Summer,” *Studio Potter* 27, no. 2 (June 1999): 92.

³⁴⁷ Zhang, «从制陶到造村: 李见深与三宝国际陶艺村» [From Making Ceramics to Building a Village: Jackson Li & Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute at Jingdezhen], 53.

series (fig. 24) and other historical reproductions, it's a carefully-constructed fabrication of a China seemingly untouched by the currents of modernity, yet fully furnished with all the conveniences and comforts of contemporary life. As in Li's *Neo-guan* wares, cultural heritage has been refined into a new, more contemporary, and more accessible form. The accommodation for resident artists is deliberately "classical" in appearance, artfully furnished in an antique style 'to give visitors a taste of the traditional Chinese scholar's life,' yet updated with flushing, Western-style toilets, showers, and electric blankets so that visitors can enjoy this fantasy in comfort.³⁴⁸ Even before Li developed the site into a residency institution, he envisioned SICV as a rural idyll where his visitors could 'see a blind-folded water buffalo mixing [clay] ... [harvest] some tea ... and [plant] their own fresh vegetables.'³⁴⁹ It was to be a retreat where residents could live out their imagined visions of "China" as a land of misty bamboo forests and rolling mountains, playing the part of the reclusive scholar surrounded by simple yet humble farmers, without issues of translation or culture shock that might mar such imaginings elsewhere. This is perhaps the China that Sin-ying Ho thought she would discover on her first trip to Jingdezhen, only to be disillusioned by her discovery of the cultural complexities and breakdowns in communication that would become the primary motivation and subject of her work on her return to North America. In SICV, however, as in Li's contemporary veneration of classical aesthetics, complexities are hidden beneath an immaculate surface, engulfed within the irresistible lustre of a masterfully-applied glaze.

³⁴⁸ Gillette, *China's Porcelain Capital: The Rise, Fall and Reinvention of Ceramics in Jingdezhen*, 124.

³⁴⁹ Stephenson, "Jackson Lee at San Bao," 70.

For Li Jianshen, as for Sin-ying Ho, porcelain and Jingdezhen represent a point of access to their shared Chinese cultural heritage, though the vision of this heritage developed by each artist has been indelibly coloured by travel between different cultural spheres. In Ho's work, this movement has fostered an interest in blending and syncretism, but in Li's oeuvre there is a more prominent concern with the maintenance or revival of what he perceives to be a lost cultural essence. In works like *Crane* (2008; fig. 61) and *Square cups set* (2008; fig. 62), and his founding of SICV, Li adopts a reverent vision of China's mythologised classical past in which aesthetic conventions and imaginative speculation are adapted to render heritage accessible, accommodating and appealing for an increasingly global audience. In contrast to Ho, as well as Ai Weiwei and Liu Jianhua, both of whom have engaged extensively with China's past, Li seems uninterested in critique, effacing any conflict or complexity within meticulously crafted fabrications of an idealised past.

Each artist takes an idiosyncratic approach to classical aesthetics and historic narrative: adopting a transcultural perspective, Ho proposes a synthetic union of differences in the composite ornamentation of her vessels; Li strives more toward the packaging and idealised abstraction of the past as an attractive product for overseas consumption; Ai's aims are predominantly to critique, deconstruct and to demystify; while Liu alternates between incisive commentary on the politics of global exchange, both historical and contemporary, and a revelation of the impermanence of all material existence through a commitment to an aesthetic "blandness". All four have benefitted in these aims from the porcelain renaissance transforming Jingdezhen which, especially for Ho and Li, has enabled them to test the equivalence of China and china, country and material, in their constructions of personal and cultural identity.

Sin-ying Ho's visions of a composite future in *Binary code: The link* (2004) and *Matrix no. 1* (2005)

While Li Jianshen moulded SICV into his ideal vision of “China”, Ho developed a different amalgamation of China/china in increasingly composite, fragmented works. At LSU, in addition to the technique of digital decal transfer, she studied the shaping of porcelain using plaster and papier-mâché moulds. Like her experience with *gongbi* painting, her initial training in mould-making took place during a trip to China with a mentor – this time to Foshan, in Guangdong province, where she learned how to make multi-part plaster moulds to produce intricate porcelain sculptures. On her return to the US, she developed these techniques by using papier-mâché for the outer shell in which plaster moulds are contained to hold them in position while the clay air-dries, thereby making the composite much lighter and the process much less strenuous. Her most notable innovation, however, was to combine this with her training in wheel-throwing vessels: after throwing a standard vessel, like the *guan* and *meiping* forms used in *Identity* (fig. 55) and *Gibberish* (fig. 60), Ho made a plaster mould of the finished piece, cut this negative impression into an irregular series of fragments, then combined these with fragmented impressions from other vessels to create a multi-part mould for an entirely new, composite form.³⁵⁰ Echoing her combination of *gongbi* painting in cobalt blue with iron-red digital decal printing, then, as well as her merging of iconographic and linguistic codes, Ho extended this combinatory logic to the form of her work. Fused but still recognisable as a merging of separate parts, Ho's works therefore achieved an even closer approximation of her comparably composite experience and understanding of Chinese cultural identity.

³⁵⁰ Ho, 2017 Interview, Part 1.



Figure 63: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1962), Binary code: The link, 2004, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals, terra sigillata, 2 x 8 x 1.5 cm.



Figure 64: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1962), Matrix no. 1, 2005, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals, terra sigillata, 20 x 10 x 20 cm.

Two of the earliest works in which Ho most effectively combined all these elements are *Binary code: The link* (fig. 63) and *Matrix no. 1* (fig. 64), created respectively in 2004 and 2005. In the first of these, vases are distorted and fused together into an abstract organic sequence of rounded shapes that resembles a spinal column or a strand of DNA. In the second, a mass of bulging curves, attenuated contours and severed edges tapers upward without a clear sense of balance or composition toward an absurdly slender neck. Rather than a vase, it resembles a misfiring or kiln accident, or the fused remains of potsherds, sediment and crustaceans salvaged from shipwrecks. Alternatively, and considering the etymology of the work's title – the Latin word “matrix” was most commonly employed to mean “womb” – bodily associations are again clear. This resemblance is particularly apparent when the work is turned to reveal another opening in its base (fig. 65), evoking the intestinal valves or arteries of a disembodied stomach or heart. Ho explains that the ambiguity of these forms is intentional, an attempt to divert attention from the context suggested by the previously conventional shapes of her work to focus on the motifs that adorn their surfaces.³⁵¹ Yet form remains essential to the meaning of the work, not only in its suggestion of combined fragments but also in the awareness of bodily identity that it adds to Ho's existing focus on personal and cultural forms of identification. There is a fertile biomorphism in these works that evokes a sphere of existence beyond culture, a world of pulsating viscera defined and sustained by the constant flow of life-giving fluids – perhaps an analogue for Ho's vision of the global contemporary as a super-organism, in which we all maintain some part of our identity while merging with those around us.

³⁵¹ Ho, 2017 Interview, Part 1.



Figure 65: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1962), Matrix no. 1 (reverse), 2005, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals, terra sigillata, 20 x 10 x 20 cm.

Although different in form, the ornament on *Binary code: The link* and *Matrix no. 1* is very similar to that on *Identity* (fig. 55) and *Gibberish* (fig. 60). On *Binary code*, floral and foliate motifs are interspersed with the eponymous programming language and nonsensical gibberish, while *Matrix* merges these with Mayan hieroglyphs, Roman terracotta designs, a Celtic “infinite knot”, and pseudo-Arabic calligraphy.³⁵² The Roman and Celtic motifs are adapted from *The Grammar of Ornament* (figs. 66 and 67), the Mayan hieroglyphs from texts on ancient Mexico, inspired by a trip to Chichén Itzá, and the pseudo-calligraphy from Kufic passages that she saw on historic Chinese ceramics.³⁵³ In both works, the fundamental affinity between language and ornament as methods for coding meaning is affirmed with greater clarity, especially in Ho’s use of a pictographic script. On *Binary code*, as on *Gibberish*, linguistic elements are reduced to abstract pattern, rendered arbitrary and meaningless. The same is true of *Matrix*, yet here the ambiguity of image and word is emphasised in a more nuanced manner by the inclusion of a pictographic script and a style of calligraphy often used pictorially. Both works highlight the ties uniting language, ornament and cultural context, foregrounding an aspect of transcultural communication that is implied but not overtly stated in *Gibberish* – the frequent difficulties and even impossibility of translation. Speaking of the “global culture” that she predicts as the end-point of globalisation, Ho has remarked:

... we [will] still have some kind of gap that we cannot put together, but we [will] try to work at it together, and that’s how we appreciate it. But on the other hand,

³⁵² The surface effect of *terra sigillata* used on these works also derives from Roman terracotta – the term can be used to refer either to a category of ceramics created and used predominantly in ancient Rome or, as in this case, to a certain type of clay slip applied to the surface of an unfired piece that creates a crackled effect when fired. See Christopher Selwood, *Terra Sigillata Slip Coatings* (Caulfield East, VIC: Chisholm Institute of Technology, 1987).

³⁵³ Ho, 2017 Interview, Part 1.

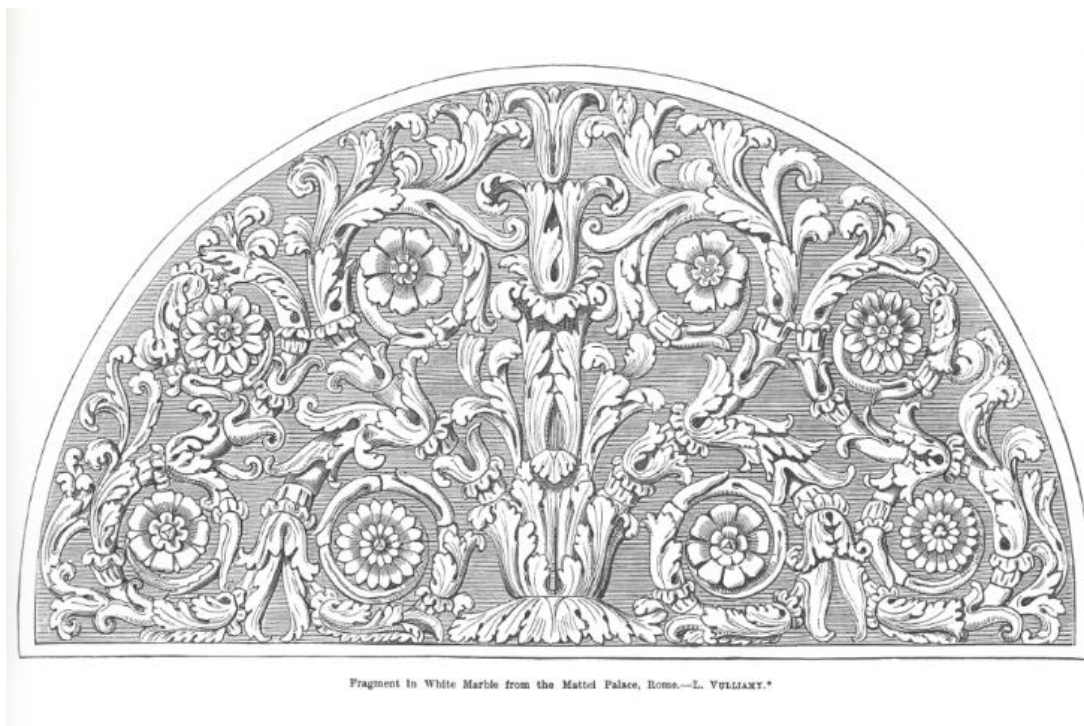


Figure 66: Owen Jones (1809-74), Fragment in white marble from the Mattel Palace, Rome, from *The Grammar of Ornament*, 1856.

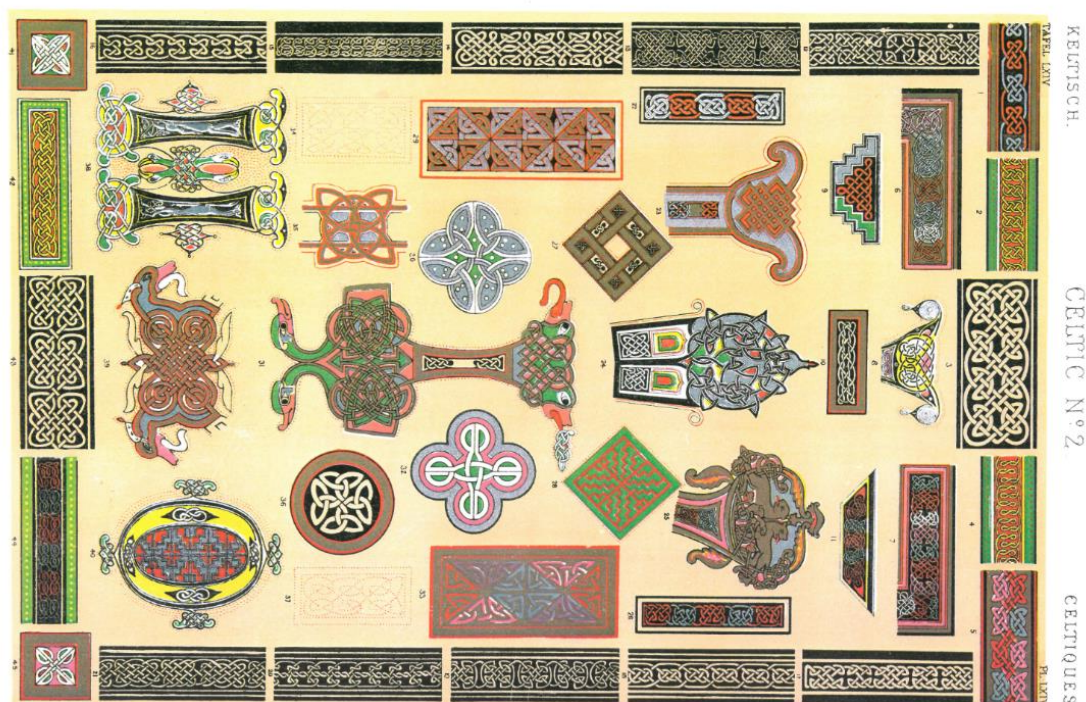


Figure 67: Owen Jones (1809-74), Plate LXIV: "Celtic No. 2", from *The Grammar of Ornament*, 1856.

we are also identifying that there is something we have to give and take and people won't lose their different cultures.³⁵⁴

In other words, although increased communication may not necessarily mean complete understanding, it also may not necessarily imply homogenisation. Rather, as suggested by the DNA-like structure, open apertures and contrasting motifs of *Binary code*, though the languages and images of different cultural contexts are imprinted even within our genetic make-up, we can remain open to the unfamiliar and untranslatable.

The ideals of mutual adaptability and open-ended multiplication of cultural possibilities that Ho envisages through her combination of ornamental and linguistic codes are also expressed through the composite form of *Binary code* and *Matrix*. Both works exemplify the modular and multiple forms of production made possible by her composite mould-making technique. While wheel-thrown vessels can be, and are mass-produced in great numbers in Jingdezhen, moulding ensures a level of mechanical consistency that would be very difficult to replicate by hand. Once Ho has created a composite mould, she can use this to create multiple identical works, while the fragmented pieces of each mould can also be recombined in almost infinite permutations, enabling her to experiment with a modularity like that explored by Liu Jianhua in his *Regular-Fragile* series. This modular approach can be seen in the rhythmic repetition of *Binary code*, for which Ho combined five identical forms taken from the same mould, but it becomes even more evident in her habit of re-using the same mould for multiple works, differentiated by their display in different orientations, or by changes in surface decoration. The same pattern of re-use and reinterpretation can be traced throughout Ho's oeuvre. In her work, then, not only motifs but also forms of the past are collected together as a pattern-book on which

³⁵⁴ Ho, cited in Burton, "Tradition in Flux," 33.

she can draw at will – her personal *Grammar of Ornament*. Yet modular composition does not imply standardisation. The deciding role of personal taste preserves a core of idiosyncrasy that reminds viewers of the connection between the composite surfaces and forms of Ho's sculptures and her equally composite experience as a global artist-traveller.

Reconciling surface and depth in Ah Xian's *China china* series (1998-2004)

The tension between the individual and the mass-produced in Ho's fractured vessels is also evident in Ah Xian's *China china* series (1998-2004; figs. 33, 68-74, 114, 117) of over eighty porcelain busts, in which the shifting relationship between internal and external visions of self evokes a similar fragmentation of identity. The first ten busts, although ornamented with stereotypically Chinese motifs adapted from standard pattern books and historic wares, convey an impression of idiosyncrasy that splits the personalities of Ah Xian's sitters into multiple co-existent forms. On one hand, the motifs expose the models to stereotype, recalling again the inevitable typecasting of culturally-marked migrants, yet on the other hand a layer of additional meaning can be read into these motifs as markers of the subjects' identities and their relationships with the artist. This blurring of cultural affiliation with the ties of family and friendship reflects the artist's association of porcelain both with Chineseness and with the feeling that he had lost something essential to his identity when he left China for Australia.

After the success of *China china*, Ah Xian incorporated many other "traditional" Chinese media into his artistic practice, gradually developing a vision of his self-assigned mission as an artist of Chinese heritage to revive and adapt historic forms for a contemporary context. Like Sin-ying Ho, in pursuing this mission he has benefited from the advantages

of an in-between existence, based in Sydney but travelling constantly between China and Australia. Most of the *China china* busts were produced during these trips to the country of his birth, moulded by the artist but painted and fired by the artisans of Jingdezhen. In contrast to the first ten works in the series, these pieces draw on a limited range of designs, recycled in permutations that create an impression of modularity and artificiality in which the cultural takes precedence over the personal and the relationship between model and motif is largely abandoned. Although these might therefore be read as a final acceptance or embrace of cultural stereotype, they also emphasise the artifice of such stereotypes, reducing that which seems essential to a patchwork of fragments that can be adopted or discarded at will. As in Sin-ying Ho's vessels, the self is revealed to be an ongoing project of negotiation with various dimensions of personal and cultural meaning, and identity itself becomes a continually renewed palimpsest of experiences.

The SCA busts and the overlapping of cultural and private dimensions of identity

The first ten busts in the *China china* series created in 1998 at Sydney College of the Arts (SCA), University of Sydney, can be set apart from subsequent additions not only for the location of their making, but also their emphasis on personal above cultural dimensions of identity. Echoing Ho's experiments with digital decal transfer and multi-part moulds, Ah Xian developed a personal method of mould-making at SCA that remains central to his practice. After casting a plaster mould of the head and shoulders of his model – usually a friend or family member – he uses this to produce an impression in porcelain that can be reproduced in identical multiples.³⁵⁵ Ah Xian ornamented the busts created

³⁵⁵ Each of Ah Xian's busts is produced in a plaster mould cast from the head and shoulders of one of his sitters. The subject must first strip to the waist so that Ah Xian can swath their head and upper body in cling wrap, leaving only their nostrils uncovered so that they can breathe; they are then wrapped tightly with bandages soaked in plaster and, after several layers of these have been applied, they must sit for

at SCA with stereotypically “Chinese” motifs, including floral patterns, dragons, plum trees in blossom, lotuses and waves, overlaying the features of the three models: a young woman of Asian heritage, likely an SCA student, his brother artist-photographer Liu Xiaoxian, and Ah Xian’s wife Mali Hong, both of whom also relocated from Beijing to Sydney in 1990 (though Mali Hong followed several months after the brothers).³⁵⁶ Ah Xian’s subjects are replicated in porcelain in the same manner, their features partially submerged within the white body of the clay so that their ornamentation becomes their primary quality, and even this is adapted from standardised pattern books and historic wares.³⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the overall impression is one of intimate idiosyncrasy, splitting sitters’ personalities into multiple co-existent forms that evoke the transexperiential condition of being both one thing and another, both here and there.

An immediate comparison can be drawn between these first ten *China china* busts and Ho’s *Identity* in the tension maintained between superficial forms of identification and concealed private dimensions of self. Just as the apparently conventional ornament and form of Ho’s work give the appearance of an unremarkable blue-and-white vase, mass-produced for export overseas, so the quintessentially “Chinese” ornament of Ah Xian’s busts exposes them to stereotype. At first, many viewers might assume that these are straightforward images of Chinese people in a Chinese medium, painted with Chinese motifs by a Chinese artist – another analogy for the typecasting of the culturally-marked migrant. This view is even encouraged to a certain extent by the artist’s identification of each bust with a number rather than a name, which gives them a certain universalising

almost an hour while the liquid plaster dries and hardens around them, remaining as still as possible. Roni Feinstein, “A Journey to China,” *Art in America* 90, no. 2 (February 2002): 110–11; Ah Xian, personal conversation with Alex Burchmore, 6 September 2016.

³⁵⁶ Feinstein, “A Journey to China,” 111.

³⁵⁷ Ah Xian, personal conversation with Alex Burchmore, 2 April 2018.



Figure 68: Ah Xian (b. 1960), China china: bust 4, 1998, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue and copper-red decoration, 32 x 36 x 19 cm; Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.

relatability, and by the reiterative title of the series, with its play on the two meanings of the English word “China”. On closer inspection, however, additional meaning can be read into the motifs as markers of the subjects’ identities and various relationships with the artist. Cultural affiliation is therefore overlayed with ties of family and friendship, while straightforward interpretation of motifs is complicated by their appropriation to a more personal sphere of significance.

The restrained underglaze cobalt blue and overglaze copper red motifs on *Bust 4* (fig. 68), for example, suggest a delicate balance of intimacy and convention that perhaps reflects the artist’s feelings toward the sitter: his wife, Mali Hong. Her vivid expression is the bust’s most striking feature, suffused with a sense of tranquil contemplation but also animated by a slight smile, hovering on the upturned corner of her mouth. The endearing irreverence of this subtle facial movement is enhanced by the paired lotus bud and leaf that respectively cover and sit just above her closed eyes, creating the impression of a wink and raised eyebrow. The slender stalks of this lotus emerge from the lustrous white skin across her collarbones, reaching up her neck and across her cheeks into a canopy of leaves that almost exactly follows her hairline. Another leaf undulates across her right shoulder and collarbone. In China, the lotus (*hehua* 荷花, or *lianhua* 莲花) is associated most strongly with Buddhism, as a plant that ‘rises undefiled from impure muddy waters’ to produce a pure white flower – an analogy for the ideal life of integrity rising above the pollutions of everyday existence.³⁵⁸ It is also an emblem of love, homophonous with *he* (合), meaning harmony and *he* (和), peace, as well as with *lian* (连), connection, and *lian* (联), attachment or longing.³⁵⁹ Ah Xian’s choice of a

³⁵⁸ Welch, *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery*, 27.

³⁵⁹ *ibid*, 28.



Figure 69: Ah Xian (b. 1960), China china: bust 10, 1998, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, 31 x 40 x 21.5 cm; Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane

lotus to adorn Mali Hong's features, then, could allude to their abiding love and his vision of her rising above the struggles of daily life to a higher realm of incandescent purity.

A comparable reading can be made of *Bust 10* (fig. 69), the last addition to *China china* personally created by Ah Xian, this time of his brother. In contrast to *Bust 4*, flowers are not the principal decorative element here, and the design is neither restrained nor subtle. Liu's shoulders and neck are covered with a rhythmic seascape of tempestuous waves, while his head is almost entirely coated with an uneven ground of blue pigment, punctuated by a stylised cloud motif. Liu's eyes and nose are obscured by the face of a dragon that wraps around the crown of his head, snaking over his right ear to take up its central, confrontational position, leading some writers to describe the work as claustrophobic and asphyxiating.³⁶⁰ The choice of a dragon rather than floral motifs, and the vigour with which it is applied, has also prompted associations with the gender of the subject: flowers, it is argued, are a feminine motif, suited to elegance and restraint, while dragons and waves are innately masculine, appropriately painted with forthright audacity.³⁶¹ However, while the dragon is associated in China with the "masculine" traits of ferocity and natural power, it also denotes benevolence and nurturing protection.³⁶² The creature curled around Liu's head, then, rather than a suffocating constraint, could be read as an apotropaic talisman. This reading is reinforced by the repeated clouds (*yun* 云), homophonous with *yun* (运), meaning good fortune, and by the "wish-granting jewel" (*ruyi baozhu* 如意宝珠) that the dragon pursues, resting lightly on Liu's chin – like

³⁶⁰ See, for example, Feinstein, "A Journey to China," 111.

³⁶¹ See, for example: Irene Levin, "'China China' - Recent Works in Porcelain by Ah Xian / Powerhouse Museum / 14 March - 16 September 2001," *Artwrite*, no. 22 (2002), https://web.archive.org/web/20030703212453/www.artwrite.cofa.unsw.edu.au/0122/IssuesatLarge/Levin_AhXian/Levin_China.html; Melissa Chiu, "Ah Xian," *ArtAsiaPacific*, no. 37 (2003): 31; Stefano Catalani, "From Iconic to Symbolic: Ah Xian's Semiotic Interface Between China and the West," *Yishu*, no. 1 (March 2005): 84; Melissa Chiu, "The Iconic and the Personal: Ah Xian," in *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China* (Milan: Charta, 2006), 188.

³⁶² Strober, *Symbols on Chinese Porcelain: 10,000 Times Happiness*, 34.

the lotus, this jewel is an emblem of transcendence and the emergence of purity from the mire of everyday existence, symbolising a third association of the dragon with the natural processes of growth and metamorphosis.³⁶³ The combination of these elements – dragon, clouds, waves and jewel – has been a common motif since the Song dynasty, intended to emphasise the dragon's role as bringer of life-sustaining waters, signifying abundance, longevity and cosmic union.³⁶⁴ In addition to masculine virility, then, the motifs on *Bust 10* can also be interpreted as a wish for good fortune from the artist to his brother, a consoling reassurance that life and the potential for transcendence endure, even in the most overwhelming circumstances. In *Bust 10*, as in *Bust 4* and, to a certain extent, the remaining SCA *China china* busts, cultural motifs are given a new significance as markers of personality, family and friendship, transforming culture from a restrictive, abstract concept to an adaptable, private inheritance.

Ah Xian's search for a medium to bridge the temporal, geographical and political divides isolating him from his Chinese heritage

Ah Xian's decision to use porcelain was to a great extent driven by his association of it with Chineseness and the feeling that he had lost something essential to his identity when he relocated from China to Australia. Like Ai Weiwei, Ah Xian was born in Beijing not long before the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, though unlike the older artist he spent his childhood and adolescence on the campuses of Renmin University and the Beijing Institute of Technology, where his parents were employed as academics, rather

³⁶³ Strober, *Symbols on Chinese Porcelain: 10,000 Times Happiness*, 34.

³⁶⁴ Welch, *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery*, 124–26, 249. There is an equally venerable tradition in China of the miraculous transformation of especially courageous or powerful individuals into dragons – this is discussed further below in relation to the resemblance of the designs on Ah Xian's busts to tattoos.

than the unforgiving landscape of rural Xinjiang.³⁶⁵ After graduating high school, he was assigned employment as a mechanical fitter in a state-run factory before deciding, in 1982, to desert his post and become an artist, a radical statement in China at the time.³⁶⁶ The following year, during a trip to Shenzhen in Guangdong province, he decided to take on the pseudonym Ah Xian, which he has continued to use in preference to his birth name Liu Jixian (刘继先).³⁶⁷ Much like Sin-ying Ho and Li Jianshen, the fracturing of his identity brought about by global relocation is reflected in this nominal multiplicity, though in Ah Xian's case the adoption of his new name was a personal choice rather than an imposition of different cultural circumstances. After his return to Beijing in 1983, he created several series of oil paintings that show the influence of the '85 New Wave before leaving the city once again in January 1989 to undertake a two-month residency at the University of Tasmania in Hobart.³⁶⁸ The coincidence of his return in May with the climax of the Tiananmen Square protests prompted him to seize an invitation to show his work in Sydney in September 1990 as an opportunity to relocate permanently to that city, where he has completed his most widely-recognised work.

Like Ho, Ah Xian's first journey back to a Chinese context involved a visit to Jingdezhen. The circumstances of his journey, however, were quite different: he travelled first to Beijing to visit his mother, who had contracted an illness to which she succumbed two days before his arrival, which had been delayed by visa complications.³⁶⁹ When he set

³⁶⁵ Mabel Lee, "Ah Xian: Challenging the Spatial Limitations of Sculptural Art," *Humanities Australia*, no. 6 (2015): 47, 49–50.

³⁶⁶ Penny Brown, "Porcelain Warrior," *Weekend Australian*, December 14, 2002, 14; Feinstein, "A Journey to China," 109–10.

³⁶⁷ Claire Roberts, "Ah Xian: 'China. China'. Recent Works in Porcelain," in *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, ed. Jennifer Webb (Brisbane, QLD: Queensland Art Gallery, 1999), 228.

³⁶⁸ Lee, "Ah Xian: Challenging the Spatial Limitations of Sculptural Art," 51.

³⁶⁹ Rodney Chester, "China Art Flowers in a New Land," *Courier Mail*, November 29, 2003; Chiu, "The Iconic and the Personal: Ah Xian," 185–86.

foot in Jingdezhen on the return leg of the journey, then, the sorrow and frustrations of an in-between existence, separated from his family and past, would likely have been vividly etched in Ah Xian's mind and may have strengthened his attraction to porcelain as a means to bridge this divide. The idea to create porcelain figures occurred to him two years earlier, in 1994, after completing a series of installation works using plaster-cast replicas of hands and feet. Although these were successful, he found plaster as a material to be too aesthetically unappealing, clinical and dull; porcelain, on the other hand, seemed alluring and evocative, more durable yet just as malleable, and enlivened by an aura of precious fragility.³⁷⁰ He read manuals on ceramics-making techniques and built a small kiln in his garden to fire porcelain versions of his earlier casts.³⁷¹ In 1995, he met Wu Yan, a young woman who had recently moved to Sydney from Jingdezhen and put him in contact with Zou Xiaosong, JCI's Vice Director. Ah Xian and Zou exchanged letters for several months until, in May 1996, following his homecoming, he found an opportunity to pursue his studies in the Porcelain Capital – he had learned of the city's historical pre-eminence and, naturally, wished to explore any possibilities for further training.³⁷² Both Ho and Ah Xian were therefore driven to return to China by a desire to reignite feelings of cultural belonging, yet this journey also became closely associated for each artist with Jingdezhen and porcelain.

Although Ah Xian first turned to ceramics in a spirit of artistic enquiry, searching for a material that could be cast in the same way as plaster but that would yield a more appealing result, it was this sense of reviving his heritage that eventually gained greater

³⁷⁰ Roberts, "Ah Xian: 'China. China'". Recent Works in Porcelain," 228.

³⁷¹ Feinstein, "A Journey to China," 110.

³⁷² Suhanya Raffel and Lynne Seear, "Human Human," in *Ah Xian*, by Suhanya Raffel (Brisbane, QLD: Queensland Art Gallery, 2003), 15n8; Catalani, "From Iconic to Symbolic: Ah Xian's Semiotic Interface Between China and the West," 77–79; Li Chao, *Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute Faculty Ceramic Art Works Tour Exhibition in USA* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University, 2007), 10.

significance. As a self-taught artist, Ah Xian has experimented with a range of media over his career, from oil painting and mixed-media collage to plaster-casting and installation. With hindsight, porcelain can be situated as the first of many “traditional” media that Ah Xian adopted following the success of *China china*, including cloisonné, lacquer and jade in *Human human* (2000-03), bronze in *Metaphysica* (2007), and semi-precious stones and “scholar’s rocks” in *Evolutionaura* (2011-13). He announced this project in a statement for The Asian Arts Society of Australia Contemporary Asian Art Forum in October 1998, titled “Self-Exile of the Soul” and published several times as a declaration of his artistic aims:

In my understanding, we [Chinese artists] possess a richness of cultural resources and wealth that are beautiful and almost unassailable. So why do we let them go to waste instead of constructing them into new treasures?³⁷³

In passages like this, porcelain is elevated from a more attractive substitute for plaster to a precious “cultural resource” in need of salvation and reappraisal by those who have inherited it as a birthright but been denied access to it through historical and political circumstance. Ah Xian clarified this aspiration over a decade later in conversation with Kathryn Wells, reaffirming its ongoing centrality for his work:

Among the ideas of why I use these materials in my artwork is to show that they are not just about ancient heritage and traditions, they are also current, creative, up-to-date and compatible [with] contemporary art concepts and ideas.³⁷⁴

³⁷³ Ah Xian, “Self-Exile of the Soul,” 8.

³⁷⁴ Ah Xian and Kathryn Wells, “Ah Xian: Ancient Crafts, Contemporary Practice - A New Language of Art,” Craft Australia, September 28, 2011, <http://www.craftaustralia.org.au/library/interview.php?id=ah-xian-ancient-crafts-contemporary-practice>.

As these extracts illustrate, Ah Xian identifies his mission as a Chinese artist with the “revival” and adaptation of traditional forms for a contemporary context. A parallel could be drawn with Li Jianshen’s ceramics (figs. 61, 62), in which classical forms are also renewed. Yet Ah Xian has also defined his turn toward porcelain and other traditional media, like Sin-ying Ho, as an ‘issue of survival,’ a need to ‘remain true to myself and the specific culture from which I draw strength.’³⁷⁵ In an interview with Melissa Chiu in 2001, he noted that ‘even if someone is away from China, they recognise themselves as being Chinese,’ and ‘have a clearer vision of China and Chinese culture.’³⁷⁶ Ah Xian discovered this clarity in Sydney, separated by distance and time from his birthplace, but more aware than ever of the complexities of cultural identity and determined to explore these through porcelain, that most distinctively Chinese of materials.

Several distinctions should be noted, however, that differentiate Ah Xian’s and Sin-ying Ho’s otherwise comparable visions of porcelain as the key to their Chineseness, and that derive from their divergent experiences and artistic approaches. First, many interpreters of Ah Xian’s work have linked his use of porcelain and other traditional materials with the political violence and repression that he witnessed during the 1960s and ‘70s, when the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution spread rapidly across China – something from which Ho would have been relatively sheltered in Hong Kong. Ah Xian has recounted that his access to art during these decades was frustrated by the widespread destruction of books deemed counter-revolutionary. His parents enrolled him in after-school art classes, where he studied the principles of drawing, calligraphy, ink-painting and seal-carving, and they had preserved an encyclopaedia of artisanal arts at their home, ‘a

³⁷⁵ Ah Xian, “Self-Exile of the Soul,” 7.

³⁷⁶ Ah Xian, unpublished interview with Melissa Chiu, 15 April 2001, cited in Chiu, “The Iconic and the Personal: Ah Xian,” 183.

splendid silk-bound hard-cover first edition of *Arts and Crafts of China* [*Zhongguo gongyi meishu* 中国工艺美术, 1959],’ illustrated with samples of porcelain, lacquer, cloisonné and other media that perhaps provided the original impulse for his fascination with these materials.³⁷⁷ Like Ai Weiwei, who first encountered ceramic objects in his father’s treasured collection of diplomatic souvenirs, Ah Xian’s earliest experience with the medium was therefore comparably intimate and circumspect, perhaps inspiring his use of porcelain to conjure a private, internal world. Beyond these limited resources, Ah Xian’s access to formal arts training and art objects was almost non-existent. Classical works of art were considered too redolent of the Imperial past to be displayed, while the temples and palaces that housed collections of such objects were deemed irrelevant and repurposed into schools or community centres.³⁷⁸ Denied access to these artistic practices during his formative years, Ah Xian may have developed a particularly strong attraction to them later in life, as well as an awareness of their value and significance, and of the need to protect them from the threat of future obliteration.

A second distinction between Ah Xian and Sin-ying Ho lies in their opposing views of the global and globalisation. For Ho, globalisation represents a liberating movement away from self-contained and separate cultural spheres toward a transcultural blending of languages, iconographies and world-views. Ah Xian, on the other hand, has described globalisation as a self-denying entrapment. In “Self-Exile of the Soul”, he vehemently criticises Chinese artists who would ‘try to cast themselves into the mainstream ... co-operatively participating in [a] globalised art culture in a globalised form’ with the hope of gaining wider appreciation for their work. These artists, he asserts, in their haste ‘to just catch the last carriage of the last departing train,’ are responsible for a destabilising

³⁷⁷ Lee, “Ah Xian: Challenging the Spatial Limitations of Sculptural Art,” 49-50.

³⁷⁸ Roberts, “The Slow Art of Ah Xian,” 392.

of the continuity that once defined China's artistic heritage, 'dropping every valuable that we had but, because of its familiarity, didn't appreciate,' while deluding themselves with the belief that their adoption of "Western" approaches will guarantee success.³⁷⁹ It is ironic that Ah Xian developed this view only after he left China and had lived in Sydney for eight years; many of the works that he created before 1990, and even several years after, show an interest in European styles and forms. His oil-on-canvas series *Palace lady* (1985-87) and *The wall* (1987-89), for example, show a Surrealist influence that persists in the Giorgio de Chirico-inspired *Heavy wounds* series (1991-93; fig. 115), while the collage *Just what is it that makes today's families so different? So appealing?* (1990), completed not long after he arrived Sydney, derives both its inspiration and title from English Pop artist Richard Hamilton.³⁸⁰ It seems highly likely, then, that his abrupt change in opinion – like his attraction to porcelain – was largely motivated by his departure from Beijing and the isolation that he felt from Chinese culture. He has since tempered his criticism to some extent, exploring more "contemporary" modes of expression like concrete in *Concrete forest* (2008) and even performance in his most recent work, *Serenity self-portrait* (2016), yet he remains defiantly independent of global artistic trends. Although both Ah Xian and Sin-ying Ho were motivated to use porcelain by their migration, then, their experiences *after* migrating led to very different views of global contemporary art.

Nevertheless, despite Ah Xian's initial stated resistance to the imposition of "Western" forms and art-world structures, his use of porcelain was to a large extent enabled by the institutional framework supporting artistic practice in Australia, where he has found his

³⁷⁹ Ah Xian, "Self-Exile of the Soul," 8–9.

³⁸⁰ Suhanya Raffel, "Ah Xian," in *The China Project*, by Suhanya Raffel, Zhang Xiaogang, and William Yang (South Brisbane, QLD: Queensland Art Gallery, 2009), 103.

greatest success. This demonstrates clearly the extent to which his art and career have been enabled by his navigation of different cultural contexts, just as Sin-ying Ho's access to training and resources in Jingdezhen has been greatly enabled by her association with North American educational and arts institutions. As already noted, the first *China china* busts were completed during an artist residency at SCA, with the benefit of materials, equipment, training, and a cohort of enthusiastic students. In the following year, Ah Xian received an Australia Council New Work Grant to fund a nine-month stay in Jingdezhen, his second trip to the city, during which he commissioned local artisans to mould and paint forty-three busts.³⁸¹ He sold his first bust in the same year to the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, followed by sales to the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, and the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), Canberra, in 2000. The NGA also awarded Ah Xian the inaugural National Sculpture Prize in 2001, which likely funded a third trip to Jingdezhen in 2002, then he received an Australian Council Fellowship to fund his fourth and final journey to the Porcelain Capital in 2004.³⁸² Although Ah Xian once vehemently denied the authority of the "Western" art-world, he has benefitted from the privilege of his in-between status as a Chinese artist in Australia. Culturally homeless but 'in possession of everything,' to cite Chen Zhen, Ah Xian and Ho's experiences of dislocation greatly enabled the development of their artistic practice, not only on a conceptual but also a material level.³⁸³

A final distinction between Sin-ying Ho or Li Jianshen and Ah Xian is his resistance to the highly technique-driven, virtuosic approach that these artists have cultivated in favour of what he has defined as a more "conceptual" attitude. An emphasis on concept is

³⁸¹ Anthony Dennis, "Absence Makes the Artist Ponder and Cast His Past in China," *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 13, 2001.

³⁸² Brown, "Porcelain Warrior," 14.

³⁸³ Chen, *Transexperiences*, 5.

present as well in Li's and Ho's work but, as trained ceramicists, they engage with the medium in a manner that is entirely distinct to Ah Xian's autodidactic, idiosyncratic style. A concise explanation of this approach can again be found in one of Ah Xian's many published statements: his opening address as the judge for the tenth Sidney Myer Fund International Ceramics Award (SMFICA), held in 2008 at La Trobe University, Melbourne, in which he set forth a strident manifesto for a conceptually-motivated vision of ceramic art. Recasting his earlier statements on the need to adapt traditional techniques to a contemporary context in a more declamatory mode, the artist begins by decrying the isolation of ceramics from the mainstream of contemporary art, 'stuck to one side in a grey and shady area,' and the staid conservatism with which they have subsequently been associated. To combat this marginalisation, 'to inject new blood and energy,' ceramicists should cast aside their over-reliance on technique, 'disrupt the definition of Ceramic Art as one of process and redefine it as [one] of critical conceptualisation,' though with an emphasis on 'highly skilled technical ability.' Technique, however, when given prime importance, becomes 'a large yet invisible cocoon [suppressing] the desire, passion and courage to break the barriers and cross the border to the "outside".'³⁸⁴ While Sin-ying Ho and Li Jianshen, both trained in specialist techniques of porcelain production, view the technical aspects of their work as central, Ah Xian, the independent amateur, enshrines the concept of his busts as their most significant characteristic and, perhaps as a result, he has achieved the greatest global recognition of all three.

³⁸⁴ All quotes by Ah Xian, cited from Ah Xian and Jo Ely, "Engaging Contemporary Art Audiences," *Journal of Australian Ceramics* 47, no. 2 (July 2008): 16–17.

While pronouncements like those made in Ah Xian's SMFICA address find a parallel in his SCA *China china* busts (figs. 68, 69), a contradiction emerges when these statements are held against the seventy-three busts commissioned in Jingdezhen in 1999, 2002 and 2004. The first ten works in the series exude a potent intimacy and empathy, lovingly cast and painted by the artist during a year of great personal and artistic discovery. The pieces produced in Jingdezhen, on the other hand, show a fascination with aesthetic variety, technical virtuosity, and the potential for modular mass-production offered by the city's highly complex system of labour delegation. In these works, the cultural takes priority above the personal, both because their overwhelming quantity and variety renders the search for the private an impossible task, and because the relationship between model and motif that was once so central is largely abandoned. The latter was likely an issue of practicality, as the artist found it difficult to source willing models in Jingdezhen.

Nevertheless, for writers in Australia and North America, these busts represent the true blossoming of Ah Xian's artistic vision, while the first ten are retrospectively dismissed as "prototypes", "blueprints", 'hesitant and crude' in comparison with the Jingdezhen busts, with their air of 'added authenticity.'³⁸⁵ Ah Xian himself, at the time of the busts' creation, regarded them as experiments and was not entirely satisfied with his results, a feeling perhaps partially derived from his sense that he lacked the required technical skills.³⁸⁶ This sense of lack perhaps inspired his desire to visit Jingdezhen to learn from

³⁸⁵ Levin, "'China China' - Recent Works in Porcelain by Ah Xian / Powerhouse Museum / 14 March - 16 September 2001"; Roberts, "The Slow Art of Ah Xian," 393; Feinstein, "A Journey to China," 111; Dennis, "Absence Makes the Artist Ponder and Cast His Past in China."

³⁸⁶ Claire Roberts, email communication with Alex Burchmore, 2 May 2018.

local artisans, though for the current argument it is the association of porcelain and the Porcelain Capital with the artist's sense of self-identity that takes precedence, as a point of access with a heritage from which he felt isolated. From this perspective, the busts produced in Jingdezhen signify a final resigned acceptance, perhaps even an embrace or consummate realisation of the cultural stereotypes to which migrants are subjected, as well as a concealing of the private world beneath. The two are no longer symbiotically merged but exist as separate identities: a "skin" of culture over an inaccessibly private inner world.

A few examples will suffice to demonstrate this shift, starting with the final three works in the series: *Bust 78* (fig. 70), *Bust 79* (fig. 71) and *Bust 80* (fig. 72), all created in 2004. Each of these busts is adorned with lotus flowers that recall those first seen on *Bust 4* but that have been formed in a completely different style. While the lotuses on the SCA bust are painted under-glaze in cobalt blue, here they rest on the surface as applied decoration, unfurling in paper-thin blooms across the subject's skin, while the entire sculpture is coated in a celadon glaze that pools luxuriously in the undulations of flesh and flower alike. As in the self-contained and meditative pieces that Liu Jianhua created for "Horizon" and "Liu Jianhua," the luminous translucence and viscosity of this glaze insulates against the external world, encasing the subject within a luxurious shroud that contrasts starkly with the transparent glaze used for the SCA busts, through which both the white body of the clay and the features of the person represented are clearly visible.

At the same time, the lotus flowers in the later busts do not adhere to the figure's skin or follow the lines of their features, as in *Bust 4* (fig. 68), but rest gently on their surface, as if about to peel away, like the leaf on the shoulder of *Bust 79*. Superficial and inner meaning are independent of each other, caught in a final moment of communion before



Figure 70: Ah Xian (b. 1960), China china: bust 78, 2004, porcelain, celadon glaze, 43 x 41 x 24 cm; Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne.



Figure 71: Ah Xian (b. 1960), China china: bust 79, 2004, porcelain, celadon glaze, 41 x 39 x 24 cm.



Figure 72: Ah Xian (b. 1960), China china: bust 80, 2004, porcelain, celadon glaze, 41 x 39 x 24 cm; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

their final separation. Any suggestion of the personal within the cultural, meanwhile, is effaced by the impassivity of the models' features. Each bust is of a different woman, yet their lack of hair, shared ornament and uniform celadon glaze make them difficult to discern and almost inhuman, aloof and alien creatures. Although these final additions to the *China china* series are similar in ornament and subject to *Bust 4*, they could not be more distinct in the quality of the tension between different forms of identification.

A comparable impassivity and separation of model and motif is apparent in *Bust 45* (1999; fig. 73) and *Bust 67* (2002; fig. 74). *Bust 45* extends the wave pattern first used on *Bust 10* across the entire surface of the figure – in this case, Ah Xian's father. In the earlier work, these waves could be linked to the motif of the dragon and interpreted as either a tempestuous ocean or a reservoir of life-giving waters, associated in both cases with an emotional experience shared by artist and subject. In *Bust 45*, however, the waves have hardened into a repetitive uniformity, carved in light relief into the surface of the porcelain and, like *Busts 78, 79* and *80*, coated with an unctuous, monochrome glaze that creates an impenetrable carapace. The features of Ah Xian's father are almost completely disguised by the rhythmic incised lines, his mouth reduced to a sinuous line, his nose visible only by its protuberance and the creases of his cheeks, and his eyes two shallow indentations almost imperceptibly divided by the meeting of his eyelids. Again, there is no correlation here between model and motif, and the inner world of the subject remains private and aloof from his ornamental shell.

The same impression of hardened carapace is created in *Bust 67*, in which the anonymity of the figure has become so acute that s/he is almost androgynous, in distinct contrast to the explicit gendering of the motifs chosen for the SCA busts. As on *Busts 78, 79* and *80*, the motif has been applied rather than painted: Ah Xian has developed the all-over



Figure 73: Ah Xian (b. 1960), China china: bust 45, 1999, porcelain, 35 x 43 x 25 cm.



Figure 74: Ah Xian (b. 1960), China china: bust 67, 2002, porcelain.

pattern used on *Bust 45* into a close-fitting mantle, a three-dimensional rendering of the scale motif used for centuries by porcelain-painters as a decorative filler. The iridescent blue glaze covering this bleeds into the grey-white biscuit porcelain of the model's face, but the two remain distinct. In contrast to the partial obscuring of facial features in *Bust 45*, here the face is defiantly unadorned, even if personality is elusive and opaque. The motif is neither fused with the model's skin, as in the SCA busts, nor attached like a carapace, as in *Bust 45*, but is instead overlaid like a fitted piece of clothing. The separation of model and motif is comparable to that seen in *Busts 78, 79 and 80* yet, while in these busts the glaze unifies all elements into a single, unified composition, on *Bust 67* even this concession to aesthetic harmony is abandoned. The sitter's inner world is opaque, private and impenetrable, ornamented but not suffocated by a sumptuous and alluring mantle that seems to be worn by choice, and could be removed at any time. These few examples of the Jingdezhen-made *China china* busts, while they show the prising apart of personal and cultural that constitutes their main distinction with the earlier busts, do not adequately convey the overwhelming modularity and artificiality of the entire series of seventy-three. As the repetition of motifs used on the SCA busts in *Busts 78, 79, 80 and 45* shows, Ah Xian recycles and adapts a relatively limited range of designs: dragons and other creatures of myth appear on nine busts, while landscape scenes and various combinations of flowers, birds and butterflies each appear on thirteen, together comprising a third of the entire group. Almost all these motifs were sourced from pattern-books and catalogues of antique ceramics, given to artisans whose careers now depend on their ability to accurately reproduce historical wares.³⁸⁷ In one workshop, for example, Ah Xian employed ten artisans celebrated for their replications

³⁸⁷ Brown, "Porcelain Warrior," 15; Feinstein, "A Journey to China," 111.

of Ming- and Qing-dynasty blue-and-white and *doucai* vases, plates and sculptures – much like those employed by Ai Weiwei to produce his more conventional facsimiles.³⁸⁸ Ironically, replication of the past is one of the aspects of the contemporary porcelain industry in Jingdezhen that Ah Xian has most vehemently and consistently critiqued, citing it as evidence for stagnation in “Self-Exile of the Soul” and a loss of “artistic soul” in his judge’s comments for SMFICA.³⁸⁹ The virtuosity with which the artisans fulfil their role in his work also seems to contradict the artist’s cautions against over-reliance on technique. Yet a comparison could be drawn with Sin-ying Ho’s similar appropriation of standardised forms. In each case, potentially cliché parts are transformed into modular components of a multifaceted, composite whole. Their permutations and combinations suggest an aesthetic abundance, yet when viewed as a group it becomes evident that they are derived from a relatively limited range of sources. There is an analogy with the composite construction of cultural identity that each artist explores: that which appears essential is revealed to be a highly artificial patchwork of fragments, and even the most recalcitrant of stereotypes can be dissected and reassembled.

This reassembly of fragments is complicated in Ah Xian’s Jingdezhen busts, however, by the fracturing effect of collective production. Ho’s combinatory vessels, as the creation of a single hand, preserve a sense of aesthetic unity despite their multiple sources of inspiration. Conversely, though Ah Xian remained involved as initiator and supervisor, all aspects of the creative process aside from the casting and moulding of the busts – with a press-moulding technique similar to that used for Ai’s *Sunflower seeds* (fig. 51), not the slip-casting process that Ah Xian used at SCA – were accomplished by teams of

³⁸⁸ Rhana Devenport, “Ah Xian’s China: An Artistic Journey through a Lost Art-Form,” *Object*, no. 50 (2000): 54.

³⁸⁹ Ah Xian, “Self-Exile of the Soul,” 9; Ah Xian, in Ah Xian and Ely, “Engaging Contemporary Art Audiences,” 17.

artisans, each responsible for a single painted, incised, carved or applied motif, glazing technique or overglaze enamel. These artisans and the motifs they used were selected by the artist after visiting workshops and studios across Jingdezhen, poring over pattern books and exemplary wares.³⁹⁰ All the idiosyncratic aspects of making, from contact with models, moulding busts, to selection of designs, were under Ah Xian's control, while more practical tasks were delegated to artisans – the adaptation of the selected motifs to the irregular forms of the busts, for example, involved a high level of expertise and was a particularly time-consuming task, involving extended interaction between artist and artisans over long periods of time on-site.³⁹¹ As in *Sunflower seeds*, then, there is a split between the production and conceptualisation of the work, with the former located "there" in Jingdezhen and the latter "here" in Australia, the US and Europe, where the busts have predominantly been exhibited. Ah Xian has remarked that the artisans he employed, like those later employed by Ai, generally did not understand or share his intentions. He received mixed reactions of laughter, incredulity, surprise, curiosity, even suspicion and accusations of instability, with many artisans 'shaking their heads and laughing as if ... executing a madman's commission.'³⁹² The busts created in this split process are caught between worlds – between the world of the personal and a cultural, between an artisanal and a conceptual view of ceramics, and between their site of production and sites of display.

³⁹⁰ Interview with Ah Xian in November 2000, cited in VCE Art, "Ah Xian / Materials & Working Methods," VCE Art, 2000, <https://web.archive.org/web/20030206215651/http://www.vceart.com:80/artists/xian/page.2.html>; Feinstein, "A Journey to China," 111; Brown, "Porcelain Warrior," 15; Ah Xian and Wells, "Ah Xian: Ancient Crafts, Contemporary Practice - A New Language of Art."

³⁹¹ Claire Roberts, email communication, 5 May 2018.

³⁹² Linda Jaivin, "Ah Xian: Recent Works in Porcelain," *ArtAsiaPacific* 33, no. 1 (2002): 29; Levin, "'China China' - Recent Works in Porcelain by Ah Xian / Powerhouse Museum / 14 March - 16 September 2001"; Catalani, "From Iconic to Symbolic: Ah Xian's Semiotic Interface Between China and the West," 85; Stephan von der Schulenburg, "À La Recherche de La Porcelaine Perdue ["In Search of Lost Porcelain"]," in *Ah Xian: Skulpturen*, ed. Marc Gundel et al. (Bonn: Edition Braus, 2007), 25–26; Ah Xian and Wells, "Ah Xian: Ancient Crafts, Contemporary Practice - A New Language of Art."

At heart, then, despite the differences in their making, Ah Xian's SCA and Jingdezhen *China china* busts are united by a shared sense of fractured, multifaceted identity that reflects the artist's experiences of the in-between. Although his series in porcelain and other media are produced in China, it is revealing to note that Ah Xian is almost unknown in that country and has only displayed his work there once, in April 2000 at Beijing Normal University. Even this one exhibition, largely due to its venue, attracted a limited audience of students and friends of the artist, leaving a relatively shallow impression in the local arts community.³⁹³ Ah Xian's displays in Australia, North America and Europe, however, attract large audiences, and he is nationally recognised as a leading Australian contemporary artist, represented in the collections of almost all state and national galleries. He is the quintessential transexperiential artist, living in multiple contexts but never completely at home, 'doomed to play over again, for his audience's edification, the vicissitudes of a metaphysical homelessness.'³⁹⁴ Like Chen Zhen, he is a perpetual peripatetic: his statement in an interview in 2000, 'I feel I belong to nowhere, and that I am in between or outside of everything,' could be a quote from Chen's exposition of his transgressive theory.³⁹⁵ Even the artist's name, "Ah Xian", like the fictional "Zhu Xian" concocted by Chen or Sin-ying Ho's self-naming as Cassandra, is an artificial persona, adopted in 1982 during a trip to Shenzhen and then retained as an artistic pseudonym.³⁹⁶ Originating in his desire to reconnect with a lost heritage after moving to Australia, *China china* and subsequent series served only to reinforce for Ah Xian that this vision of

³⁹³ Feinstein, "A Journey to China," 109; Catalani, "From Iconic to Symbolic: Ah Xian's Semiotic Interface between China and the West," 80; Ah Xian, cited in Ah Xian and Wells, "Ah Xian: Ancient Crafts, Contemporary Practice - A New Language of Art"; Ah Xian, cited in Michael Young, "Ah Xian," *Artist Profile*, April 26, 2016, <http://www.artistprofile.com.au/ah-xian/>.

³⁹⁴ Jonathan Goodman, "Ah Xian," *Sculpture* 22, no. 5 (June 2003): 73.

³⁹⁵ Interview with Ah Xian in November 2000, in VCE Art, "Ah Xian / Ideas, Inspirations & Influences," VCE Art, 2000, <https://web.archive.org/web/20030206220641/http://www.vceart.com:80/artists/xian/page.1.html>.

³⁹⁶ Roberts, "Ah Xian: 'China. China'. Recent Works in Porcelain," 228.

culture was comparably artificial, and that his Chineseness (and that of others) is more complex than a stereotype. Shot through with personal and experiential dimensions of meaning, intersected by bonds of family and friendship, it is a fabrication of his own making and on his own terms.

Transcendence and constriction in Caroline Cheng's *Prosperity* series and her packaging of Chineseness as an artistic commodity at The Pottery Workshop

In the work of the artists so far discussed, a persistent preoccupation can be noted with the often unstable interactions between personal and cultural dimensions of self. Each artist has explored a range of responses to these pressures, from desire for liberation to a deliberate disguising of private meaning. Both lines of imaginative speculation can be identified in the work of Hong Kong-born ceramicist Caroline Cheng, whose *Prosperity* series of porcelain “butterfly-dresses” suggests a moment of metamorphosis between transcendence and constriction, representing both the weight of cultural stereotypes and the uplifting abandonment of a transcultural existence. In these works, as in those of Sin-ying Ho and Ah Xian, culture becomes an ornament or adornment, a costume that viewers can imagine draping around their shoulders, to be either suffocated by the weight of the composite garment or carried into the air by the thousands of porcelain butterflies from which each dress is constructed.

For the artisans hired to create these butterflies, however, constriction remains the only possible outcome – they received no acknowledgment for their involvement, relegated like those involved in the making of *Sunflower seeds* to the denigrated status of *gongren*. The same discrepancy is apparent in Cheng's founding and operation of the Jingdezhen branch of PWS, another art residency initiative in the city that promotes and facilitates

the fascination of overseas visitors. Rather than a recreation of China's classical past, Cheng's program gives residents an opportunity to gild their work with a ready-made aura of Chineseness to enhance its artistic value. Like her porcelain dresses, this cultural overlay is a form of costume or adornment, a vehicle for the imagination that allows visiting artists to experience a feeling of transcendence from the constraints of culture, while the artisans who assist them are grounded by their role as voiceless labourers.

Entrapment and liberation in Cheng's "butterfly-dresses"

In Ah Xian's *Bust 67* (fig. 74), the personal and the cultural are definitively separated, with the latter seemingly worn around the anonymous subject's shoulders and head like a close-fitting but detachable mantle. Another aspect of this work that hasn't yet been discussed is the striking biomorphism of the motif: though adapted from a conventional pattern, it could be mistaken for a coat of scales or feathers growing from the model's skin and marking her or him as a hybrid creature, part-human, and part-fish/bird. This is reminiscent of the biomorphic forms taken by Ho's *Matrix* (figs. 64, 65) and *Binary code* (fig. 63) and the sphere of bodily existence beyond culture that they evoke, alluding perhaps to a mutual yearning for transcendence through symbiotic union.

A closer parallel can be drawn, however, with Cheng's work, specifically her *Prosperity* series of composite "butterfly-dresses" (fig. 75). Both series suggest a metamorphosis that complicates any unequivocal identification of Chineseness, despite their use of Chinese motifs and a quintessentially Chinese material. The androgynous figure in *Bust 67* wears ornament like a second skin, transposed from two-dimensional motif to spiny mantle. Cheng too imbues her chosen motif – the butterfly – with a captivating three-



Figure 75: Caroline Cheng (b. 1963), Prosperity: Peacock, 2012, porcelain, linen, 181 x 180 cm; British Museum, London.

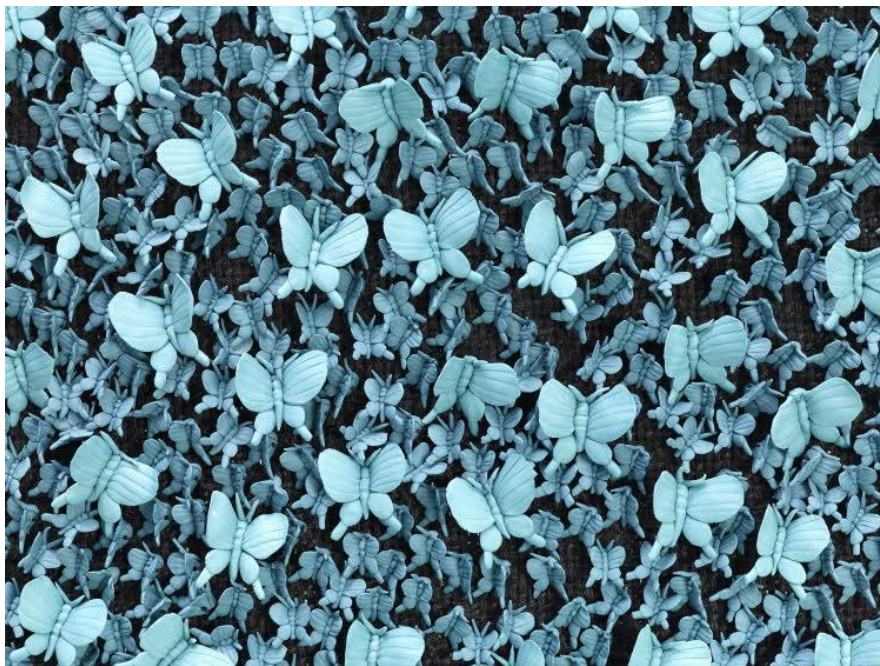


Figure 76: Caroline Cheng (b. 1963), Prosperity: Peacock (detail), 2012, porcelain, linen, 181 x 180 cm; British Museum, London.

dimensionality, weaving thousands of miniature porcelain insects into a swarming robe of outstretched wings that provokes wonder and unease, perhaps even disgust (fig. 76). In contrast to Ah Xian's busts, Cheng's porcelain garments do not adorn a visible figure but only suggest the possibility of adornment, hung on the gallery wall with sleeves outstretched as if about to take flight. Like the apertures in *Binary code* (fig. 63) and *Matrix* (figs. 64, 65), or the negative space in *Crane* (fig. 61) and *Square cups set* (fig. 62), they invite the viewer to complete the composition through the imagined insertion of their own body, held aloft (or suffocated) by porcelain wings. The issue of whether the robes are tools of liberation or suppression is left unresolved. These works, like Ah Xian's, represent both the asphyxiating weight of superficial cultural constructs and the uplifting release of transexperience.

Like both Ah Xian's busts and Sin-ying Ho's composite vessels, Cheng's butterfly-dresses generate tension above all through the complex relationship between their form and ornament. The principal motif of the series is the butterfly, 'a symbol [in Chinese art] of summer, beauty, romance, and dreams.'³⁹⁷ As such, like flowers, it is associated with femininity and has long been used to adorn women's jewellery, accessories and clothing. The Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908), for example, was fond of the "100 Butterflies" (*baizhi hudie* 百只蝴蝶) design used on textiles and ceramics to convey a wish for the same number of blessings, and she often wore a robe bearing this auspicious design.³⁹⁸ Cheng's choice of the butterfly therefore seems appropriate, combining the two media on which it is most commonly depicted in a lavish celebration of feminine beauty. This impression is reinforced by the title of the series: *Prosperity* (*Fu* 富) which, in Chinese, is

³⁹⁷ Welch, *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery*, 91.

³⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 91–92.



Figure 77: Woman's jacket [ao], 1880-1900, indigo-dyed silk, cotton, 146.5 cm; Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney.

homophonous with *fu* (服), a generic term for clothing, playing on the association of extravagant robes with wealth and fortune. Yet the latter *fu* also carries more sinister connotations, including servitude, obedience and mourning, signalling the role that clothing plays in social hierarchies and rituals. The type of robe that Cheng has chosen reinforces this aspect of her work's meaning: although not completely identical with any single form of dress, the billowing sleeves of her garments find their nearest counterpart in the surcoats (*ao 襖*; fig. 77) worn by Han Chinese women in the Qing dynasty. These loose-fitting, heavy garments were cut to conceal the body's contours, while the sleeves, often so long that they would hang to the knee, were intended to provide enough room for a woman to breastfeed without having to undress.³⁹⁹ They were designed, by men, with modesty, motherhood and limited mobility in mind, so their evocation in *Prosperity* introduces a note of constriction or entrapment to initial associations with a liberating transcendence.⁴⁰⁰ Additionally, as in both Ah Xian's and Ho's work, this constriction is associated with a stereotyped marker of Chineseness, thereby implying the suffocating weight of an imposed cultural identity.

However, while Cheng's practice is analogous on a conceptual level to that of the two artists mentioned above, in terms of production it is closer to the works by Liu Jianhua and Ai Weiwei discussed in previous chapters, especially *Sunflower seeds* (fig. 51). Each dress bears between five and twenty-five thousand porcelain butterflies, hand-crafted and stitched with embroidery thread to a linen support by artisans hired to produce the work under Cheng's direction.⁴⁰¹ Like those employed by Ai and Ah Xian, these artisans

³⁹⁹ Naomi Yin-yin Szeto, "Cheungsam: Fashion, Culture and Gender," in *Evolution & Revolution: Chinese Dress 1700s-1990s*, by Claire Roberts (Sydney, NSW: Powerhouse, 1997), 55–57.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 55–57, 63–64.

⁴⁰¹ Fang, "Jingdezhen and the Artist: 1910-2012," 10; Tony DeBlasi, "Caroline Cheng: Reinventing Subversion," *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, no. 74 (February 2009): 72–74.

are not credited for their labour and are relegated to the status of anonymous *gongren*, a denigrated position further complicated by Cheng's employment of women artisans only.⁴⁰² These fractured emblems of liberation on one hand, entrapment on the other, visually comparable with a form of dress designed to constrict women's freedom, are created by another generation of women contractually obligated to serve – a potent analogy for the abrupt dispelling of their promise of transcendence when it is realised that the heavy folds of ceramic-encrusted fabric are more suffocating than liberating. Another parallel with Ai can be found in Cheng's framing of *Prosperity* as a comment on the role of the individual within the collective:

From afar, people ... look at China and see a country with people almost looking the same. But if you look closely, China has many complex personalities, many different cultures mixed into one large pot.⁴⁰³

Like the sunflower seeds in Ai's installation, however, Cheng's butterflies ultimately remain a symbol of the artist and her personal creative vision, rather than the various personalities of their creators. Viewed alongside Ah Xian's and Sin-ying Ho's explorations of the personal within the cultural, her porcelain dresses reinforce the tension between external and internal identifications, the superficial and intimate, multiple and singular.

The Jingdezhen branch of The Pottery Workshop and Cheng's development of the China/china analogy into a global brand

Following Li Jianshen's example, Cheng has paired her artistic practice with a more ambitious institutional manifestation of her view of Chinese cultural identity, promoting

⁴⁰² Fang, "Jingdezhen and the Artist: 1910-2012," 10.

⁴⁰³ DeBlasi, "Caroline Cheng: Reinventing Subversion," 74.

the fascination with Jingdezhen and porcelain that she shares with Li, Sin-ying Ho and Ah Xian through her residency initiative: PWS. Yet in contrast to Li's idealised fiction of classical China as literati retreat, those visitors who choose to stay at PWS gain access to a far more enterprising range of resources. Rather than a facsimile of a lost classical past, here it is the equally nebulous quality of Chineseness that is fabricated and offered to visiting artists as a form of ready-made cultural authenticity that can be applied to their work like another layer of glaze. Residents are given access to the same resources used by Ah Xian, but with the preliminary process of selecting receptive workshops already accomplished. No knowledge of China, Chinese language, or Chinese culture is needed to take this opportunity – the materials, tools and personnel required to conjure a “Chinese” aesthetic are paid for and arranged in advance, demonstrating once again the ease with which cultural identity can be fabricated, in this case quite literally, when the correct components are at hand.

Cheng opened PWS in 2005, taking over a series of studios and apartments within the former SF, where Liu Jianhua and his uncle worked during the 1970s and 1980s. Even before Cheng opened PWS, former SF employees and other unemployed artisans across Jingdezhen had seized the opportunity to partition this disused space into independent studios. When English-Australian ceramicist Roger Law (b. 1941) visited the factory for the first time in 2003, he found a ‘rabbit warren of broken-down buildings, [where] many an aspiring Chinese and foreign contemporary artist can be found,’ facing a courtyard ruled by ‘a manic ginger cockerel and his chickens.’⁴⁰⁴ On his return in 2009, however, it had been transformed into a labyrinth of glass-and-steel boutiques and sleek studios overseen by affluent young art stars that inspired another visitor in 2012 to christen it

⁴⁰⁴ Roger Law, “Imperial Potters,” *Ceramic Review*, no. 235 (February 2009): 50–52.

‘a ceramics 798’, drawing a comparison with the commercially successful arts district in Beijing.⁴⁰⁵ By this time, the tenants of the complex were predominantly not Chinese and included designers, artists and entrepreneurs as well as practising ceramicists, all drawn by the opportunity to make a profit from this flourishing porcelain renaissance.

For this transient population of opportunistic visitors, PWS was their gateway to the SF, and Jingdezhen in general, though there had been earlier attempts to transform the disused space into a conduit to the Porcelain Capital. Liu Yuanchang, for example, the uncle with whom Liu Jianhua received his training in porcelain production, also initiated a residency program in the SF. When the collective was forced to close in 1997, faced with few alternatives, Liu decided to rent a small studio in the complex, where at first he continued to produce sculptures in the style of the factory’s former output, later adopting a more abstract style when these proved difficult to sell. In 2003, however, municipal officials suggested that Liu should rent more space. He expanded his business to include a team of twenty employees, producing art-porcelain that sold for high prices. The following year he opened a limited number of residency opportunities to overseas and Chinese artists with the aim of promoting the virtues of his home-city to a wider audience.⁴⁰⁶ These residencies soon came to focus more on visitors from outside China as their principal clientele, and so Liu’s workshop started to offer his residents assistance in accessing materials, equipment and labour. His daughter, Liu Danyuan, explains:

⁴⁰⁵ Law, 50; Fang, “Jingdezhen and the Artist: 1910-2012,” 10. The 798 Art District (798 艺术区) is a complex of de-commissioned military factory buildings in Beijing, many of which were repurposed during the mid-1990s into galleries and artist studios. It has now grown into a vibrant hub for contemporary artistic activity and a popular tourist destination, home to an ever-increasing number of arts venues as well as designer boutiques, bookshops, cafes and performance spaces.

⁴⁰⁶ Gillette, *China’s Porcelain Capital: The Rise, Fall and Reinvention of Ceramics in Jingdezhen*, 102.

We are a bridge. We help foreign artists get what they need so they can work.

We help them find raw materials, ceramists to make things for them, throwers, mould-makers, glaze-makers, firing – whatever our foreign artists need.⁴⁰⁷

What Liu's residencies offered above all else, however, was access to a wellspring of cultural authenticity – a means to elevate the value and appeal of an artist's work by associating it with an attractive (and lucrative) Chineseness.

In May 2005, Cheng opened PWS in another part of the SF, taking note of the clientele that Liu had found among overseas ceramicists and rapidly eclipsing his much smaller residency initiative. The growth of Cheng's interest in Jingdezhen parallels that of Li Jianshen. She first visited the Porcelain Capital at Ostrom and Sin-ying Ho's invitation in 1998, following her attendance of the Yixing International Ceramic Conference.⁴⁰⁸ Prior to this, she studied in the US during the 1980s, before returning in 1991 to Hong Kong, where she spent most of her childhood when not in her birthplace of Cambridge, England.⁴⁰⁹ Like Sin-ying Ho, Cheng has a complex cultural and linguistic background, and it was partially a sense of fragmented identity that drew her to Jingdezhen, where she too hoped to find a reassuring cultural stability and a feeling of wholeness.⁴¹⁰

Yet it was not only a yearning to discover her roots that drew Cheng to the Porcelain Capital. In 1995, in Hong Kong, she assumed leadership of PWS from another English-born ceramicist, Mak Yee-fun, who founded PWS in 1985 as an informal space where enthusiasts could gather to share their passion, and who taught wheel-throwing to Sin-

⁴⁰⁷ Liu Danyuan, cited in Gillette, 125.

⁴⁰⁸ Ho, 2017 Interview, Part 1.

⁴⁰⁹ Feng Jiaxue, «郑伟: 乐在陶中» [Caroline Cheng: The Joy of Ceramics], 中国新时代, no. 4 (2011): 48–51.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

ying Ho.⁴¹¹ Cheng expanded the reach of Mak's relatively modest operations by inviting contacts in the US and England to give guest lectures, causing attendance of open classes to grow in the next few years from less than ten students to over a hundred. In 2002, buoyed by this success, she opened a retail outlet in Shanghai's Tianzifang arts district to sell ceramics created in the Hong Kong studio, followed in 2007 by another retail branch on Nanluoguxiang, a tourist-oriented alley in Beijing. From a small communal space in Hong Kong, then, Cheng extended the reach of the PWS brand across mainland China, marketing Chinese ceramics (and the Porcelain Capital) to a diverse array of international clients.⁴¹² Like her butterfly-dresses, Cheng's sprawling commercial empire is founded on an understanding of modular adaptation, an ability to harness collective effort, and, above all, on the long-standing role of china as a gateway to China. In both her art and her business, she relies on this slippage of meaning between the two terms, promoting an image of China and Chineseness that is essentially a fabrication but, from a distance, gives the impression of a restorative wholeness.

Jingdezhen is often celebrated by ceramicists and ceramics historians in the US, Europe and Australia as the site of a porcelain renaissance, where local artisans and visiting artists alike can share their love for this material, reviving the storied splendours of the Porcelain Capital. For artists like Sin-ying Ho, Li Jianshen, Ah Xian and Caroline Cheng, on the other hand, who grew up in China but now live or travel extensively outside of the country, porcelain and Jingdezhen serve as a point of access to another revival: the

⁴¹¹ Ho, 2017 Interview, Part 1.

⁴¹² Feng, «郑伟: 乐在陶中» [Caroline Cheng: The Joy of Ceramics].

recovery of what they perceive to be a lost cultural inheritance, from which they feel they have been separated both by time, distance, and political or cultural upheaval.

Ho and Ah Xian, after relocating respectively to Toronto in 1992 and Sydney in 1990, gained their initial experience of Jingdezhen in 1996 on their first return journeys to China, associating the city with feelings of homecoming and reconnection. Ho sought on this journey to gain an insight into her family heritage, while Ah Xian aimed to imbue his highly conceptual artistic practice with a “traditional” or professional dimension and at the same time to give such traditions a contemporary relevance. Both came to realise, however, that Chineseness is a complex, composite designation, and that the China they had envisioned was an imagined ideal, assembled from their memories of home and inheritance, rather than an actual place. Ho subsequently became fascinated with the symbols and codes from which such ideals are fabricated, interrogating naming customs and official identification in *Identity* (2001; fig. 55), stereotyped ornamental vocabularies in *Identity, Binary code: The link* (2004; fig. 63) and *Matrix no. 1* (2005; figs. 64, 65), and linguistic translation in *Gibberish no. 3* (2005; fig. 60). She combined conventional vase forms, like *guan* and *meiping*, and traditional techniques, like *gongbi* painting in cobalt blue, with more contemporary processes of digital decal transfer and multi-part mould-making to create composite vessels that reflect her equally composite cultural identity.

Ah Xian also adapted traditional techniques, giving form in his *China china* series (1998-2004; figs. 33, 68-74, 114, 117) to the tensions between cultural and other forms of identity, like the affective bonds of family and friendship. Although he attempted at first to combine these webs of association in works created at SCA, he later came to view Chineseness as a form of collective production separate from the private world of the individual, or a pool of images on which he could draw at will to create various modular

configurations, a shift in attitude partially brought about by his realisation of the high-level technical support and material possibilities available in Jingdezhen.

Unlike Ah Xian and Ho, Li Jianshen was born in Jingdezhen and trained as a ceramicist at the JCI. After leaving the city in 1993 to pursue further education in the US, however, and subsequently returning only on intermittent occasions, he formed a comparably idealised image of the Porcelain Capital that is expressed through his homage to classical Chinese aesthetics in *Crane* (2008; fig. 61) and *Square cups set* (2008; fig. 62). The extent to which Li cherished this ideal is clearest, however, in his establishment of the SICV to give form to his fantasies and share them with ceramicists across the world, who treasure the same image of a rural China untouched by the illusion-shattering advances of modernity. Caroline Cheng shares Li's ambition to serve as a global ambassador for Jingdezhen, but rather than an idealised facsimile of "China", the Jingdezhen branch of her Hong Kong-based arts organisation PWS offers visiting artists a means to imbue their work with a veneer of Chineseness. As expressed by her *Prosperity* series of composite garments that invite viewers to inhabit their rustling, insect-like folds (figs. 75, 76), Cheng recognises the artificiality of Chineseness as a collective construct but embraces the liberating prospect of a cultural identity that can be worn or discarded at whim.

For each of these artists, porcelain is the vehicle through which they have realised the composite complexity of their ties to Chinese culture, as well as the means by which they have been able to reconstruct and reconsider this relationship – to initiate their own "porcelain renaissance". And Jingdezhen, as the Porcelain Capital, is the crucible in which their various visions of China and Chineseness have been given form. A further point of identification between Ho, Li, Ah Xian and Cheng, however, is their shared imagining of a sphere of existence beyond singular constructs of culture and unified

conceptions of self: the realm of transexperience, or the in-between. In her amorphous combinations of form and ornament, Ho envisions the global contemporary as a gigantic super-organism in which different views of the world and different experiences are merged and united. Li's cultivation of negative space, and his association of SICV with a "back-to-nature" way of life, offer points of access to a world outside the inexorable march of time. Ah Xian, too, conjures a vision of alternate, independent worlds in his *China china* busts – the private worlds of his subjects, overlaid and sometimes fused with cultural identity, but never completely exposed. Finally, Cheng's butterfly-dresses provide the most accessible path to transcendence: simply by donning one of these composite garments, it seems, the wearer can be carried beyond the mundanity of their everyday existence by a swarm of porcelain butterflies, given a new layer of meaning to add to the ongoing project of their transexperiential self.

Chapter 4: A play of surfaces

Ai Weiwei, Liu Jianhua, Ah Xian, Sin-ying Ho and other contemporary Chinese creators of New Export China have found in porcelain an ideal means to explore the ambiguities of history, the vaguely-defined boundary between artistic and artisanal production, and aspects of their fractured personal identities. Yet for each of these artists the appeal of the material was initially more superficial, arising from the translucent lustre and glossy smoothness of a glazed porcelain surface that almost impels the desire to possess and caress. In Beijing's antique markets, Ai Weiwei was first drawn to the 'shape, colour and markings' of the heaped ceramics offered for purchase, fascinated by 'the enormous skill, the refined workmanship and ... aesthetic interest' that they displayed.⁴¹³ For Sin-ying Ho, the visual contrast of cobalt-blue and iron-red proved so alluring that she determined to use it throughout her career as an analogy for the blending of cultures and historical eras. Ah Xian initially chose porcelain as a substitute for plaster, attracted by its more refined material associations as well as its inherent beauty and tactility. And Liu Jianhua, once driven to reject porcelain by the memory of many unrewarding years working on an assembly line, returned to the medium over a decade later, like Ah Xian, in search of a material that could better convey his desire for visual appeal.

Reflecting this initial enticement, many works by these artists seem to emphasise visual and tactile appeal over conceptual depth, apparently creating little more than attractive objects, though the superficiality of these works masks more incisive critical aims. This tension between the superficial and the critical is most evident in a series of attractive, yet seemingly vacuous porcelain pieces commissioned by Ai Weiwei between 2004-07 and ranging from a miniature version of a motif taken from an iconic *ukiyo-e* woodblock

⁴¹³ Ai Weiwei, cited in Cohen, "Ai Weiwei," 78; Wilson and Van der Zijpp, *Ai Weiwei*, 9.

print, to *trompe l'oeil* imitations of fruit, crude oil and clothing. Despite their innocuous and even vacuous subject matter, the captivating lustre of these works masks a strident critique of the excesses of contemporary consumerism and global commercialisation of the Chinese art market, as well as the enervating desire for fame and profit that both carry with them. The first works in which Liu Jianhua adapted his professional training in porcelain production to contemporary artistic expression – his *Obsessive memories* series (1998-2000; figs. 84, 85, 87) of dismembered and decapitated women draped over voluminous armchairs or bathtubs – also draw attention to the disparity between appealing surface and an inner vacuity subjected to critique. Liu's porcelain sculptures adopt and extend the "Gaudy Art" (*Yansu yishu* 艳俗艺术) aesthetic created by artists like Xu Yihui during the mid-1990s, a sub-genre of Political Pop typified by combinations of folk and consumerist cultural forms in self-consciously gaudy, flamboyant works (fig. 86).⁴¹⁴ In contrast to the playful absurdism of most Gaudy works, however, as well as Ai's irreverent works of 2004-07, the critical thrust of Liu's sculptures is almost a threat, expressed through juxtaposition of superficial allure with an unsettling violence enacted on the bodies of faceless porcelain women.

A further contrast with both Ai and Liu can be found in many works by Sin-ying Ho, in which the apparently vacuous products of commodity culture and the entertainment industry are neither critiqued nor celebrated but are instead imbued with the possibility of symbolic and affective depth. On her composite sculptures *Confucius, Jesus Christ and*

⁴¹⁴ The term *su* (俗), usually translated as "vulgar" in opposition to *ya* (雅), meaning "elegant", has long been used in the literature of Chinese connoisseurship to imply 'a cluster of meanings which all operate in the area of social classification and ... are analogous to the descendants in the Romance languages of the Latin *vulgus*,' making clear the extent to which aesthetic distinctions in this literature are often a reflection of social classification. The use of this word in the epithet *Yansu yishu* to imply affiliation with a "gaudy", folk-derived artistic vocabulary is therefore very much in keeping with this established polarity. Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 82-83.

John Lennon no. 1 and no. 2 (2003-06; figs. 88-91), *Music* (2004; fig. 96), *Hero no. 1 and no. 2* (2007-09; figs. 97-99) and *Trilogy no. 1 and no. 2* (2007-09; figs. 100-101), Ho moves away from her focus on linguistic and ornamental codes toward pop icons. Although the juxtaposition of Charlie Brown and Bruce Lee, Hello Kitty and John Lennon may at first seem absurd and lacking any deeper meaning, these characters are brought together on Ho's vessels within narratives of travel, translation and the experience of living in-between cultural contexts that emerge only after careful study of the works and sources on which they draw. At the same time, further extending her early explorations of personal identity, each of the characters chosen is associated with a memory in Ho's life, revealing the extent to which even the most superficial image can gain complexity and affective potency through time and use. Yet Ho is not immune to the allure of a generously glazed and garishly-coloured porcelain surface, celebrating the seemingly interminable flow of images that characterises contemporary life in her *Made in the postmodern era: Paradox* (2007-09; figs. 102-105) series of composite vessels. For Ho, as for Ai Weiwei and Liu Jianhua, one of the main attractions of porcelain is its superficial appeal, though in each artist's work this appeal is used either to suggest a critique of the world of images or sensations, or to disguise private dimensions of meaning.

Superficial, insubstantial and gaudy: Critiques of consumerism in porcelain works by Xu Yihui, Liu Jianhua and Ai Weiwei

Although working at different times and in different artistic circumstances, Xu Yihui, Liu Jianhua and Ai Weiwei have each created works in which their initial attraction to the surface appeal of porcelain is foregrounded and used as a means of social critique. Xu Yihui was the first of the three to realise the suitability of the material for this purpose, commissioning a series of sculptural works in Jingdezhen in 1994 that adhere closely to

the Gaudy Art aesthetic in which he and several other artists were working at the time. The defining characteristics of this style are evident in Xu's *Little Red Book* (1994; fig. 86), for which the titular Maoist emblem is reduced to something garish and superficial and therefore implied a broader debasement of the political system it represents by the increasing commercialisation of Chinese society. Liu's *Obsessive memories* sculptures of 1998-2000 (figs. 84, 85, 87) could also be termed Gaudy Art for their combination of consumerist icons with folk aesthetics, rendered in unabashedly garish colours. A more sinister dimension of meaning can be noted in this series, however, that contrasts with the irreverence of most works of Gaudy Art. A violent self-effacement is implied through the decapitation and dismemberment of Liu's porcelain women, reduced like the sofas and bathtubs on which they're posed to vacuous icons of desire and instant gratification that encapsulate the enervating vacuity of a materialist and profit-hungry culture.

Several years after Liu's *Obsessive memories*, from 2004 to 2007, Ai Weiwei created a sculptural series in which the vacuous and superficial are emphasised, yet the absurdism of these works is closer to Xu Yihui's mischievous parodies (fig. 86) than to Liu's sinister figures. In *The Wave* (2005; fig. 78) and *Bowl of pearls* (2006; fig. 80), the sublime, iconic and abundant are reduced to a compliant ornamentality and, as in the artist's earlier work, the ambiguous divide between artificial and authentic is rendered even more uncertain using comparable *trompe l'oeil* effects. Yet these works can also be read as critiques of cultural stereotyping and the unthinking accumulation of material wealth. The same tension between superficial and deeper meaning appears in his *Watermelon* (fig. 81), *Oil spill* (fig. 82) and *Dress* (fig. 83) series initiated in 2006, each of which appear seductive but are ultimately unfulfilling or dysfunctional, reflections of a society in which surface value is prized over utility or genuine benefit. The objects chosen for replication

in porcelain in each series also point to other effects of consumer-driven economics, from environmental degradation and spiritual vacuity, to the hidden realities of sweat-shop labour. For Ai, as for Liu and Xu, the superficial is not only a means to attract the gaze of desiring viewers, but to compel them to think about the effects of their desire and to question the stability of contemporary consumerism

The superficial and the artificial in Ai Weiwei's The Wave (2005), Bowl of pearls (2006), and Watermelon, Oil spill and Dress series (2006-present)

Between his first experiments with ceramics in the 1990s, when he used the medium to interrogate established historical narratives and concepts of value, and the installation of his spectacular *Sunflower seeds* at Tate Modern in 2010 (fig. 51), Ai commissioned the production of a series of porcelain sculptures between 2004 and 2007 that seem entirely superficial, even vacuous. These works are almost wilfully small in scale and seem far removed from the conceptualism of performances like *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* (fig. 2) and the meditations on authenticity provoked by his *Blue-and-white* reproductions (fig. 24) – though this strand of Ai's practice was sustained in other works, like *Ghost Gu coming down the mountain* (figs. 19-23). Even in this concept-driven work, an awareness of aesthetic appeal is clear in the 'calming rhythm of the assembled platoons of vases,' prompting Clark to observe that Ai is always as much a 'sensualist' as an intellectual.⁴¹⁵ In *The Wave* (2005; fig. 78), *Bowl of pearls* (2006; fig. 80), and the *Watermelon* (fig. 81), *Oil spill* (fig. 82) and *Dress* (fig. 83) series, however, produced in multiple from 2006 to the present, Ai's emphasis has definitively shifted from political critique to superficial appeal and a detached, almost smug absurdism. Yet these works could also be read, in

⁴¹⁵ Clark, "Mind Mud: Ai Weiwei's Conceptual Ceramics," 62.

line with Ai's published comments after and during their making, as a critique of the global commodification of Chinese contemporary art and the erosion of artistic ideals by an eager pursuit of fame and profit in which he too could be accused of having participated.

The Wave (fig. 78) can be positioned as the inaugural work in this series of "superficial" sculptures, balancing an emphasis on surface with a clearly recognisable subject that points, perhaps, to the intended target of Ai's veiled critique. The title of this relatively small piece is an allusion to the now iconic *ukiyo-e* woodblock print *Under the wave off Kanagawa* (c. 1830-1832), usually referred to in English as *The Great Wave*, by Japanese printmaker Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). For his sculpture, Ai has isolated the most recognisable motif in this print – the crest of a wave about to fall upon a fishing boat – translated it into three dimensions and thereby emphasised its unnatural stasis, caught indefinitely between rising and falling. At the same time, the visual analogy between the glazed porcelain surface of the sculpture and the liquid sheen of water enhances the naturalism of the image. Like Liu Jianhua's similarly abstracted celadon sculptures, *The Wave* seems to rely on the lustre of its medium, combining form and subject to create a unified aesthetic statement.

The allusion to a canonical work of art, however, imbues *The Wave* with connotations of appropriative referentiality that hover between pastiche and parody. On one hand, this transformation of Hokusai's motif could be considered an homage; yet, on the other hand, the isolation of the motif and subsequent reduction of the overwhelming power of nature implied in the print to a distinctly unthreatening ornamentality suggest a less reverent aim. This impression is reinforced by a prototype for the sculpture created in 2004 (fig. 79), in which the form of the wave is more schematic, decorated with cobalt

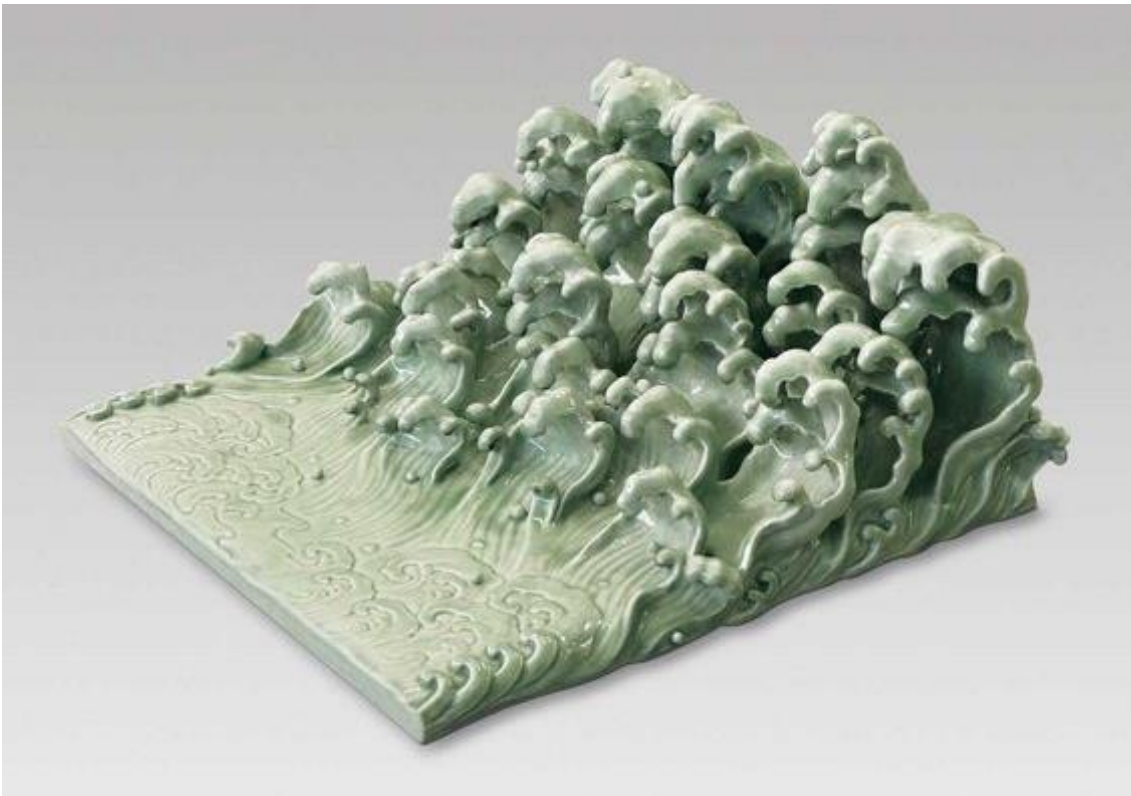


Figure 78: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *The Wave*, 2005, porcelain, celadon glaze, 25 x 40 x 40 cm; Galerie Urs Melie, Beijing.

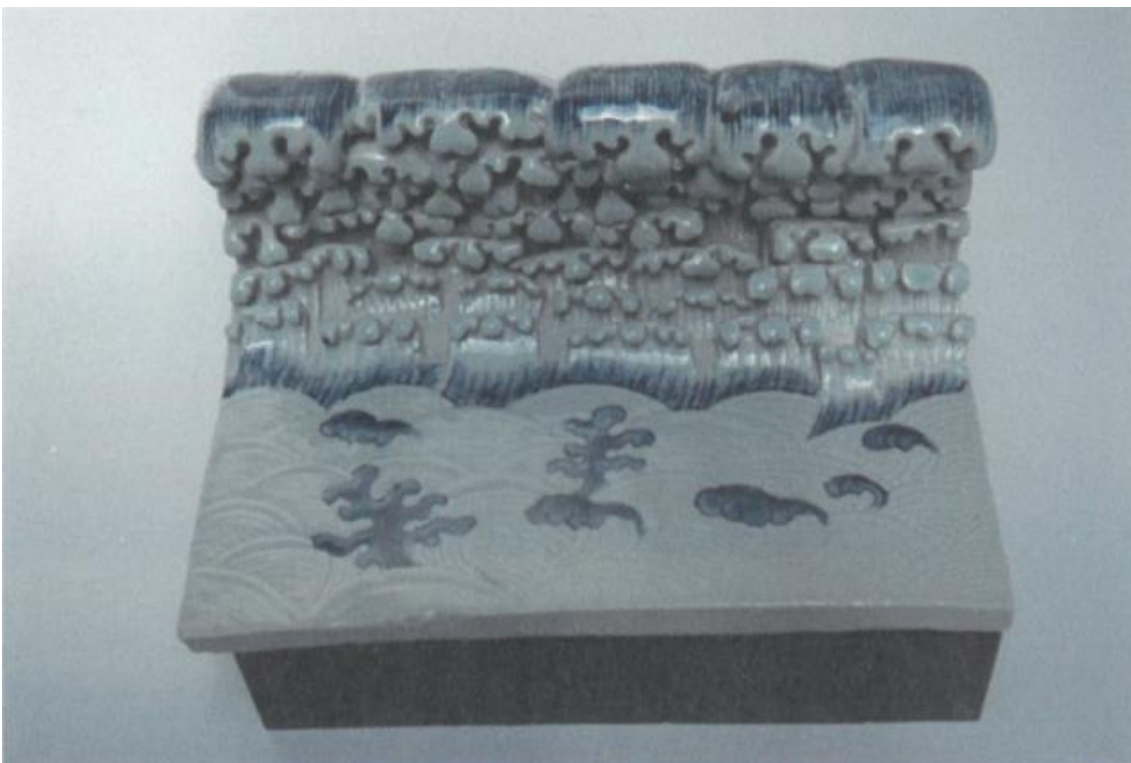


Figure 79: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), *Prototype of The Wave*, 2004, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, wood, 32.5 x 25 x 19 cm.

blue under a transparent glaze, and paired with a group of cartoon-like marine plants. For Philip Tinari, this irreverence indicates the beginning of ‘a new vein in Ai’s practice, one of ... objects that served as vignettes, even jokes,’ and that coincided with a moment in his career ‘when artistic renown was beginning to accrue and critics were beginning to pigeonhole [his] practice.’⁴¹⁶ Rather than a straightforward celebration of the surface appeal of porcelain, then, Ai might have intended *The Wave* as a veiled critique of such stereotyping, choosing to reduce one of the most recognisable emblems of Asian art to an appealing yet vacuous and compliant commodity.

Ai continued this vein of critique in 2006 with *Bowl of pearls* (fig. 80), a pair of porcelain bowls each precisely one metre in diameter and filled almost to the brim with pearls. Like *The Wave*, these bowls appear at first to lack any apparent subject other than their physical form, their monochrome glazes (yellow on the outside, celadon on the inside), and the pearls that they contain. There are imperfections in the latter, however, that introduce a critical ambiguity into the work: these are freshwater pearls, rarely perfectly spherical and usually less lustrous than their saltwater counterparts, so less desirable, while those that Ai has selected are additionally discoloured and damaged. Although their great volume would seem to imply an extravagant abundance and great wealth, they are worth very little in terms of monetary value.⁴¹⁷

Sue-an van der Zijpp, Curator of Contemporary Art, Design and Fashion at the Groninger Museum in the Netherlands, has interpreted this disparity between appearance and reality as an allusion to the inflation of China’s economy and the ‘passion for material wealth’ that this inspired, despite the questionable foundations of many investments or

⁴¹⁶ Tinari, “Postures in Clay: The Vessels of Ai Weiwei,” 35–36.

⁴¹⁷ Meile, *Ai Weiwei: Works 2004-2007*, 10.



Figure 80: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Bowl of pearls, 2006, porcelain, freshwater pearls, 43 x 100 cm.

enterprises.⁴¹⁸ Like the miniaturisation of Hokusai's iconic motif in *The Wave*, however, *Bowl of pearls* could also be read as a critique of the interest in Chinese contemporary art that emerged during the same years among overseas collectors, many of whom set out to accumulate as much as they could with little regard for the intrinsic value of the works they bought, as long as they looked recognisably "Chinese". In an interview with arts publisher Robert Bernell in 2000, Ai spoke of the compulsion he saw among Chinese artists '[to] take on the requirements of the market, a "regional dress" [rather than] real things.'⁴¹⁹ Over a decade later, speaking with Angie Baecker of *The New Statesman*, he referred to such work as 'a fake smile,' devoid of value and suited only for decoration.⁴²⁰ Like *The Wave*, then, *Bowl of Pearls* can be read as a material expression of this disdain in which the sublime is reduced to the ornamental, that which seems genuine is revealed to be an artful deception, and meaningful content is veiled by an alluring surface.

This tension between authentic and artificial, recalling Ai's reproductions of blue-and-white wares of the 1990s, is reinforced by a series of sculptures commissioned by the artist from 2006 to the present, in which watermelons, oil, and dresses are replicated in porcelain. Produced, like his first reproductions, by artisans in Jingdezhen, these works likewise draw on a long tradition in the city: the creation of skeuomorphs, or ceramic sculptures that mimic other materials, from wood, root vegetables and rocks to leather and woven cloth.⁴²¹ In contrast to his earlier reproduction works, however, Ai's porcelain watermelons, dresses and oil spills, like their historical precedents, are not intended to deceive but to demonstrate technical skill and entertain viewers with the playful trickery

⁴¹⁸ Wilson and Van der Zijpp, *Ai Weiwei*, 10–11.

⁴¹⁹ Ai Weiwei, cited in Ai and Bernell, "Ai Weiwei with Robert Bernell," 180.

⁴²⁰ Ai Weiwei, cited in Ai Weiwei and Angie Baecker, "You Aren't Born a Good Artist. You Have to Fight," *New Statesman*, October 22, 2012, 63.

⁴²¹ Clark, "Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn (Ceramic Works, 5000 BCE - 2010 CE)"; Pierson, "Historical and Cultural Contexts for Ceramics in China," 101–2.



Figure 81: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Watermelon, 2006, porcelain, 38 cm (diameter).



Figure 82: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Oil spill, 2006, porcelain, dimensions variable.

of *trompe l'oeil*, much like the anamorphic perspective in *Ghost Gu coming down the mountain* (figs. 19-23), created around the same time. Garth Clark has described these works as 'Ai lite: charming and fun but with no great meaning attached,' intended to offer viewers little more than an 'unpretentious pleasure.'⁴²² Nevertheless, despite their apparent superficiality, these sculptural series can once again be read as critiques of a society in which 'environment, education, social standards [and] morals [are] sacrificed just to get rich quick.'⁴²³

Watermelons, despite their bulbous girth, are largely composed of water, refreshing but unfulfilling – a lack made even more apparent in Ai's distended but hollow replicas (fig. 81). Crude oil, used for fuel and the main constituent in most plastics, is not only one of the most desired commodities in the contemporary global economy, initiating bitter political disputes and even wars, but is also a leading cause of the rampant pollution engulfing large parts of the world (fig. 82). In Ai's *Oil spills*, both the seductive value and the undesirable permanence of oil are enhanced by its replication in porcelain. Finally, the dresses Ai has replicated are inexpensive, low-quality garments mass-produced in Chinese factories, then shipped across the world for sale in low-end department stores (fig. 83). Like *Bowl of pearls*, they might appear attractive but are flawed, carelessly designed and produced using sub-standard materials – furthermore, as ceramics, they are rendered unwearable, unwieldy, and inconveniently fragile, often shattering or losing their decorative flowers when transported.⁴²⁴ Although they appear seductive and are undoubtedly aesthetically appealing, each of these works is ultimately unfulfilling or

⁴²² Clark, "Mind Mud: Ai Weiwei's Conceptual Ceramics," 66.

⁴²³ Ai Weiwei, in Ai, Bingham, and Daniel, "A Conversation," 80–81.

⁴²⁴ Tinari, "Postures in Clay: The Vessels of Ai Weiwei," 39.



*Figure 83: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Dress with flowers, 2010, porcelain, 7 x 90 x 65 cm;
Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing.*

dysfunctional, implying a critique of a consumerist global economy in which surface value is often prized above genuine utility or benefit.

The Wave (fig. 78), *Bowl of Pearls* (fig. 80) and the *Watermelon* (fig. 81), *Oil spill* (fig. 82) and *Dress* (fig. 83) series may seem vacuous and superficial, yet this focus on surface can also be read as an attempt to highlight the ‘unbearable lightness’ of contemporary consumerism, to cite the title of Czech author Milan Kundera’s 1984 novel, and the artificiality of the global art market.⁴²⁵ Objects that seem luxurious are revealed to be little more than reductive imitations and imperfect facsimiles, seemingly intended to frustrate and withhold satisfaction. Like the work of Chinese artists who seek to appeal to collectors’ desires for a product that is visibly “Chinese” with little thought to the creation of genuine or meaningful content, these works are predicated on appearances and the creation of a meticulous deceit. As in Ai’s earlier works for which the artist drew on the skills of professional reproduction-makers, they lead viewers to question the distinction between fact and fiction, though in this case the divide between the two is more self-evident, highlighting the extent to which the artificial has now become a ubiquitous aspect of our daily lives.

Critiques of China’s market-driven socialism in Liu Jianhua and Xu Yihui’s “Gaudy Art”

Liu Jianhua has also deployed the superficial allure of porcelain to critique consumerist discontent in his *Obsessive memories* sculptural series (1998-2000; figs. 84, 85, 87), the first in which he used this material as a medium for contemporary artistic expression. The central motif of this series is the dismembered and decapitated body of a woman

⁴²⁵ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Faber & Faber, 1984).



Figure 84: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), *Obsessive memories*, 2000, porcelain, 31 x 41 x 42 cm.



Figure 85: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), *Obsessive memories*, 2000, porcelain, 18 x 54 x 33 cm.

clad in *qipao* and high-heeled shoes, reclining luxuriously on an overstuffed armchair or sofa (fig. 84), or sprawled in a distended bathtub on a pile of porcelain blossoms that recall those used to ornament Ai's porcelain dresses (fig. 85). Disregarding for now the hyper-sexualisation and violent objectification of the women shown, these sculptures have been presented since their first display in 1999 as a comment on the transition from a state-controlled to market-based economy and the trend toward superficial materialism that many people, including Liu, predicted as a result of this shift.⁴²⁶ As such, they can be associated with the Gaudy Art style defined by avant-garde trendsetter Li Xianting as emergent in the mid-1990s, and especially Gaudy Art sculptures by Xu Yihui (fig. 86). For both artists, it was the lustrous surface, vibrant colours and "preciousness" of this material that attracted them. Superficial appeal, however, is given a deeper meaning in their work as a critique of consumerism in which external attractiveness is paired with an inner vacuity and frustration.

Although trained as an assembly-line ceramicist and employed in a collective ceramics factory for much of his adolescence, Liu did not incorporate porcelain into his artistic practice until the late 1990s, attracted by the same "gaudiness" that appealed to artists like Xu Yihui. Xu's first works in porcelain created in 1994 preceded Liu's return to the medium by several years and were motivated by the similarity that he saw between its lustrous surface and lurid colours, and the comparably glossy packaging and colourful advertisements used to entice consumers to buy the newest products. After working primarily in paints since the start of his artistic career in the 1980s, Xu was introduced to ceramics by Li Xianting who, like Liu, has a parental connection to the porcelain industry, and who offered to accompany Xu to the Cizhou kilns in his home province of

⁴²⁶ Gendered aspects of this and Liu's related *Games* series will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Hebei, where Ai Weiwei first experienced ceramics in 1977 (fig. 5). The artisans in Hebei advised that Jingdezhen would be a more suitable place of production, so Xu travelled to the Porcelain Capital in September 1994 to begin work on a series of sculptures.⁴²⁷ Like Xu, Liu was enticed to return to porcelain by the medium's innate visual and tactile qualities, rather than his extensive training in ceramics production. Although he created several pieces for *Obsessive memories* in fibreglass in 1998 (fig. 113), he was unable to achieve the 'fast colour, vibrant tones and ... smooth, lustrous surface' that he had envisioned.⁴²⁸ These were precisely the qualities he had once identified with porcelain and had sought to discard in favour of a more organic, "sculpted" style, though now such traits were ideally suited to his aims:

For me, porcelain is a very beautiful yet also very fragile material, with a lustre that makes it ideally suited to the representation of superficial prosperity, susceptible ... to evaporate into nothingness ... [and] Jingdezhen ceramics are exceptionally exquisite, complex and resplendently colourful.⁴²⁹

For both artists, then, despite their widely divergent experiences with and introductions to porcelain, the appeal of the medium lay in its surface appeal and the similarity that this evoked with the gaudy products of a consumer economy.

It is also this emphasis on surface that has led both artists' works to be classified as examples of Gaudy Art, a short-lived tendency identified in Chinese art of the 1990s by Li Xianting and associated with a critique of China's commercialisation. Locating the

⁴²⁷ Li Xianting, "Some More Thoughts on the *Raison d'être* of Gaudy Art," in *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium: Chinese-Art.com 1998-1999*, by John Clark (Hong Kong: New Art Media, 2000), 84-85.

⁴²⁸ Pi Li, "Polychrome Ceramics, Cheongsam and Chinese Porcelain," in *Porcelain-Like Skin*, by Zhu Qi and Pi Li, trans. Trevor Morris (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 2001), 17.

⁴²⁹ Liu and Zhu, «如果迷茫的话，我会不知所措 - 对刘建华的访谈» [If You're Confused, Then I Have No Idea - an Interview with Liu Jianhua], n.p.

inspiration for this trend in the earlier tendencies of Political Pop and Cynical Realism, Li defined Gaudy Art by the use of ‘symbols of consumerism, such as money, TVs, images of overnight millionaires, or ... beautiful women,’ combined with auspicious emblems of wealth and success drawn from Chinese folk culture, all depicted in ‘gaudy or garish colours and materials.’⁴³⁰ The aim of these juxtaposed appropriations, he explained, was both to satirise the superficiality of global consumer culture and to exaggerate the visual appeal of folk-cultural forms, ‘the multi-coloured fantasy of hitting it big and getting rich,’ drawing a parallel between these cultural spheres. With consumerism, Li asserted, ‘the long-exiled God of Prosperity was invited back ... the East Wind blew in old skeletons and spirits from the past.’⁴³¹ The garish palette and bold design of New Year pictures (*nianhua* 年画) are the most evident folk source for many artists who have been linked with Gaudy Art, though “low” art materials such as paper-cut, lacquer and, in the case of Xu and Liu, porcelain have also been used.

Among Xu’s limited range of porcelain sculptures, these characteristics of Gaudy Art are most evident in *Little Red Book* (1994; fig. 86), created during his first trip to Jingdezhen. In this work the titular book, the *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* (*Mao zhuxi yulu* 毛主席语录), better known as the “Little Red Book” (*Hong bao shu* 红宝书), is replicated in porcelain on a bed of brightly-coloured, hand-modelled “pinch-flowers” (*niehua* 捏花). The latter are an elaborate, extravagant form of ornament used on “folk-kiln” (*minyao* 民窑) wares in Jingdezhen since the Qing dynasty, though their application here is again motivated more by their gaudy appearance than any desire to establish a

⁴³⁰ Li Xianting, “The Pluralistic Look of Chinese Contemporary Art Since the Mid-1990s,” in *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium: Chinese-Art.com 1998-1999*, by John Clark (Hong Kong: New Art Media, 2000), 78; Li, “Some More Thoughts on the *Raison d’être* of Gaudy Art,” 81.

⁴³¹ Li, “The Pluralistic Look of Chinese Contemporary Art,” 79.



Figure 86: Xu Yihui (b. 1964), Little Red Book, 1994, porcelain, 15 x 46 x 32.5 cm; Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

historical parallel.⁴³² A Maoist emblem is reduced to something garish and superficial, lying open to reveal only the pristine whiteness of blank pages instead of the edited selection of Mao Zedong's words that readers would expect. Yet this is not merely 'a meaningless empty shell,' as one writer has suggested, but rather, like the motif from Hokusai's print appropriated for Ai's *The Wave* (fig. 78), the book retains an additional significance indicated both by the title of the work and the position of reverence in which it is displayed, even if this is parodied to a certain extent by its flamboyant decoration.⁴³³ The implication is clear: rather than the reputation of a famous artist or work of art, here it is the integrity of the Maoist political system that is undermined by the belittling and trivialising process of commodification.

In Liu's *Obsessive memories*, however, implied ideological content has been removed, transforming his sculptures into a parody of consumerism and superficiality alone. While Xu contrasted the gaudiness of glazed porcelain with an apparently more substantial subject – albeit a slim volume of quotations published in honour of an authoritarian leader – the women and furnishings in Liu's series are eminently vacuous. The artist has explained that he chose these subjects for their evocation of materialist pleasures:

The symbolic image of [*Obsessive memories*] is a combination of [the *qipao*] and sofa. The [*qipao*] will arouse the imagination and a desire for possession [while] the sofa reminds us of modernity, power, money, sex, comfort.⁴³⁴

⁴³² Chen Jie, «景德镇陶瓷的民间审美样式与当代艳俗艺术» [Folk Aesthetics in Jingdezhen Ceramics and Contemporary Gaudy Art], 40; Dianne Perry Vanderlip and Gwen Finkel Chanzit, *Radar: Selections from the Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan* (Denver, CO: Denver Art Museum, 2006), 174-175.

⁴³³ Thomas J. Whitten, "China on the Radar: Post-1989 Chinese Art from the Logan Collection," *Arts of Asia* 37, no. 1 (January 2007): 76.

⁴³⁴ Liu Jianhua, in Liu Jianhua and Mao Xuhui, "Infatuated Memory," in *Three Artists from Kunming*, by Marcello Kwan (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1999), 15.

Many commentators on Liu's work have identified the same associations – Zhu Qi, for example, has associated these sculptures with 'the release of the senses and sensual pleasure under capitalist consumerism,' identifying underlying themes of 'conspicuous consumption ... passionate social life; private existences preoccupied with interiors; exquisite ... décor; fashion ... and recreation.'⁴³⁵ Pi Li compared the experience of viewing these works to 'flipping through fashionable magazines,' entranced by bright colours and lurid imagery, 'a visual orgy [in which] the existence and experience of the individual self are deliberately ignored.'⁴³⁶ For both critics, as for the artist, content and meaning adhere to the work's surface – these are icons of male heterosexual desire, consumption and instant gratification, unashamedly superficial and apparently devoid of any hidden meaning. Like Liu's later *Container* series (figs. 31, 32), they seem to offer luxurious abundance but, when held and turned over in the holder's hands, they are revealed to be hollow, empty and cold, even more insubstantial than they appear. And as in the later sculptures, the material qualities of porcelain are essential to this effect – appealing on the surface and attractive to the eye, but cool to the touch and disconcertingly fragile.

As Pi Li's comments indicate, however, something more sinister can be found in the denial of selfhood that these sculptures seem to imply, expressed above all through the dismembering and decapitation of the represented women. Like the models who adorn the pages of fashion magazines, these figures are reduced to their sex and their clothing, intended only to arouse desire either to seduce or to imitate their seductive appearance. Denied the expressive capabilities of face and hands, their identity is externalised, and they are rendered as mute and featureless as the chairs and bathtubs over which they're

⁴³⁵ Zhu Qi, "How Does the Body Adorn Itself with Clothes?: The Everyday Nature of Post-Political Society," in *Porcelain-Like Skin*, by Zhu Qi and Pi Li, trans. Trevor Morris (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 2001), 10–11.

⁴³⁶ Pi, "Polychrome Ceramics, Cheongsam and Chinese Porcelain," 19.

draped. The artist has again explained that this denial was deliberate and is intended to reflect the effects of China's transition from state-controlled to market-driven economy:

the Chinese economy has developed [yet] I doubt if the inner world of individuals has proceeded [at] such a pace ... Superficial beauty is not able to conceal the loneliness and frailty of our heart[s] ... we are all living in an unstable, insecure and highly sensitive materialistic world.⁴³⁷

The clear implication here, as in Ai's more recent sculptural series, is that the fleeting pleasures of consumerism are ultimately unfulfilling and even harmful, eroding our sense of self until we are no more than attractive but psychologically devastated husks. On the second page of a text published to accompany one of the first displays of these works in China, fittingly titled "Delight and Illusion", this implication is reinforced by the inclusion of a photograph of the artist in a supermarket in Kunming, surrounded by shelves of products that were recreated in the exhibition by the display of his works '[as] commodities, for viewers to browse, select and enjoy' (fig. 87).⁴³⁸ The artist later used the same mode of display in several installations of *Regular-Fragile* in which his replica porcelain commodities were arranged on shelves or mounted on gallery walls (fig. 11) to mimic luxury goods in a high-end boutique.⁴³⁹ Again, that which appears vacuous and superficial veils a critique of the very consumerist pleasure that relies on such qualities, exposing something menacing and harmful.

⁴³⁷ Liu Jianhua, in Liu and Mao, "Infatuated Memory."

⁴³⁸ Liu and Zhu, «如果迷茫的话, 我会不知所措 - 对刘建华的访谈» [If You're Confused, Then I Have No Idea - an Interview with Liu Jianhua], n.p.; Monica Dematté, "Projecting Dreams: Liu Jianhua's Spiritual Things," *Yishu* 9, no. 1 (February 2010): 26.

⁴³⁹ Dematté, "Projecting Dreams: Liu Jianhua's Spiritual Things," 28.



Figure 87: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), Obsessive memories (installation), 1998-2000, porcelain, dimensions variable.

Sin-ying Ho's autobiographical appropriations of pop icons and her vision of a global syncretic utopia

Although Sin-ying Ho has also devoted great attention to the elaborately ornamented surfaces of her work and, in her choice of subject, seems to privilege the superficial or commercialised over authenticity and depth, unlike Ai Weiwei, Liu Jianhua and Xu Yihui, she neither parodies surface appeal nor uses it as a means of critique or discomfort. That which appears superficial in Ho's work is instead revealed by the artist to be embedded within a complex network of dynamic contexts that extend her earlier exploration of linguistic and ornamental codes from the realm of the individual into a broader socio-cultural sphere. At the same time, her focus on personal identity is also continued in the many layers of meaning with which she imbues icons of popular and consumer culture, inserting them within narratives of family and self that lend them deeper significance.

On paired vessels *Confucius, Jesus Christ and John Lennon no. 1* and *no. 2*, for example, created between 2003 and 2006 (figs. 88-91), Ho involves the eponymous figures within an all-embracing vision of a utopic future defined by merged cultural, ideological and religious spheres. In form, subject and ornamentation, these works express her desire for a community in which mutual recognition and cooperation ensure global harmony. These themes recur in *Hero no. 1* and *no. 2* (figs. 97-99), completed between 2007 and 2009, in which the amorphous forms created by Ho's mould-making technique signal an even greater commitment to transcultural interaction, while images of Bruce Lee and Muhammad Ali offer exemplary case-studies in hybrid identity. Finally, with *Trilogy no. 1* and *no. 2* (figs. 100-101), created during the same years, Ho achieves a consummate statement of her envisioned future, blending not only different cultures but also temporal contexts and even, in the transgressive figure of the traveller from another world, suggesting an extra-terrestrial perspective. Yet each of these works also

maintains a more grounded connection to the details of the artist's life and her experiences as a Hong Kong Chinese/North American migrant, appropriating the renown of global pop icons as proxy figures in the narrative of her multifaceted autobiography.

Sin-ying Ho's celebration of a transcultural heritage and an eclectic future in Confucius, Jesus Christ and John Lennon no. 1 and no. 2 (2003-06) and Music (2004)

The first indication of Ho's conceptual shift from an interrogation of linguistic and ornamental codes to the construction of identity through "superficial" elements of culture can be found in the paired vases *Confucius, Jesus Christ and John Lennon no. 1* (fig. 88) and *no. 2* (fig. 89), completed between 2003 and 2006. In both works, the trio of "cult" figures are appropriated by the artist to represent the divergent strands of her heritage and the various cultural spheres in which she sought a sense of community identity throughout her life. The presence of "classical" figures like Confucius and Jesus Christ marks these vessels as a transitional point in Ho's oeuvre, contrasted with the English singer and guitarist John Lennon who provides the clear focal point on each vase, emerging in red decal from a mass of underglaze cobalt-blue clouds and surrounded by a halo of gold lustre, gazing directly out from the composition, guitar in hand. In contrast, the stately yet lifeless figures of Confucius and Jesus Christ seem to provide little more than a passive background, standing in for the distant mountains often used in classical Chinese landscape painting to create depth – a comparison emphasised visually by the rugged folds of their robes and the addition of a bird flying past their heads. As this depiction suggests, Ho explains that Confucius and Jesus Christ are used to represent her own moral background: on arriving in Canada, she realised that her view of the world was deeply imbued with Confucian values; at the same time, during high school, she chose to identify as a Christian, seeking communal support through religion. Lennon, on



Figure 88: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1963), Confucius, Jesus Christ and John Lennon no. 1, 2003-06, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue and overglaze enamel decoration, digital decals, gold lustre.



Figure 89: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1963), Confucius, Jesus Christ and John Lennon no. 2, 2003-06, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals, gold lustre.

the other hand, represents for Ho the dream of a utopia beyond such contrasts of belief, epitomised in the lyrics of his 1971 song “Imagine”.⁴⁴⁰ Lennon therefore seems to take prominence over Confucius and Jesus Christ, perhaps representing a new form of idol for the contemporary era.

Yet all three figures also point to a broader referential context that raises themes of cultural interaction and collision which resonate with Ho’s previous explorations of her transcultural, or transexperiential identity. The shared title of the vessels, for example, rather than a mere description of their content, was inspired by a mainland Chinese theatrical production (*Yesu, Kongzi, Pitoushi Lienong* 耶稣, 孔子, 披头士列侬), written in 1987 by playwright and social critic Sha Yexin (1939-2018) and first performed in 1988. While working in the theatre in Hong Kong in the late 1980s, Ho saw a performance of this play and identified strongly with the themes of cultural collision that it explores, in the context of a China that had just “opened up” to the outside world.⁴⁴¹ Superimposed over the founders of two of the most significant moral systems of the “West” and “East”, then, Lennon appears to offer an alternative devotional focus, ‘the hope of a generation that lost faith in other teachings.’⁴⁴² In contrast to the atrophied and antiquated belief-systems of Christianity and Confucianism, and the cultural disparities they represent, he is an emblem not only of the desire for unity despite difference suggested in the lyrics of “Imagine”, but also an imported culture bearing a promise of liberation from the past.

This theme of cultural interaction and merging is continued on the reverse of each vessel (figs. 90 and 91), on which the roles of the characters appear to be reversed. Although Lennon still occupies the centre of the composition, he is turned away from the viewer,

⁴⁴⁰ Sin-ying Ho, personal conversation with Alex Burchmore, 14 April 2017.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴⁴² Philip Read, “Sin-Ying Ho,” *Fusion* 30, no. 2 (January 2006): 26.



Figure 90: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1963), Confucius, Jesus Christ and John Lennon no. 1 (reverse, detail), 2003-06, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue and overglaze enamel decoration, digital decals, gold lustre.



Figure 91: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1963), Confucius, Jesus Christ and John Lennon no. 2 (reverse, detail), 2003-06, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals, gold lustre.

reclining and inactive, his hands empty. Conversely, Confucius and Jesus Christ are animated and engaging, smiling and holding guitars of their own. Ho explains this as a humorous inversion, in which 'Confucius becomes an observer, they're meeting in Heaven ... Jesus Christ is playing the guitar, and John Lennon has become a thinker.'⁴⁴³ Yet the transformation in the disposition of central figures effected by turning the vases also suggests a narrative of cultural osmosis, comparable but in several key aspects distinct from the imagery of globalised exchange in Ho's earlier phase of work. While, in *Binary code* (fig. 63) and *Matrix* (figs. 64, 65), different cultural elements are mixed but remain self-contained and independent, in *Confucius, Jesus Christ and John Lennon* the titular characters interact, competing for recognition. At first, Lennon takes precedence, but then Confucius and Jesus Christ step out of the background and take a more active role, as indicated by the hand-over of Lennon's guitar, which Christ brandishes over his head. This is not a struggle for dominance, but a celebration of the meeting between disparate cultural and historical contexts, in which all are mutually reinforced and invigorated. The implication seems to be that there is no single, correct ideology, and that encouraging respect and recognition can bring mutual benefit – a template for the heterogeneous utopia that Ho has envisioned as the culmination of globalising forces.

The shifting roles that Lennon, Confucius and Jesus Christ are given on Ho's vases are echoed by a parallel transformation of the principal motifs and the types of vessel the artist has chosen, demonstrating once again her sensitivity to the symbolic dimensions of meaning that ornament and form can convey. The shoulder of *No. 1*, for example, bears a peacock-feather pattern in orange, green, yellow and blue that contrasts with Ho's characteristically two-tone palette. Both colours and motif have been appropriated

⁴⁴³ Sin-ying Ho, personal conversation with Alex Burchmore, 14 April 2017.



Figure 92: Dish [piatto], c. 1550-60, Deruta, Italy, tin-glazed earthenware, 40.2 cm (diameter); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

with almost no alteration from Italian *majolica* ware (fig. 92).⁴⁴⁴ On *No. 2*, however, the same peacock-feather pattern spreads down from the neck of the vase to cover a large portion of the body, rendered with much more precision in a rich, dark blue with gold lustre highlighting. While in *No. 1* the motif is gaudy and superficial, a counterpoint to the primary scene, in *No. 2* it has not only escaped confinement but has gained a life of its own, absorbing and re-arranging the surrounding decoration. It has become a more recognisably “Chinese” motif, transformed and revitalised by its assimilation. Italian *majolica* was an attempt to mimic Islamic tin-glaze ceramics, themselves an imitation of Chinese blue-and-white – with her contemporary appropriation, then, Ho completes the circle of influence, returning the motif to its origin with a new vigour attained via contact with other cultures in a union that reflects that of Lennon, Confucius and Jesus Christ.

The form of each vessel also reflects this commitment to harmonious eclecticism. For *No. 1*, complementing her choice of *majolica* ornament, Ho has created a variation on the medicine jars once produced in bulk for a European market during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (fig. 93). Like tin-glazed earthenware, jars for spices, herbs and medicinal concoctions with concave sides and a wide mouth first appeared in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Syria and Persia, exported from the turn of the fifteenth century to Spain and Italy, where they were reproduced in *majolica* (fig. 94) and came to be known as *albarello*, perhaps derived from the Arabic *al barani*, a generic term for storage containers. After the opening of trade with China, they were reproduced in porcelain by Chinese artisans.⁴⁴⁵ For *No. 2*, on the other hand, perhaps to match the more Sinicised ornamentation, Ho has chosen a distinctively Chinese “pear-shaped” or *yuhuchun* (玉壺

⁴⁴⁴ Sin-Ying Ho, 2017 School of Art & Design Artist Residency, Australian National University, Interview Part 2, interview by Alex Burchmore, April 14, 2017.

⁴⁴⁵ Craig Clunas, *Chinese Export Art and Design* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1987), 34-38.



Figure 93: Medicine jar, c. 1660-80, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, China, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, 23.5 cm (height); Victoria & Albert Museum, London.



Figure 94: Medicine jar [albarello], c. 1505-10, Deruta, Italy, tin-glazed earthenware, 22.3 cm (height); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 95: Vase [yuhuchun], Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign (1662-1722), Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, China, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, 24.4 x 12.1 cm; Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

春) vase, first created during the Tang dynasty then adapted over subsequent centuries until it gained its characteristically tapering neck and bulbous, globular belly (fig. 95). Although *Confucius, Jesus Christ and John Lennon no. 1* and *no. 2* may at first seem little more than tongue-in-cheek parodies of the often anachronistic and jarring combinations of influences thrown together in contemporary popular culture, closer analysis (and conversation with the artist) reveals that they are deliberate meditations on issues of transcultural mixing and influence. As such, they extend Ho's earlier interest in linguistic and ornamental codes into a socio-cultural sphere of meaning, imbuing the superficial with a new depth and complexity.

The most visible distinction between these vessels and Ho's previous work, however, is her appropriation of pop-culture icons to enact her narratives of cultural exchange, an addition that she further refined in the related piece *Music* (2004; fig. 96), in which the processes of interaction and combination have become more diffuse and open-ended. This new diffusion is clear even in the form of the pieces – while both *Confucius, Jesus Christ and John Lennon no. 1* and *no. 2* take conventional forms, *Music* follows *Binary code* (fig. 63) and *Matrix* (figs. 64, 65) in taking a more organic, indeterminate shape. Like those works, it is composed of multiple partial vases combined into an amorphous mass, appropriately resembling a conch or other organically-formed instrument. The surface is decorated with Ho's signature combination of cobalt-blue and red decal yet, unlike her previous works, there are no ornamental motifs. Recalling the use of binary code and nonsensical symbols as ornamentation on *Gibberish* (fig. 60), European and Cantonese musical notation become the counterpoint of a composition dominated by images of Cantonese Opera performers and German composer Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), contrasted with a smaller image of contemporary popular musician Britney



Figure 96: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1963), *Music*, 2004, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals, 41 x 20 cm.

Spears. A trio of figures is therefore again the focal point, each representing a stream of cultural production. Jesus Christ and Confucius as icons of “Western” and “Eastern” classicism are replaced with Bach and a Cantonese Opera performer, while Lennon is superseded by Spears as an emblem of contemporary pop culture. In contrast to the shifting disposition of the characters on *Confucius, Jesus Christ and John Lennon*, however, all three figures on *Music* are dynamic and engaging, emerging from a swirling, vibrant accumulation of images across the undulating surface of the porcelain. In the vases, there appeared to be an equilibrium between the past and the present, and between different cultural contexts, but here the process of interaction has progressed further. Images are cast adrift from the security of their origins to mingle and coalesce freely, uninhibited by a porcelain vehicle that, like those of *Binary code*, is open to the world and to the entry of yet more influences.

Cultural pride and community identity in Hero no. 1 and no. 2 (2007-09)

Following the pattern established in *Music* and the two iterations of *Confucius, Jesus Christ and John Lennon*, another pair of works entitled *Hero no. 1* and *no. 2* (figs. 97 and 98) and completed between 2007 and 2009, extend Ho’s blending and juxtaposition of cultural motifs drawn from music and religion into the realms of sport and film, equally transcultural in appeal and extent. These pieces also continue Ho’s creation of organic and indeterminate forms, once again resembling a mass of fragmented vases fused into a shape resembling a shell, with visible bases and necks protruding from the overall form. Ornament is again a primary indicator of the artist’s intent: most of the surface of *Hero no. 1*, front and back, is adorned with a range of patterns, predominantly including



Figure 97: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1963), Hero no. 1, 2007-09, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals, 38.5 x 28.5 x 21 cm.



Figure 98: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1963), Hero no. 2: Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, 2007-09, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals.

an accumulation of red decal “peace” symbols scattered across the base and combined in groups of four on the side and reverse to form a geometric floral design (fig. 99). This is paired with a conventional Chinese floral pattern in underglaze cobalt-blue on the front, while a compact group of juxtaposed ornamental styles appears on the reverse: a foliate arabesque; a diaper pattern that echoes the conjoined “peace” symbols; and a dense mosaic of several different motifs, including foliage, geometric grids and a swastika pattern, each enclosed within a separate tile and decorated in turn with floral medallions. This presentation of ornamental motifs within a grid highlights their formalist function, drawing attention to the artistic act itself rather than the subject of representation – to the form of the work rather than its content – in much the same manner as Ho’s dissection and re-assembly of vase-forms. As in *Matrix no. 1* (figs. 64, 65), then, the composite form of the object is echoed in its decoration, which on both works follows and emphasises the undulating surface contours. Yet on *Hero no. 1* the motifs are denser and more complex, less clearly tied to different cultural contexts and more defined by the balance of natural and geometric elements exemplified by the tiled mosaic of motifs. They suggest a sphere of representation in which ornament has been detached from coded meaning and rendered purely formal, open to a wide range of interpretations.

In addition to the syncretism of ornament on *Hero no. 1*, the front of the piece also bears a central medallion framing decal portraits of US-born Kung Fu film icon Bruce Lee and African-American professional boxer Muhammad Ali that contrast “West” and “East” only to dissolve the coherence of all such definitions. Ho accomplishes this ambiguity by introducing other elements that cannot be readily assimilated or interpreted – here, she



Figure 99: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1963), Hero no. 1 (reverse), 2007-09, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals, 38.5 x 28.5 x 21 cm.

includes a border of arabesque motifs and Arabic script surrounding the two portraits, which Ho explains were appropriated from Yuan-dynasty porcelain intended for export to West Asia.⁴⁴⁶ The use of Arabic imagery creates a parallel with *Matrix*, on which Kufic calligraphy was combined with conventionally “Chinese” motifs. Its appearance on this piece could also be associated more specifically, however, with Ali, whose Muslim faith was widely publicised since his first acceptance into the Nation of Islam in 1964 and often stimulated instances of cultural collision throughout his career, most famously including his refusal to serve in the Vietnam War.

Ali is therefore not a simple representative of “Western” culture, but a global figure: an African-American Muslim who achieved fame through boxing, part of a cultural arena in which, as in music, transcultural contact is evident. Bruce Lee, too, although apparently adding a specifically Chinese or Chinese-American aspect to *Hero no. 1*, is a comparably complex figure. Not long after his birth in San Francisco in 1940, Lee’s parents returned to their original home in Hong Kong and Lee grew to adulthood within this colonial context until, in 1959, his parents sent him back to the US. Building on experiences in the Hong Kong film industry, and utilising his extensive martial arts training, Lee acted in several US television series and films, before returning once again to Hong Kong to direct and star in the Kung Fu films that established him as a global cinematic icon.⁴⁴⁷ In addition to his adulation among Chinese and diasporic Chinese audiences, in the Euro-American pantheon of cinema icons Lee was ‘a James Dean figure of the seventies,’ occupying a representative role for Kung Fu films parallel to that held by John Wayne

⁴⁴⁶ Sin-ying Ho, personal conversation with Alex Burchmore, 14 April 2017.

⁴⁴⁷ Chiao Hsiung-ping, “Bruce Lee: His Influence on the Evolution of the Kung Fu Genre,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 32

for the Western genre.⁴⁴⁸ Like Ali, he is a quintessentially transcultural figure, rather than an emblem of a unitary “East”.

As global representatives of hyphenated cultural identities, Lee and Ali embody heroic ideals of community solidarity and support that resonate with Ho’s enduring vision of a world united by mutual recognition and a blending of perspectives. Ho explains that this aspect of their public activities was central to her decision to represent them on the two *Hero* pieces, to emphasise that they and other public figures ‘weren’t just [playing sport or acting] for their own interests, but to bring the community together.’⁴⁴⁹ Throughout his life, Ali was a passionate advocate for African-American communities. Always seen to be ‘flamboyant, immodest and defiantly confident,’ he cultivated an unapologetic pride of his race and actively participated in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, earning the respect and admiration of prominent community leaders.⁴⁵⁰ Though often obscured or forgotten, Ali’s actions contributed greatly to the struggle for civil rights and inspired African-American fans, rendering him ‘a champion of Blackness.’⁴⁵¹

Bruce Lee led a similar championing of Asian-American identity, actively fighting against derogatory media stereotypes like Fu-Manchu, imagined by English writer Sax Rohmer (Arthur S. Ward) as ‘[the] enemy of the white race ... [an] inhuman being ... whose very genius was inspired by the cool, calculated cruelty of his race,’ and reiterated through the first half of the twentieth century in countless US-made television series and films.⁴⁵² To combat such stereotypes, Lee sought to create an image of a new Chinese-American masculinity like that embodied for White audiences by John Wayne, James Dean, Clint

⁴⁴⁸ Phil Ochs, *The Legend of Bruce Lee*, 1977, cited in Chiao, “Bruce Lee,” 30; Chiao, “Bruce Lee,” 32.

⁴⁴⁹ Sin-ying Ho, personal conversation with Alex Burchmore, 14 April 2017.

⁴⁵⁰ Abdel-Shehid, “Muhammad Ali: America’s B-Side,” 321-322.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid*, 324.

⁴⁵² Sax Rohmer, *The Return of Fu-Manchu*, 1916, cited in Jonathan Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (St Ives: Penguin, 1998), 141.

Eastwood and Marlon Brando, ultimately becoming 'a symbol of and for multiple ethnic, diasporic, civil rights, anti-racist and post-colonial cultural movements across the globe.'⁴⁵³ He became so emblematic of China that Ho recollects being asked while travelling around Europe in the 1980s whether she knew Lee personally.⁴⁵⁴ Where once porcelain had served to represent China and served as a vehicle for the translation of Chinese culture, in a contemporary global context Bruce Lee and other media icons now fulfil this same role. Yet in contrast to the often exoticised vision of China as the land of china, the sense of Asian-American solidarity embodied by Lee, like the African-American identity championed by Ali, is a self-determined and socially constructive ideal, and it is this aspect of both figures that is implied in *Hero no. 1*.

As with *Confucius*, *Jesus Christ* and *John Lennon*, however, there is a personal element to Ho's choice of motifs – Muhammad Ali, Bruce Lee, the peace emblem, and John Lennon are associated with the 1960s and early 1970s which for Ho, who was born in 1963, were a pivotal era in her life as well as society in general. These were the decades of Ho's childhood and adolescence in Hong Kong at a time when that city, under British colonial rule, was saturated with European and US culture but almost entirely isolated from the Chinese mainland, embroiled in the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. Ho recounts that, although her family didn't own a television, she and her sisters would watch TV series and films at a neighbour's house. It was here that she first saw Lee's films and Ali's boxing matches, and her decision to appropriate the images of these pop icons derives at least in part from a sense of nostalgia. Ho considered the associations

⁴⁵³ Yuan Shu, "Reading the Kung Fu Film in an American Context: From Bruce Lee to Jackie Chan," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 31, no. 2 (2003): 54; Chiao, "Bruce Lee: His Influence on the Evolution of the Kung Fu Genre," 31–32; Paul Bowman, "Sick Man of Transl-Asia: Bruce Lee and Rey Chow's Queer Cultural Translation," *Social Semiotics* 20, no. 4 (2010): 394.

⁴⁵⁴ Sin-ying Ho, personal conversation with Alex Burchmore, 14 April 2017.

of her *Hero* pieces to be so personal that she gifted one to her neighbour's son as a memento.⁴⁵⁵ Yet as close analysis of Ho's chosen imagery makes clear, the 1960s and 1970s in the US and Europe, as well as in China, were decades of unprecedented social transformation, 'a turbulent period of jangling discord and generational conflict' when mass movements based on ideals of racial tolerance and an end to international conflict gained widespread support.⁴⁵⁶ Ali and Lee are not solely athletic and cinematic heroes; nor are they merely the heroes of Ho's formative years; above all, without effacing these simultaneous roles, they are heroic representatives of the desire for global harmony that can be traced as a guiding concern throughout Ho's oeuvre.

Fusing the classical and the contemporary in Trilogy no. 1 and no. 2 (2007-09)

Ho extends her utopic vision further in another pair of works created between 2007 and 2009, *Trilogy no. 1* (fig. 100) and *no. 2* (fig. 101), in which not only contemporary icons of pop culture but also those of China's past are combined and conjoined, revealing their multiple derivation and their seamless blending in Ho's personal life. There is a direct formal link between *Hero no. 2* (fig. 98) and *Trilogy no. 1*, cast using the same mould, immediately indicating the unified conception underlying these works. The subject of the ornamentation on both pieces is also similar, with one exception: dominating the composition on the front of *Trilogy no. 1* is an underglaze cobalt-blue image of a scene from the Chinese classic *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* 西游记), showing Buddhist monk Xuanzang (玄奘) on the White Dragon Horse (Bai Longma 白龙马), following Princess Iron Fan (Tie Shan Gongzhu 铁扇公主) and accompanied by Zhu Bajie (猪八戒), partially

⁴⁵⁵ Sin-ying Ho, personal conversation with Alex Burchmore, 14 April 2017.

⁴⁵⁶ Dorinson, "Black Heroes in Sport: From Jack Johnson to Muhammad Ali," 128.



Figure 100: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1963), Trilogy no. 1, 2007-09, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals.



Figure 101: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1963), Trilogy no. 2: Monkey King, Charlie Brown, Hello Kitty and ET, 2007-09, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals, 39 x 27.5 x 27.5 cm.

obscured by a break in the decoration but recognisable by his iconic muck-rake. Curving around the side and reverse of the vessel, the “Monkey King” Sun Wukong (孙悟空) is also shown, with another image of Xuanzang. More prominent on the reverse, however, are repeated red decal images of contemporary pop icons Charlie Brown and Hello Kitty, analogous to Muhammad Ali and Bruce Lee on the *Hero* vessels. Classical Chinese and twentieth-century global entertainment culture are therefore combined, yet while the diverse imagery on *Hero no. 1* and *no. 2* (figs. 97-99), *Music* (fig. 96), and the *Confucius, Jesus Christ and John Lennon* (figs. 88-91) vases was relatively unified, a new sense of antagonism is suggested on *Trilogy no. 1* by the partial obscuring of the literary scene. The benignly blank yet insistent crowds of Charlie Brown and Hello Kitty figures encroach upon the narrative, preventing a clear reading. Like a bloom of mould or a rash, they seep across the surface of the work, exposing the white of the clay and highlighting the crackle lines in the glaze. This could be interpreted as an oblique commentary on the encroachment of mass-culture into the dream-world of classical China, replacing a vaunted authenticity with overwhelming superficiality and echoing the similar critiques raised by Ai Weiwei, Xu Yihui, Liu Jianhua.

On the other hand, the differences between the various elements of the composition are not as stark as they seem at first – each motif is a blending of multiple elements and attained its current form through a process of transcultural adaptation. Like Bruce Lee, Hello Kitty is an “Asian” cultural export, created and launched in Japan in 1974 before travelling to the US in 1976, Europe in 1978 and back to a broader Asian market in 1990.⁴⁵⁷ The amalgamated form of the character, part-human and part-cat, echoes this duality of cultures while at the same time, in the particular context of this work, evoking

⁴⁵⁷ Christine R. Yano, *Pink Globalisation: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 9.

a parallel with the comparably hybrid characters taken from *Journey to the West* – Zhu Bajie, part-human, part-pig, and the divine monkey Sun Wukong. Charlie Brown, though not a hybrid figure, has been closely associated since his appearance in US-based cartoonist Charles M. Schulz’s comic-strip *Peanuts* in 1950, with the anthropomorphised dog Snoopy, who joins his adventures much like Xuanzang’s semi-human companions.⁴⁵⁸

Even *Journey to the West*, though regarded as one of the “Four Great Chinese Classics,” is not independent of external cultural influence. The novel is based on the historical Xuanzang’s (c. 596-664) pilgrimage from China to India and back in the mid- to late-7th century, in search of Buddhist scripture. This Xuanzang was ‘a hero of religion,’ returning in 645 to the Tang-dynasty capital Chang’an with almost seven hundred scriptural texts. The Xuanzang of the novel, however, is entirely different. Pilgrimage remains a central theme, yet after centuries of adaptation, embellishment, and blending with folktales and mythological stories between the monk’s death and publication of *Journey to the West* in 1592, the story became ‘a tale of supernatural deeds and fantastic adventures, of mythic beings and animal spirits, of fearsome battles with monsters and miraculous deliverances from dreadful calamities.’⁴⁵⁹ Already a composite text, the novel has been subject to many further transformations in a wide variety of forms, from direct textual translations, to abridged editions such as English Sinologist Arthur Waley’s *Monkey, Folk Novel of China* by Wu Ch’êng-ên (1943), theatrical and cinematic adaptations, comic-book and graphic novel retellings, even animated versions for children. It was through some of these subsequent iterations that Ho came to know *Journey to the West* during

⁴⁵⁸ Stephen J. Lind, *A Charlie Brown Religion: Exploring the Spiritual Life and Work of Charles M. Schulz* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 18.

⁴⁵⁹ Anthony C. Yu, introduction to *The Journey to the West*, by Wu Cheng'en, revised edition, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1, 4-6, 60-61.

her childhood in Hong Kong, rather than through study of the novel itself.⁴⁶⁰ The contrast on *Trilogy no. 1* and *no. 2* between classical Chinese characters, Charlie Brown and Hello Kitty, between an ancient text and contemporary consumerism, is therefore not as stark as it seems. Each character is an amalgam of multiple sources, and each exists in an ever-evolving constellation of composite forms.

Ho's celebration of what some might consider a superficial effacing of the boundaries between past and present, classical and kitsch, is accomplished even more successfully in the second *Hero* vessel (fig. 98), in which her enduring vision of a future community founded on mutual recognition and cross-fertilisation is extended even beyond the confines of the planet. To the "trilogy" of Charlie Brown, Hello Kitty and *Journey to the West*, Ho adds a fourth character on this vessel whose presence clarifies the concept of the work: E.T., the protagonist of American director Steven Spielberg's 1982 science-fiction film, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. Unlike Charlie Brown and Hello Kitty, with whom the alien seems to be more closely connected, E.T. is depicted in underglaze cobalt-blue rather than red decal and so is integrated into the scenes from *Journey to the West* that again dominate the composition. The latter are even more fragmented and obscured, reduced to an almost decorative series of narrative splinters, from which only the rotund figure of Zhu Bajie can be clearly discerned. Ho explains her juxtaposition of these four images – of Charlie Brown, characters from *Journey to the West*, E.T. and Hello Kitty – as a representation of different "layers" of popular culture within her life. As a child, she watched animated and cinematic adaptations of *Journey to the West*, while her older sisters watched Charlie Brown cartoons from the US; during the 1980s, they all watched Spielberg's film; and during the 1990s, her niece collected Hello Kitty merchandise.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁶⁰ Sin-ying Ho, email communication with Alex Burchmore, 25 April 2017.

⁴⁶¹ Sin-ying Ho, personal conversation with Alex Burchmore, 14 April 2017.

The merging and ambiguity of cultural spheres suggested on *No. 1* is therefore made explicit, with the Charlie Brown and Hello Kitty figures interacting with compositional elements of the literary scene, while E.T. has entirely transgressed the border between the two worlds.

It is significant that this transgression of the ambiguous boundary between “Chinese” and “Western” elements of decoration on *Trilogy no. 2* (fig. 101) is accomplished by E.T. As an alien, or “Extra-Terrestrial” life-form, E.T. is the quintessential traveller between worlds, cast adrift in the universe and completely independent of any contextual background which might define and limit his identity. Like Hello Kitty and many of the characters in *Journey to the West*, he is also a hybrid creature, caught between human and animal spheres of existence. His appearance therefore makes clear that both *Trilogy* vessels are representations of transitional states of being, or metamorphoses. Drawing from one of the most widely-known narratives of travel – including both geographical travel and the movement between divine and mortal realms – they valorise characters defined by their ability to exist simultaneously in multiple contexts and orders of being. Inserted within the “trilogy” of sources on these two works, E.T. acts as a substitute for the artist-as-migrant, and for the transgressive figure of the traveller in general, as one who can move easily between different contexts and can even aspire to unite them into a new aesthetic whole. On the reverse of the work, the depiction of E.T. enacting the most iconic scene from the film – arm outstretched, index finger extended – seems to mimic the similar representation of Charlie Brown. On the front of the vessel, E.T. gazes confidently from the glazed surface toward the viewer, his hands cradling a flowerpot. Both poses stage the possibility of communication, either through bodily interaction or the ceremonial gesture of gift-giving.

Like Ai Weiwei, Liu Jianhua and Xu Yihui, Sin-ying Ho emphasises the material appeal of porcelain in the extravagant surface ornamentation and rich glazes of her work, thereby disguising the conceptual depth of her work beneath an alluring façade. In contrast to these artists, however, the deeper meaning that she conceals is not one of parody or critique, but a dimension of personal relevance that imbues the pop icons appropriated in her complex compositions with new meaning as players within narratives of family and private identity. The figures of Confucius, Jesus Christ and John Lennon that appear on her vessels of the same name (figs. 88-91), for example, mark significant moments in her life-long search for a sense of community and provide a consummate expression of her desire for a global community founded on mutual respect and cooperation. Images of Bruce Lee and Muhammad Ali on *Hero no. 1* and *no. 2* (figs. 97-99) reiterate this close intertwining of nostalgia and idealistic aspiration, emphasising Ho's abiding desire for communal support and solidarity. Yet the clearest statement of her envisioned syncretic utopia is achieved in *Trilogy no. 1* and *no. 2* (figs. 100, 101), in which not only icons of contemporary culture but also those of the distant past are fused with the events of Ho's life in a celebration of a utopic transcultural space devoid of borders and prejudice. In each of these paired works, that which appears superficial is revealed to be capable of under-acknowledged depths of personal meaning and uninhibited speculation, not merely visually appealing but intellectually and emotionally stimulating.

Sin-ying Ho's appropriation of Pop aesthetics in *Made in the postmodern era: Paradox* (2007-09)

The joy of the superficial and play of glamorous surfaces unburdened by any "deeper" meaning is not completely absent from Sin-ying Ho's oeuvre. In a series of four vessels

created alongside those discussed above, she appropriates pop icons in a much less sincere and less idiosyncratic manner that recalls the Gaudy Art of Xu and Liu. *Made in the postmodern era: Paradox* (figs. 102-105) encapsulates the chaotic contradictions and confusions of the postmodern condition in image-saturated collages of cultural markers with no apparent sense of order or context. In the first three works, identical in form to *Trilogy no. 2* (fig. 101), decal images of Mao Zedong, Marilyn Monroe and Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* cascade across the surface of the porcelain, separated by the sinuous form of a dragon in cobalt-blue. The references in previous works to sport, film, literature and music as spheres of transcultural contact have now largely disappeared, superseded by a more vaguely-defined allusion to the cult of celebrity and, through the *Mona Lisa*, to the ever-ambiguous realm of artistic value. In the fourth work in the series, the act of appropriation itself emerges as an underlying theme in the figure of US Pop artist Andy Warhol, though Ho implies a subtle distinction between the regenerative appropriation most apparent in her works and the disjunctive form practiced by Warhol.

In the first three *Made in the postmodern era* works (figs. 102, 103 and 104), Ho provides no sense of coherence or resolution for the paradox named in the subtitle of the series, juxtaposing disparate images from divergent contexts to create a kaleidoscopic web of referential associations. Any grounding in the narrative of her life or sublimation within utopic visions of a syncretic future are completely dissolved within the play of surfaces. This vacuity finds its clearest expression in serialised representations of the *Mona Lisa* and *Vitruvian Man*, created by Italian Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) in 1490 and 1503. Like Hokusai's *The Great Wave*, these images are emblematic of a certain type of canonical "classical" art – European in this case, rather than Japanese –



Figure 102: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1963), *Made in the postmodern era: Paradox no. 1*, 2007-09, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals, 39 x 27.5 x 27.5 cm.



Figure 103: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1963), *Made in the postmodern era: Paradox no. 2*, 2007-09, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals, 39 x 27.5 x 27.5 cm.



Figure 104: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1963), *Made in the postmodern era: Paradox no. 3*, 2007-09, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals, 39 x 27.5 x 27.5 cm.

yet they are reduced here to ornaments, just another element in the overall decorative scheme alongside the dragon, that quintessential symbol of a complementary Chinese classicism. One implication of the subtitle Ho has chosen for the series could therefore be the paradoxical union and coexistence of these parallel classical lineages, each of which has historically been positioned as singular and preordained despite the inherent contingency of all such constructions.

These icons of classicism are juxtaposed, however, with repeated images of Mao Zedong and Marilyn Monroe, figures who embody the decades of the 1960s and 1970s to which Ho often refers in her work. Superficial parallels can be drawn – the portrait of Mao Zedong, as a marker of absolute authority, relates very closely with the representation of the Imperial dragon, while Monroe’s glamorous image parallels Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*. However, another paradox emerges in the contrast between Mao and Monroe who, though contemporaries, achieved fame in radically divergent contexts: Mao’s portrait was circulated after the founding of the PRC, achieving its greatest ubiquity during the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution, while Monroe’s came to prominence alongside her film career in the 1950s, gaining iconic status following her suicide in 1962. There are therefore multiple paradoxes in these works – the coexistence of two putatively singular classical traditions, the continuity of the distant past with the more immediate reality of the present, and the contemporaneity of a culture of glamour and excess with one of horror and repression, each inextricably intertwined yet denied the coherence of an underlying narrative.

On the fourth *Made in the postmodern era* sculpture (fig. 105), however, the addition of another iconic figure raises the possibility that appropriation itself is a unifying theme, in both its regenerative as well as disjunctive aspects. This figure is archetypal Pop artist



Figure 105: Sin-ying Ho (b. 1963), Made in the postmodern era: Paradox no. 4, 2007-09, porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration, digital decals, 38.5 x 28.5 x 21 cm.

Andy Warhol (1928-1987; fig. 148) who, like E.T. in the second *Trilogy* vessel (fig. 101), becomes a mediator between the various disparate elements of Ho's composition. The images of Mao, Monroe and the *Mona Lisa* on these vessels are appropriated from Warhol's own earlier appropriations of these portraits during the 1960s and 1970s (the only exception to this logic is the *Vitruvian man*, though this could be a veiled allusion to Warhol himself as a unifying figure at the centre of Ho's artistic universe). Ho has confirmed this source, explaining that she intended to draw a parallel between Warhol's all-encompassing artistic practice and the "appropriation" of porcelain forms and motifs by generations of artisans in Jingdezhen, a parallel she feels deserves more attention:

I was thinking about ideas of appropriation ... [and] the history of Jingdezhen's artisans, how they learned from masters, appropriating their designs [and] work, from generation to generation ... Warhol also used other people's work, re-working it and making a new statement. I found that an interesting dialogue.⁴⁶²

There is a fundamental difference, however, between these two forms of appropriation or, in the case of the artisans of Jingdezhen, what could more accurately be termed reproduction or imitation. Above all, the artisanal practice of "copying" the past is an established aspect of the industry and a direct result of the long history of modularity, mass-production and division of labour discussed in previous chapters. The aim of such imitation is not parody or critique, as it is for most contemporary artistic appropriations, but to ensure the continuity of admired (and profitable) motifs. Ho's comparison of this tradition with Warhol's works of Pop Art therefore seems disingenuous, anachronistic, or perhaps little more than an attempt to "re-claim" appropriation as a distinctly Chinese aesthetic practice. Though it might also point toward the divergent effects that this

⁴⁶² Sin-ying Ho, personal conversation with Alex Burchmore, 14 April 2017.

artistic act can exert on an appropriated image: on one hand, as in the case of Warhol, it can dislocate and fragment, exposing and widening existing divisions; yet on the other hand, as in the case of artisans working in Jingdezhen, it can be a tool for refinement, regeneration, and the mastering of historical memory.

The disjunctive aspect of appropriation is most apparent in Warhol's fascination with Marilyn Monroe, which Ho revives and extends on *Made in the postmodern era*. Warhol produced his first image of Monroe, the *Marilyn diptych*, in 1962, two weeks after her suicide. Both this and his subsequent images of her were based on a photograph taken by Gene Kornman as a publicity photograph for the film *Niagara* (1953).⁴⁶³ Warhol's appropriation of Monroe's image was therefore associated from its first appearance in his oeuvre with her death and the construction of her iconic status, 'both ... the ultimate glamour symbol of the Hollywood machine but also the star as memento mori.'⁴⁶⁴ By presenting the publicity shot as a repeated image in jarring, garish colours, Warhol drew attention to its artificiality and to the usually concealed divide between surface and substance, between the character of Marilyn Monroe and the person of Norma Jeane Mortenson. The images can be read as allusions to Warhol's own conflicting public and private personae, the extent to which he also actively constructed his own public image, and the isolation and depersonalisation that this inevitably fostered.⁴⁶⁵

In the semiotic logic of Ho's oeuvre, this underlying effect of Warhol's Marilyn Monroe as an image of disparity between public/private, surface/substance, is reinforced by her recycling of Warhol's *Mona Lisa*. The US artist first appropriated the *Mona Lisa* a year

⁴⁶³ Heiner Bastian, *Andy Warhol: Retrospective* (London: Tate Publishing, 2001), 294; John A. Walker, *Art in the Age of Mass Media* (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 39.

⁴⁶⁴ Gary Needham, "Publicity and Pathos: Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Diptych* (1962) in Context," *Film, Fashion & Consumption* 4, no. 2/3 (2015): 224

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 221-224.

after his *Marilyn diptych*, in 1963, following loan of the painting to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in January of that year.⁴⁶⁶ The most notable of his *Mona Lisa* works, *Thirty are better than one* (1963), follows a pattern of multiplication set by the *Marilyn diptych* and other works produced by Warhol at this time in its transposition of the painting into a grid of black-and-white screen-print reproductions. Both this and the *Marilyn Diptych* invite interpretation as comments on the mass-reproduction of art and the flattening that this engenders, reducing potent works to little more than undifferentiated surfaces. This is the disjunctive aspect of appropriation, intended to expose the always unstable boundary between the superficial and the substantial, and to further widen this divide by flattening and fragmenting an image until it seems completely devoid of content.

The regenerative aspect of appropriation, on the other hand, is best illustrated in Ho's (and, to a lesser extent, Warhol's) re-presentation of the image of Mao Zedong. Warhol first used Mao's image in 1972, following Richard Nixon's diplomatic visit to China in the same year. The version he chose to appropriate was that reproduced across China as the frontispiece for the *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong*.⁴⁶⁷ This is one of the most reproduced portraits in recorded human history, with an estimated 2.2 billion editions of the *Quotations* distributed during the Cultural Revolution alone.⁴⁶⁸ Warhol's choice of this image would therefore seem to have been motivated again by a desire to expose the divide between substance and surface, the disparity between artificial and real – though now through propaganda rather than a publicity shot. This interpretation is supported by the juxtaposition of the “mechanical” silkscreen process in the first Mao

⁴⁶⁶ Bastian, *Andy Warhol: Retrospective*, 294.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid, 302.

⁴⁶⁸ Francesca Dal Lago, “Personal Mao: Reshaping an Icon in Contemporary Chinese Art,” *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 48.

works with more painterly elements, highlighting the fabrication of the image.⁴⁶⁹ Ho's re-appropriation of these images in *Made in the postmodern era*, however, effected by a Chinese-born rather than US artist, situates her work within a different artistic lineage.

During the 1980s and early '90s, alongside a resurgence in the popularity of Mao's image now termed a "Mao craze" (*Mao re* 毛热), many Chinese artists appropriated the former dictator's portrait.⁴⁷⁰ Like Warhol and Ho, these artists were interested in the status of mass-reproduced imagery rather than the man himself, probing the extent to which his portrait, especially the versions displayed in Tiananmen Square and as the *Quotations* frontispiece, had 'become relatively unfixed ... available to a play of semiosis, a variety of re-placements [and] resignifications.'⁴⁷¹ In line with the shift toward a more market-oriented socialism and away from an (overtly) Maoist frame of reference, Mao's image became detached from the ideological certainty with which it had once been associated and open to additional cultural and personal layers of meaning. Like the other iconic characters, fictional and otherwise, who appear throughout Ho's oeuvre, it became a focus for the projection of personal fantasies and quixotic ideals, even while grounded within a specific historical context and reminiscent of a specific point in time. This is the

⁴⁶⁹ Anne Rorimer, "Andy Warhol's Mao, 1973," *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago* 69, no. 3 (June 1975): 4–7. Considering this exposure of the portrait as an artificial icon, it is interesting to note that ten of Warhol's "Mao portraits" were in fact recently banned from exhibition in China as part of the touring exhibition *Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal*, thus demonstrating the extent to which Mao Zedong's image can still become a focus for politically-charged debate. Patricia Cohen, "Warhol's Mao Portraits Banned from a Show in China," *New York Times*, December 24, 2012, <https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/24/warhols-mao-portraits-banned-from-a-show-in-china/>.

⁴⁷⁰ A great deal of analysis of the "Mao craze" of the 1980s and early 90s has been published, see for example: Edward Friedman, "Democracy and 'Mao Fever,'" *Journal of Contemporary China* 3, no. 6 (Summer 1994): 84–95; Dai Jinhua, "Redemption and Consumption: Depicting Culture in the 1990s," *Positions* 4, no. 1 (1996): 127–43; Geremie R. Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996); and, more recently, Ruth Y.Y. Hung, "Red Nostalgia: Commemorating Mao in Our Time," *Literature Compass* 12, no. 8 (August 2015): 371–84.

⁴⁷¹ David Clarke, "Reframing Mao: Aspects of Recent Chinese Art, Popular Culture and Politics," in *Art & Place: Essays on Art from a Hong Kong Perspective* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996), 239–241.

regenerative aspect of appropriation – the adaptation of an image to new contexts and new purposes to ensure its continued relevance.

Each of the artists considered in this chapter – as well as Ah Xian, though his *China china* busts (figs. 33, 68-74, 114, 117) are not discussed here in depth – was drawn to use porcelain by the surface appeal of the material, yet they have imbued this superficiality with a critical, autobiographical, even utopian significance. Ai Weiwei's sculptural pieces created between 2004-2007 (figs. 78-83) appear vacuous and devoid of content but conceal a strident critique of contemporary consumerism, the commercialisation of the Chinese art market, and the desire for fame and profit that drives these cultural forces beneath their immaculately glazed surfaces. The *Obsessive memories* series (figs. 84, 85, 87) of dismembered women draped over armchairs and bathtubs with which Liu Jianhua signalled his return to a medium he had long disdained also contains a veiled critique of consumerism, expressed with a malice that recalls the malevolent intrusion of his pieces in Oxburgh Hall (figs. 35-40). Conversely, the intent of Sin-ying Ho's work is far from malicious, expressing a fervent desire for a more harmonious and syncretic world in which different cultural codes are dissolved through mutual influence and interaction. That which appears superficial is revealed to be deeply imbedded within a complex web of associations and multiple meanings, to which the thread of the artist's life and her experiences as a global traveller add an underlying narrative. Yet even Ho is not immune to the visual allure of glazed porcelain, reiterating its superficial appeal in her *Made in the postmodern era* series (figs. 102-105). For all three artists, it is not only the historic resonance, potential for mass-production, and personal relevance of porcelain that attract them to the medium, but also its more superficial appeal.

Chapter 5: Porcelain flesh

In addition to their fascination with the visual and tactile appeal of porcelain, Ai Weiwei, Liu Jianhua, Ah Xian, Sin-ying Ho and other creators of New Export China have shown an abiding interest in its exotic associations – the etymological equivalence between china and China mentioned at the start of this dissertation. This interest is often expressed through or closely tied to their exploration of the superficial aspects of the medium. With *The Wave* (fig. 78), for example, Ai Weiwei exaggerated the lustre of celadon and the “preciousness” of small-scale porcelain sculpture to critique the commodification of Asian works of art as representative of a stereotyped Asian identity. In Ah Xian’s and Sin-ying Ho’s works, too, their search for a lost Chineseness and eventual discovery of a more complex, transexperiential identity is made visible in the tension between the surface and form of their work, while the markers of Chinese identity that they adapt are iconographic and stylistic in derivation (iconic motifs like the dragon, and particular combinations of colours).

These explorations of Chineseness, however, have so far been considered only from the perspective of the artist, considering their motivations and possible intentions – for the viewer, on the other hand, iconographic and stylistic indicators may retain stereotypical, exoticising associations. This is particularly apparent in the reception of Ah Xian’s *China china* busts (figs. 33, 68-74, 114, 117), which have been consistently read as images of the artist’s experience as a Chinese migrant living in Australia. The conventional motifs that adorn his anonymous sitters, often obscuring their features, have been likened to birthmarks, a rash, or even a disfiguring scar analogous to the suffocating imposition of cultural stereotypes on migrant-citizens – the feeling of being unwillingly assigned a certain identity that Sin-ying Ho highlighted in her early work. The busts could therefore

be termed a form of autoethnographic art, through which the artist deliberately adopts and therefore reclaims stereotypes. Yet the process Ah Xian has developed to produce his busts, involving intimate collaboration with the subject to create an almost exact replica of their features, draws attention to another defining quality of porcelain: its closeness to the body. In addition to the already-discussed tension between cultural and personal identity evoked by their motifs, when viewed in person these works exude a potent aura of human physicality, immortalising even the humblest features of the artist's subjects in a highly tactile medium. Although often associated with death masks, the busts should be more accurately termed life masks, while the motifs that adorn their surfaces evoke comparison with self-expressive, and self-exoticising tattoos

The ambiguous relationship between the exotic and the body is even more evident In Liu Jianhua's *Games* (2000-02; figs. 34, 106) series, an extension of *Obsessive memories* (figs. 84, 85, 87) in which the same dismembered and decapitated women are displayed on plates rather than sofas and bathtubs. In contrast to Ah Xian's meditative, empathic approach to the human form, these works communicate bodily identity through an exaggerated sexuality, reducing the women represented to little more than emblems of their sex and objects for the desiring gaze of male heterosexual viewers. By encasing their forms within *qipao*, however, an item of women's clothing that has become emblematic of Chinese identity, Liu merges the erotic with the exotic. Like Ai Weiwei, he has frequently criticised the commodification of Chinese contemporary art and artists in the global market, and his *Games* sculptures have been interpreted as a visual representation of such stereotyping – degraded icons of Chineseness served on porcelain plates, which are in turn adorned with highly conventional motifs. The contested history of the *qipao* in China and the memories of repressed desire that Liu

associates with such clothing, however, as well as the act of decapitating and dismembering the women depicted, make these works deeply problematic, especially when considered as products of a society in which media representations and everyday treatment of women are highly inequitable.

In addition to the tension that Ah Xian's and Liu's works in porcelain create between the exotic and the body, the various contexts in which *China china*, *Games* and *Obsessive memories* have been received highlight a parallel tension between different interpretive perspectives. While Liu's works were created in Jingdezhen and first shown in Shanghai and Hong Kong, since the turn of the millennium they have generally been put on display outside of China, in European and North American contexts in which the historical and symbolic resonance of the *qipao* may not be so familiar, leading their always-present sexual content to assume a position of greater significance. Ah Xian's busts, on the other hand, although also produced in Jingdezhen, have only been exhibited once in mainland China and have been studied almost exclusively by Australian, European and North American art-historians. This may explain why a perceived exoticism of decoration has taken precedence over their materiality and intimate relationship to the human body. Such issues of movement between cultural contexts are central to this thesis and are encapsulated in a photographic series by Chinese-Dutch artist Ni Haifeng, *Self-portrait as a part of the porcelain export history* (1999-2001; figs. 118), which extends the logic of the tattoo as autoethnographic self-expression. In this work, as in Ah Xian's and, to a lesser extent, Liu Jianhua's, the exotic is transformed into a costume that can be adopted or discarded at will, emphasising not only the connection between cultural heritage and bodily identity, but also the liberating potential of a transexperiential existence.

Liu Jianhua's *Games* sculptures (2000-02) as sexual objects

Liu Jianhua's *Games* series of porcelain sculptures (figs. 34, 106), created in Jingdezhen between 2000 and 2002 as an extension of the *Obsessive memories* series, combine the exotic and bodily associations of porcelain in an unsettling and problematic manner. Both sculptural sets are often referred to as the artist's "*qipao* series" in reference to their defining feature: the *qipao* or *cheongsam* in Cantonese (*changshan* 长衫, literally "long shirt"), a distinctively Chinese dress. In *Games* and *Obsessive memories*, brightly-coloured porcelain *qipao* are arranged in various poses that follow the curves of a stereotypically attractive woman's body yet adorn only a pair of long, elegant legs, with apertures in place of head and arms revealing that each is little more than an empty shell. In *Obsessive memories*, this vacuity and the superficial sex appeal of the sculptures has been associated with their critique of China's market reforms, while in *Games* the same qualities are related to the commodification of Chinese contemporary art.

Yet the sinister eroticism of both series cannot be ignored. Folds of fabric recreated in porcelain cling tightly to the breasts and stomachs of the fragmented women, who sit, lay or kneel in a range of sexualised poses, their dresses raised to reveal exposed and parted thighs, painted toenails or feet enclosed within high-heeled shoes. As the work of a male heterosexual artist, produced and displayed in a nation where the media representation and broader social positioning of women remains highly inequitable, these sexualised images are undeniably problematic.⁴⁷² When positioned within the development of Liu's oeuvre in the 1990s and interpreted with reference to the artist's published comments on the repressed sexuality that he associates with the *qipao*, the

⁴⁷² Detailed coverage of these issues in the People's Republic of China can be found on the pioneering blog, "Women and Gender in China" or WAGIC, at <https://www.wagic.org/>.



Figure 106: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), Games, 2001, porcelain with overglaze enamel decoration, 67.8 cm (diameter).

interpretation of these sculptures as critiques of exoticism or consumerism is rapidly eclipsed by a more accurate impression of their function as fetishistic sexual objects.

The male gaze, sexual objectification, and the transformation of the qipao from icon of liberation to erotic fetish

The interrogation of this aspect of Liu's sculptural series brings to mind ideas of the male gaze and sexual objectification which, though reinterpreted in many different contexts, remain foundational to feminist thought and retain their value as a means to highlight the problematic nature of such representation.⁴⁷³ John Berger presented one of the most recognised presentations of these ideas in his canonical text and television series *Ways of Seeing* (1972), in which he observed that a woman is defined in patriarchal social systems as 'an object of vision: a sight [to be held in] the keeping of men.' Divested of any identity aside from sexual characteristics and sexualised clothing, the women represented in Liu's sculptures are an unsettling encapsulation of this reduction of women to the basic premise of 'what can and cannot be done to [them],’ playthings for the men who survey them.⁴⁷⁴ Feminist film critic Laura Mulvey's critique of the male gaze in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is also relevant here, famously linking the pleasure felt by a (heterosexual male) viewer when looking at an exposed woman's body, as well as the denial of this pleasure, with the reduction of women to sexual objects defined only by their visible desirability, or their "to-be-looked-at-ness". Central to this act of delimitation is the allure of "scopophilia", the pleasure of

⁴⁷³ For a discussion of the principal critiques of Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" in the four decades since the first publication of her essay in 1975, including above all her often overlooked emphasis on the cinema, her privileging of heterosexual desire, and her neglect of forms of spectatorship other than that of the voyeur, see Roberta Sassatelli and Laura Mulvey, "Interview with Laura Mulvey: Gender, Gaze and Technology in Film Culture," *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 5 (2011): 123–43.

⁴⁷⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 2008), 39–40.

vision, or 'taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.'⁴⁷⁵ In film, Mulvey writes, women are often represented to accord with scopophilic desire as an "erotic spectacle", 'isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualised ... for the gaze and enjoyment of men.'⁴⁷⁶ Although formulated in relation to the cinema, this analysis can be applied to Liu's sculptures, in which women are likewise depicted as objects for the voyeuristic enjoyment of (heterosexual male) viewers.

Yet this apparently evident sexual or erotic aspect of *Obsessive memories* and *Games* has largely been overlooked in most interpretations of these works, considered secondary to their critique of commodified exoticism or vacuous consumerism. Even when critics – predominantly male critics – have considered the sexual objectification of women in these sculptures, it is rarely criticised or interrogated and is usually considered to be appealing rather than abhorrent. Zhu Qi's association of *Obsessive memories* with a 'release of the senses and sensual pleasure' and the comparison that Pi Li has drawn between the women represented and the models who adorn the pages of fashion magazines have already been noted.⁴⁷⁷ Even before these statements were published, however, in the exhibition text for the first display of *Obsessive memories* in China, internationally-regarded curator and gallerist Chang (Johnson) Tsong-zung wrote that Liu '[invites] viewers to caress [the porcelain] bodies with their eyes, to relish the sensuousness,' and that he '[views] the female body as an object of desire ... [taking] no interest in its features.'⁴⁷⁸ Similarly, in the essay by Pi Li cited above, the critic praises

⁴⁷⁵ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 16–17.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid, 19, 21.

⁴⁷⁷ Zhu, "How Does the Body Adorn Itself with Clothes?: The Everyday Nature of Post-Political Society," 10–11; Pi, "Polychrome Ceramics, Cheongsam and Chinese Porcelain," 19.

⁴⁷⁸ Johnson Tsong-zung Chang, "Flesh in Porcelain: Liu Jianhua," in *Three Artists from Kunming*, by Marcello Kwan (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1999), 3. Chang was an important figure in the creation of a market for Chinese contemporary art outside of China, not only as the curator of "China's New Art, Post 1989" in 1993, but also for his role in organising the participation of mainland Chinese artists at the

‘the eroticism of milk-white thighs and pert breasts,’ likening the works to “playthings” that ‘we cannot help but want to fondle.’⁴⁷⁹ Such descriptions foreground the erotic aspects of the work in unambiguously sexualised and objectifying language. There is no further interrogation of this sexuality – considering only their own desires, these writers view the dismembering and objectification of women in *Obsessive memories* and *Games* as an acceptable means to an end, with little thought to the broader historical and social context in which such representation should be positioned.

The sublimation of scopophilia in *Obsessive memories* to critique consumerist desires has already been discussed at length and can be identified with relative ease, though the parallel reinterpretation of the erotic as exotic in *Games* draws on a more complex set of historical circumstances and associations, and so requires further explanation. The central element in this reading is the *qipao* and its origins in China’s transition from Imperial to Republican rule during the first decades of the twentieth century. This form of dress initially developed in contrast and competition with the everyday women’s clothing that had been worn in China for centuries: a loose-fitting jacket (fig. 77) over a skirt (裙 *qun*) or trousers (裤 *ku*).⁴⁸⁰ There is some confusion about its exact derivation, but most scholars agree that the *qipao* was adapted from or inspired by Qing Manchu robes, as implied by its Mandarin name, which can be translated as “Manchu banner gown”.⁴⁸¹ Its historical significance, then, strikes at the heart of modern Chinese national

São Paulo Biennale in 1994 and the 46th Venice Biennale in 1995, and his involvement in the selection of works for the survey exhibition “Paris-Pékin” (2002). In 1999, when he wrote these comments, he was therefore approaching the height of his career and so exercised a substantial influence over canonical interpretations of work by contemporary Chinese artists. Clark, “Between the Worlds: Chinese Art at Biennials since 1993,” 43.

⁴⁷⁹ Pi Li, “Polychrome Ceramics, *Cheongsam* and Chinese Porcelain,” in *Porcelain-Like Skin*, by Zhu Qi and Pi Li, trans. Trevor Morris (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 2001), 16.

⁴⁸⁰ Roberts, “The Way of Dress,” 17–18; Finnane, “What Should Chinese Women Wear?,” 106–7.

⁴⁸¹ See, for example: Antonia Finnane, “What Should Chinese Women Wear? A National Problem,” *Modern China* 22, no. 2 (April 1996): 106–7; Huang Nengfu and Chen Juanjuan, “The Emperor’s Clothes,” in *Evolution & Revolution: Chinese Dress 1700s–1990s*, by Claire Roberts, trans. Bruce Gordon Doar

identity, recalling an alternately maligned and celebrated history of imperial splendor and at the same time heralding the dawn of a New China. Liu's use of this iconic garment could therefore be interpreted as a critique of such images and their use to reinforce stereotyped narratives of national identity, in China and overseas, where the *qipao* is likewise considered emblematic of Chineseness. Like the exposure of inner vacuity beneath alluring surfaces in *Obsessive memories, Games* is a revelation of the ultimate emptiness and fragility of such ideals, recalling Ai Weiwei's undermining of nationalist myths in *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* (fig. 2) and other works of the 1990s.

The *qipao* was also closely tied, however, to volatile fluctuations in the expression and repression of femininity during these pivotal decades – a parallel significance that is of special relevance for Liu's sculptural series. Its initial popularity was directly linked to the emergent influence of a women's rights movement in China during the first decades of the 20th century. Among calls for reform, *qipao* rapidly gained popularity as single-piece garments without the cumbersome folds of *aoqun/aoku*, sometimes cut so wide and long that a mother could slip her baby inside a sleeve when breastfeeding.⁴⁸² The *qipao* of this era resembled men's *changpao* (长袍), or "long robes", and were intended to enable reform-conscious women of the era to cultivate an androgynous appearance that reflected their belief in the collapse of gender distinctions and their desire to be equal participants in the political transformation of modern China.⁴⁸³ Those women who chose to wear *qipao* predominantly belonged to a progressive middle class in the port-

(Sydney, NSW: Powerhouse, 1997), 37; and Vivienne Tam, *China Chic* (Hong Kong: Harper Collins, 2000), 8.

⁴⁸² Szeto, "Cheungsam: Fashion, Culture and Gender," 55–57.

⁴⁸³ Finnane, "What Should Chinese Women Wear?," 113–15.



Figure 107: Hatamen Cigarettes, c. 1930, lithograph, 50 x 74 cm; Poster Museum, New York.

cities of Shanghai, Tianjin, Hankou and Guangzhou, and were well-educated, financially secure, and politically aware, while those living in the more conservative communities outside the cities or of a lower socio-economic level generally preferred *aoqun/aoku*.⁴⁸⁴ As conceived, therefore, the *qipao* was an emblem of women's empowerment, affluent cosmopolitanism and forward-thinking politics.

The appeal of this early iteration of the *qipao* was limited, however, by its isolation to a relatively small group of privileged women and its androgyny – qualities that alienated those of a lower socio-economic level and those who did not desire to shed outward signs of gender. During the 1920s and 1930s, therefore, it rapidly evolved into an overtly “feminine” garment. Skirt-lengths became shorter, fabric was cut to cling more closely to the wearer's breasts and hips, accentuating the narrowness of their waist, and the slits down each side were widened to draw attention to the wearer's legs. The new and now definitive *qipao* was advertised in calendar posters that captured urban Chinese modernity in Shanghai, regarded as the “Paris of the East”, a city of elegant socialites unashamed of their femininity (fig. 107).⁴⁸⁵ This version of the *qipao* was also uniquely suited, however, to the authoritarian political climate of Republican China. Like fascistic governments elsewhere in the world at the time, Republican authorities propagandised the restoration of a putative national essence, one aspect of which was a reversal of the moves toward gender equality in the first two decades of the century. Under Republican rule ‘women were supposed to be women,’ and feminisation of *qipao* was promoted.⁴⁸⁶ In an article written for *The Eastern Miscellany* (*Dongfang Zazhi* 东方杂志) in 1928, for example, the author proclaimed that *qipao* should be ‘cut to the shape of the body,

⁴⁸⁴ Finnane, “What Should Chinese Women Wear?,” 111, 119–20.

⁴⁸⁵ Roberts, “The Way of Dress,” 21; Tam, *China Chic*, 8, 12; Szeto, “*Cheungsam*: Fashion, Culture and Gender,” 62; Finnane, “What Should Chinese Women Wear?,” 118.

⁴⁸⁶ Finnane, “What Should Chinese Women Wear,” 117.

showing the curvaceous beauty of the female and in this way displaying the woman's sex, what it is about a woman that makes her a woman.'⁴⁸⁷ Although initially intended to express a desire for equality, a progressive politics and an air of urbane elegance, from the 1920s *qipao* became a means to exaggerate and even to objectify women's sexuality, reinforcing rather than contesting established norms of femininity.

It is this hyper-sexualised *qipao* of the 1920s and 1930s that Liu has chosen to render in *Games* and *Obsessive memories*, highlighting the "curvaceous beauty" that this form of the dress was designed to display for the pleasure of the male heterosexual gaze. In the critical reception of the series to date, however, even while their sexuality is recognised and often celebrated as in the quotations cited above, authors associate the *qipao* more with its earlier role as an expression of Chinese national identity, in both a positive and negative light. Zhu Qi, for example, identifies a parallel in *Obsessive memories* between Chinese mass-consumerism of the 1990s and 1930s, each decade representing

a brief ten-year experiment in peace and prosperity ... conspicuous consumption in the foreign settlements; passionate social life [and] ... exquisite interior décor; fashion [and] ... matters of the heart between the sexes; amusing conversation ... [and] orchestrated nostalgia.⁴⁸⁸

Chang similarly praises Liu's evocation of 'a gentle time warp ... bringing back romantic fantasies about pre-revolution China ... the old dynamics of seduction and conquest.'⁴⁸⁹ For both authors, the symbolism of the *qipao* is fundamentally nostalgic and, despite

⁴⁸⁷ Li Yuyi, «美装, 新装与奇装衣服» [Beautiful dress, new dress, weird and wonderful dress], 东方杂志 14, no. 9 (1928), cited in Finnane, "What Should Chinese Women Wear," 115–16.

⁴⁸⁸ Zhu, "How Does the Body Adorn Itself with Clothes," 11.

⁴⁸⁹ Chang, "Flesh in Porcelain: Liu Jianhua," 3.

the gendering of the sculpted figures, has little relation to issues of women's rights and equal representation.

Chang's evocation of a 'dynamics of seduction and conquest' seems to indicate some acknowledgment of the role that sexuality plays in these works, yet his association of this dynamic with 'romantic fantasies' of China bears a closer relation to a parallel, more negative interpretation of the *qipao* as an embodiment of Chinese national identity. This reading has been most clearly expressed by Pi Li, who identifies *Games* as a critique of unequal power relations between art-world elites in Europe and North America, and artists in China and other "Third World" nations who are reduced to little more than representatives of an exotic cultural essence. He asserts that Liu sought to exaggerate and expose the artificiality of this stereotyping by deliberately preparing 'a scrumptious dish ... with Chinese culture as its recipe.' It is for this reason, Pi argues, that the artist chose the *qipao* as the archetypal Chinese dress, porcelain as the quintessential Chinese medium, and fragmented women's bodies on plates as an analogy for the "serving-up" of Chinese culture to a global audience.⁴⁹⁰ This view of Liu's series is now canonical, both within and outside of China: Bernhard Fibicher, for example, now Director of the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne, has written that 'Liu produces "exoticism" [to] represent the gaze of an outsider [and] the ineradicable memories of [China's] historical determinism,' and this 'is why he can allow himself to depict women as ornamental objects and precious toys.'⁴⁹¹ For critics in this school of thought, sexual objectification is a critical strategy rather than an end in itself, while the *qipao* functions primarily as an emblem of Chinese national identity, whether celebrated or stereotyped.

⁴⁹⁰ Pi, "Polychrome Ceramics," 18–20.

⁴⁹¹ Bernhard Fibicher, "Liu Jianhua," in *Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*, by Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 256.

Reinterpreting Obsessive memories (1998-2000) and Games (2000-02) as expressions of Liu Jianhua's adolescent sexual fantasies

However, as the history of the *qipao* makes clear, it emerged not only alongside the development of modern Chinese national identity, but also in conjunction with a shift in public perception of women's sexuality. It is this, I argue, that should be considered the primary subject of the *Obsessive memories* and *Games* series, not only because of their historical context, but also because of their extensive display outside of China as well as a sustained interest in sexuality throughout Liu's work in the 1990s. Although in China the *qipao* might be associated with the Republican era, and so the alternately nostalgic or post-colonial associations of Liu's series may be self-evident, the same is not true for audiences outside of China, where the sculptures have primarily been exhibited since their display in Shanghai and Hong Kong. In this context, received by European, North American and Australian viewers for many of whom the *qipao* is likely a much less nuanced marker of a vague Chineseness or even "the Orient" in general, rather than the specific historical moment of Republican China, the objectified sexuality inherent in both series draws most attention and should be considered their primary subject. This shift in interpretive position is not only a result of a parallel shift in display context, however, but can also be closely related to a fascination with sexuality that recurred throughout Liu's work in the 1990s, from his fiberglass sculptural series *Concealed* and *Disharmony* (figs. 109-112), created from 1993-97, to the first fiberglass pieces created for *Obsessive memories* in 1997 (fig. 113). Liu himself has noted this conceptual interest, observing that

while [*Obsessive memories* and *Games*] carry elements of social critique, [they are] more concerned with ... clothing and women's bodies ... an unfolding of personal desires ... I think [the *qipao* is] very erotic; those of us born in the 1960s

were very inhibited and unable to openly express our feelings ... so I decided to bring out my desires.⁴⁹²

Conversely, asked whether *Games* could be seen as a representation of exploitative global relations in the art-world, Liu has noted that he didn't consider this implication when he first conceived the series, yet he did subsequently come to consider it valid.⁴⁹³ Rather than icons of a stereotyped Chineseness, then, *Obsessive memories* and *Games* should be acknowledged as problematic representations of objectified hyper-sexuality. Gender more than culture is stereotyped and essentialised in these works, in which women are deprived of personal identity through their dismemberment, decapitation and reduction as playthings for heterosexual male viewers, and so it is this aspect of the works that should be interrogated.

In the wake of this interpretative shift, Liu's reference to his childhood in the 1960s and 1970s becomes particularly important, implying that the sculptures could be read as an exorcism of long-repressed desires, though the artist has sublimated these suppressed yearnings in other comments as artistic rather than sexual in origin. In mainland China, the 1960s and 1970s are remembered for the violence of the Cultural Revolution, when *qipao* were denigrated as excessively luxurious and gendered clothing. Those discovered wearing or even in possession of *qipao* were often assaulted on the street and forcibly stripped, their homes ransacked so that the offending garments could be confiscated or destroyed. Both women and men were instead required to wear a plain grey or navy-blue jacket over trousers, known as a *zhifu* (制服) or "uniform" (fig. 108).⁴⁹⁴ For Liu, an

⁴⁹² Yan and Liu, «嬗变中的刘建华: 艺术转变的内在逻辑 - 阎玉婷对话刘建华» [The Evolution of Liu Jianhua: Internal Logic for Art Transformation – Yan Yuting in Dialogue with Liu Jianhua], 41.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Finnane, "What Should Chinese Women Wear," 120–22; Sang Ye, "From Rags to Revolution: Behind the Seams of Social Change," in *Evolution & Revolution: Chinese Dress 1700s-1990s*, by Claire Roberts, trans. Sue Trevaskes and Geremie R. Barmé (Sydney, NSW: Powerhouse, 1997), 43, 50–51.

adolescent in this oppressive environment, it is easy to imagine how the *qipao* could become a fetish for a sexuality once considered taboo but free to be indulged in the more open political climate of the 1990s, though still marred by the pervasive violence of the era and the shockingly vicious response that such clothing could once provoke. This tension between eroticism and sadism is evident in Liu's choice to depict women clad in this dress without heads or arms, reduced to the primary and secondary sexual characteristics of breasts, genitals, buttocks and legs. Returning to the filmic analogy suggested by Mulvey's feminist theory, this representation parallels the cinematic use of close-ups on women's bodies to heighten their erotic appeal through a process of fragmentation and denial of individual subjectivity.

Liu has explained his removal of head and arms as a purely aesthetic decision, arguing that they would be a distraction for the viewer.⁴⁹⁵ He notes that bodily fragmentation is a highly-regarded sculptural technique used, for example, by French modernist sculptor Auguste Rodin, whose work Liu cites as a catalyst for his decision to leave the factory and pursue a career in contemporary art.⁴⁹⁶ Yet Liu's dismemberment of women remains disquieting, ritualistic and even misogynistic, whether unintentionally or by design. It is revealing, for instance, that Liu has remarked in conversation with Lisa Movius, again recalling the 1960s and '70s, that 'in communist films, it was only the evil women who were pretty.'⁴⁹⁷ Though perhaps intended as an aesthetic decision, Liu's decapitated and

⁴⁹⁵ Liu Jianhua and Mao Xuhui, "Infatuated Memory," in *Three Artists from Kunming*, by Marcello Kwan (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1999), 15; Yan and Liu, «嬗变中的刘建华: 艺术转变的内在逻辑 - 阎玉婷对话刘建华» [The Evolution of Liu Jianhua: Internal Logic for Art Transformation – Yan Yuting in Dialogue with Liu Jianhua], 41. See also: Dematté, "Projecting Dreams," 25.

⁴⁹⁶ Sandy Wan, "Liu Jianhua: A Body Built by Broken Pieces," trans. Dorothy Cheng, *Art Plus*, no. 16 (February 2013): 55; Yan and Liu, «嬗变中的刘建华: 艺术转变的内在逻辑 - 阎玉婷对话刘建华» [The Evolution of Liu Jianhua: Internal Logic for Art Transformation – Yan Yuting in Dialogue with Liu Jianhua], 41; Jin, «刘建华: 给艺术做减法» [Liu Jianhua: An Art of Subtraction], 89.

⁴⁹⁷ Liu Jianhua, cited in Lisa Movius, "Material World: The Works of Artist Liu Jianhua Poke Fun at the Wealthy New China," *Women's Wear Daily*, November 20, 2006.



Figure 108: Jacket [zhifu], 1970-79, cotton, plastic, 67 cm; Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney.

dismembered *femmes fatales* emphasise sexual objectification as a means to isolate and control feminine sexuality, inspired by his memories of the gendered violence enacted during the Cultural Revolution.

This reductive exaggeration of sexuality is a recurring motif in Liu's 1990s' works, first appearing in his fiberglass sculptural series *Concealed* and *Disharmony* (1993-97; figs. 109-112), clear precedents for *Obsessive memories* and *Games* that mark an important turning-point in Liu's career – his move from abstraction to figuration. Echoing the recollection of his encounter with reproduced images of Rodin's sculpture as pivotal for his decision to become an artist, Liu has explained that his later transition from abstract to figurative work was inspired by a visit to Kunming's Qiongzhu Buddhist Temple in 1988, where he came across the famous series of painted clay sculptures (*caisu* 彩塑) of the five hundred *luohan* housed in that complex. These, he asserts, prompted him to explore naturalistic modelling of the body and experiment with brighter colours.⁴⁹⁸ Liu's sculptural figures, however, are very different to the Qiongzhu Temple *luohan*. In *Concealed*, he juxtaposed masculine Sun Yat-sen suits, military uniforms and breasted jackets (*duijinshan* 对襟衫) with disembodied women's legs and arms, embracing or emerging seductively from the folds of meticulously hand-sculpted fiberglass (figs. 109, 110). These works are usually described as a satirical comment on political corruption – each of the items of clothing that Liu chose to represent are linked to political, military or social authority, while the women's limbs that extend from them, as well as the series title *Concealed*, imply lasciviousness concealed beneath a façade of respectability.⁴⁹⁹ Yet they also convey a tension between stereotypical gender traits: masculine control and

⁴⁹⁸ Jin, «刘建华:给艺术做减去» [Liu Jianhua: An Art of Subtraction], 89.

⁴⁹⁹ Dematté, "Projecting Dreams: Liu Jianhua's Spiritual Things," 24.



Figure 109: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), Concealed, 1993-97, fiberglass.



Figure 110: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), Concealed, 1993-97, fiberglass.

sobriety juxtaposed with a voluptuous feminine sexuality that transgresses and exceeds externally-imposed limits. As such, they can be read as a material manifestation of the artist's memories of his youth during the Cultural Revolution, when he and other boys were compelled to hide their sexual desires. However the series is read, *Concealed* can be positioned as the first instance in Liu's oeuvre in which the artist used the motif of a fragmented woman's body as a symbol of male heterosexual desire, establishing a precedent for his later works in porcelain.

In *Disharmony*, completed after *Concealed*, this objectification of feminine sexuality is made more explicit by the clear separation of gendered elements and the suggestion of a narrative of sexual exposure and possession, leading directly into the consummate expression of these same themes in *Obsessive memories* and *Games*. The sculptures in *Disharmony* are overtly sexual: in one, a disembodied older man's hand rests on the naked thigh of a much younger woman in a highly disturbing amalgamation of gendered markers (fig. 111), while in another an empty buttoned jacket inspects two nude women reduced to a pair of legs, genitals and a partial torso (fig. 112). Early fiberglass works in the *Obsessive memories* series continue this theme of opposing genders, pairing Sun Yat-sen suit, military uniforms and buttoned jackets with *qipao* as emblems of femininity (fig. 113). In the latter, the use of fabric to hide flesh in *Concealed* is combined with the explicit baring of genitals in *Disharmony* to create a flirtatious but still hyper-sexualised and de-individualised representation of women, using the close fit of the *qipao* and the associations of dress and high heels with the availability of sex to give the impression of what Chang might term the 'dynamics of seduction and conquest.' Liu has explained that, for him, the styles of men's clothing that he depicted are not only "political icons" but also 'something I wear myself ... [while the] *qipao* is very trendy yet traditional and



Figure 111: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), Disharmony, 1993-97, fiberglass.



Figure 112: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), *Disharmony*, 1993-97, fiberglass.



Figure 113: Liu Jianhua (b. 1962), *Obsessive memories*, 1997-2000, fiberglass.

feminine, and so [they are] very contradictory.⁵⁰⁰ Considering this personal connection, a parallel can again be drawn here with the *zhifu* of the Cultural Revolution, intended to suppress gender beneath a severe austerity like that associated by Liu with masculine sexuality. The works in *Disharmony* resonate far more profoundly, however, with the violence and volatility of these years – the forcible removal of women’s clothes in the street, the invasion of their privacy and scrutiny of every aspect of their private lives and, perhaps, Liu’s own repressed desires to enact a comparable disrobing, to view and enjoy the bodies of the women around him who were forced to conceal their sexuality.

In 1998, searching for a material with which he could better convey the eroticism of smooth skin and fabric, Liu shifted his attention from fibreglass to porcelain. Working within the constraints of the medium, he greatly reduced the size of his *Obsessive memories* sculptures and incorporated sofas, armchairs and bathtubs to reflect a new interest in the commodification of sexuality that was inspired in part by the similarity of these works to mass-produced ornaments.⁵⁰¹ Then, in 2000, Liu started working on *Games*, replacing furniture with dishes bearing conventional Chinese decorative motifs. Although some pieces in the *Obsessive memories* series look back toward *Concealed* and *Disharmony* with the inclusion of a disembodied man’s hand, in general Liu completely removed masculine clothing from both porcelain sculptural series, instead focusing entirely on his new motif: the *qipao*. The tropes of patriarchal authority and ownership that Sun Yat-sen suits, military uniforms and buttoned jackets represented were not, however, completely effaced, but were transferred to the viewer of these works, now

⁵⁰⁰ Liu Jianhua, cited in Movius, “Material World: The Works of Artist Liu Jianhua Poke Fun at the Wealthy New China.”

⁵⁰¹ Monica Dematté, “Projecting Dreams: Liu Jianhua’s Spiritual Things,” *Yishu* 9, no. 1 (February 2010): 25–26.

placed in the unsettling position of desiring voyeur. A line of development can be traced, then, from *Concealed* and *Disharmony* to *Obsessive memories* and *Games* that reveals a shared emphasis in each series on repressed sexuality and frustrated desire, reinforced by but independent of their critiques of political corruption, superficial materialism, and global stereotyping of an exotic Chineseness.

Ah Xian's *China china* series (1998-2004) and the cultivation of empathic connection to erode ossified cultural stereotypes

Like Liu's ceramic fetishes, Ah Xian's *China china* series of porcelain busts (figs. 33, 68-74, 114, 117) also suggests a tension between the exotic and, if not quite the erotic, then definitely the sensuality of bodily experience. In both bodies of work, elements of the human figure are reduced to ornament and overlaid with conventional Chinese motifs that suggest the imposition of a stereotyped cultural essence. On one hand, this aspect of Ah Xian's work could be interpreted as a visceral critique of the stifling sense of constriction and confinement often felt by migrant citizens, drawn from the artist's own experiences of living as a Chinese migrant in Sydney, Australia. A comparison could be drawn here with the constrictive influence of the male gaze in *Obsessive memories* and *Games*, the narrative of sexual repression and restraint from which these works are derived, and the close-fitting fabric of the *qipao*, as well as Ah Xian's earlier paintings and installations in which themes of suffocation and concealment are more evident. The *China china* busts can also be read, however, as an autoethnographic engagement with the mechanisms of cultural stereotyping, appropriating and recreating conventional motifs to reclaim their use as emblems of positive cultural identification, and to reinsert them within the dynamic flow of a lived existence.

Several parallels can be drawn between *Games*, *Obsessive memories* and *China china* that clarify the merging of exoticism and sensuality in these series, in which the body appears to be reduced to an exotic ornament, fragmented and overlaid with markers of a stereotypical Chineseness. Both artists have created what in Chinese art-criticism are termed “shelf sculptures” (*jiashang diaosu* 架上雕塑) comparable to the ornaments usually produced in Jingdezhen’s factories, where all three series were created between 1998 and 2004.⁵⁰² As discussed above, Liu did at first create larger figures in fiberglass, and Ah Xian initially intended to create life-size replicas of his models but was forced to reduce the scale of his work by the limits of the medium – the reading of their work proposed here is based on finished pieces, however, rather than the artist’s unrealised intentions or earlier experiments. Both Liu and Ah Xian also focus on the human body and have fragmented and objectified their subjects. Although this objectification varies in extent and aim, the partial treatment of the figures represented, along with their reduced size and replication in a medium associated with “preciousness”, seems to efface the identity of each artist’s subjects and equate their bodily form with that of a vase, little more than a lifeless vessel. The most important point of comparison between these series, however, is their shared adaptation of conventional Chinese patterns and motifs, applied by skilled artisans in imitation of the designs that they would usually apply to mass-produced wares. For the unnamed figures in *Games*, *Obsessive memories* and *China china*, these motifs seem to provide a sole means of identification, erasing any individual identity in favour of a frozen and commodified ethnicity.

⁵⁰² The term “shelf sculpture” is used to describe Liu’s work in Yan and Liu, «嬗变中的刘建华: 艺术转变的内在逻辑 - 阎玉婷对话刘建华» [The Evolution of Liu Jianhua: Internal Logic for Art Transformation – Yan Yuting in Dialogue with Liu Jianhua], 41.

Like the association of *Games* and *Obsessive memories* with theories of the male gaze and sexual objectification, this deliberate act of cultural branding in Liu's and Ah Xian's porcelain works calls to mind another theoretical framework – that of autoethnography. Literary theorist Mary Louise Pratt defined this term in her *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992) as a tool by which authors or artists living in a colonised nation can 'undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the coloniser's terms [by] appropriating the idioms of the conqueror.'⁵⁰³ Unlike ethnographic texts, which are produced by the coloniser to propagate their culture among the colonised, autoethnographic texts are created by the subjugated as a response or interjection to colonial narratives, appropriating the same linguistic or visual codes yet adapting these for the interrogation of stereotype and to introduce transgressive, disruptive difference into the dialogue between cultures.⁵⁰⁴ Although neither Liu nor Ah Xian produced their works within a colonial context, Pratt's idea of autoethnography can nonetheless be productively used to interpret their use of stereotypically "Chinese" motifs. In a recent analysis of the *China china* series, for example, Marita Bullock noted the similarities between Ah Xian's busts and the reductive images created by ethnographers, a parallel 'made explicit in the way the grandiose symbols [of] the Ming and Qing dynasties ... have overwritten the particularities of the people on display,' reducing idiosyncratic diversity to 'generic, visually defined ... "Otherness".'⁵⁰⁵ Bullock argues that Ah Xian's deliberate self-exoticising through his use of these symbols exposes the stereotyping and implied stasis underlying all assertions of cultural essence, while at the same it also represents a reclaiming of these symbols as the heritage of the artist and his subjects, worn as a

⁵⁰³ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 9.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid, 9.

⁵⁰⁵ Bullock, "'China, China': Autoethnography as Literal Translation in Ah Xian's Porcelain Forms," 122.

badge of pride and reinserted into the currents of everyday life.⁵⁰⁶ Liu takes a similar approach in *Obsessive memories* and *Games*, though the objectifying and fetishisation of his figures is not balanced by a comparable reinterpretation of the *qipao* as a dynamic emblem of culture – these works are relentlessly critical in intent, and problematic in execution. Nevertheless, both artists have used conventional ornament to contend with stereotypes of Chineseness, initiating an autoethnographic dialogue that reveals the fabrication of all such ideals of cultural essence, thereby opening these stereotypes to reinterpretation.

Turning first to the preliminary stage in autoethnographic dialogue – the appropriation and recreation of the ethnographic mechanism to be critiqued – Ah Xian's *China china* busts could be interpreted along the same lines as Liu's *Obsessive memories* and *Games* series as highly critical and pessimistic icons of cultural stereotyping. This interpretation is reinforced by the analyses of the series published to date, in which the ornamentation of each bust is privileged as their main subject and the concealing function of the chosen motifs is emphasised. Bullock's above-cited account, for example, describes the busts as "generic" and "overwritten", whereas Roni Feinstein, Stephan von der Schulenburg and Hans-Jürgen Schwalm have respectively observed that 'the weight of history and culture ... obliterates [Ah Xian's subjects], 'smothered in the beauty of a time long-forgotten,' so ornate that it 'devour[s] the individuality of the person,' smothering their features in 'rampant arabesques.'⁵⁰⁷ An exemplary work frequently cited to support this view of the

⁵⁰⁶ Bullock, "'China, China'," 110–11.

⁵⁰⁷ Feinstein, "A Journey to China," 111; Hans-Jürgen Schwalm, "'China, China' Oder 'Ich' Ist Das, Wozu 'Du' Gesagt Wird' ['China, China' or 'I' Is What You Say 'You' To']," in *Ah Xian: Skulpturen*, ed. Marc Gundel et al. (Bonn: Edition Braus, 2007), 30–31; Britta Schmitz, "Ein Bild von Ferne: Verstreute Anmerkungen Zu Den Arbeiten von Ah Xian ["An Image of Remoteness: Scattered Remarks on Ah Xian's



Figure 114: Ah Xian (b. 1960), China china, bust 14 (detail), 1999, porcelain with overglaze enamel decoration, 33 x 27 x 23 cm.

Works"]," in *Ah Xian: Skulpturen*, ed. Marc Gundel et al. (Bonn: Edition Braus, 2007), 36; von der Schulenburg, "À La Recherche de La Porcelaine Perdue ["In Search of Lost Porcelain"]," 27.

series is *China china: bust no. 14* (1999; fig. 114), of which Linda Jaivin writes that '[the sitter's] eyes have been forced shut or blinded by the [motif of a] butterfly ... and her mouth smothered by [a] yellow and pink blossom and sealed by its tendrils.'⁵⁰⁸ This interpretation of the busts renders them bleak and pessimistic, the result of an erasure and disempowerment comparable with that implied by Liu's dismembered and sexually objectified women. As such, it not only contradicts the more affirmative interpretation of the busts proposed in this thesis – as a reclamation and revivification of cultural emblems – but also the artist's own stated reasons for using these motifs, discussed at length in Chapter Three above, as a resonant cultural resource that is 'beautiful and almost unassailable.'⁵⁰⁹ Nevertheless, this interpretation remains current in much interpretation of the *China china* series and so merits further analysis.

Just as the sexual objectification in *Games* and *Obsessive memories* can be brought into focus by repositioning these series alongside Liu's earlier *Concealed* and *Disharmony* fiberglass sculptures, the themes of constriction and concealment in *China china* can be related to an exploration of these themes in Ah Xian's previous works. In his *Heavy wounds* oil-paintings (1991; fig. 115), for example, created not long after his arrival in Australia and partly in response to the Tiananmen Square Massacre, anonymous figures are shown wrapped in white bandages, some with their heads completely concealed beneath the sterile folds of material. Painted in a clinical, Socialist Realist style, these works satirise Red Cross propaganda posters distributed in the 1960s and 1970s to illustrate methods for dressing wounds. They are suffused with melancholy and a feeling of isolation, the blank eyes of those whose heads are exposed denying connection with

⁵⁰⁸ Linda Jaivin, "Ah Xian: Recent Works in Porcelain," *ArtAsiaPacific* 33, no. 1 (2002): 28–29. See also: Roberts, "Fishes and Dragons: Ah Xian's 'China China' Series," 15; Melissa Chiu, "Ah Xian," *ArtAsiaPacific*, no. 37 (2003): 31; Feinstein, "A Journey to China," 109.

⁵⁰⁹ Ah Xian, "Self-Exile of the Soul," 8.



Figure 115: Ah Xian (b. 1960), *Heavy wounds, no. 10*, 1991, oil on canvas, 110 x 90 cm; Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.

the viewer or with other figures depicted in the work, and their anonymity emphasised by the meaningless line of numbers written across the bottom of each painting. Some critics have even interpreted the bandages as ‘subliminal metaphors for lobotomy or imposed amnesia,’ a reference to the same repressed psychological state cultivated by totalitarian rule that Liu has traced as the source for his fetishisation of *qipao*.⁵¹⁰

Ah Xian continued to explore these themes in two installation series, *Site perspectives* and *Pervasive spirit* (1991-92; fig. 116), which also mark his first experimentation with body-casting. In the first of these, he extended the bandage motif used in *Heavy wounds* by piling layers of white gauze on top of fragile partial towers of plaster. Nestled within these layers of surgical material, he placed cast-plaster replicas of disembodied hands and feet, again intended to invoke the abject horror of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, ‘something terrible ... something like a real sight, like what happened in China.’⁵¹¹ This trauma was made even more explicit in *Pervasive spirit*, in which cast-plaster hands and feet were variously nailed to the wall, enclosed within military ammunition boxes, or piled on columns of poured plaster, ‘from the crevices of which red or blue paint seems to seep like the blood of the dead and wounded.’⁵¹² Constriction and concealment are unambiguous themes in each of these series, through which the artist sought to come to terms with the traumatic events that he had witnessed in Beijing just prior to his departure for Sydney by recreating scenes of death, amputation and bodily harm.

⁵¹⁰ Feinstein, “A Journey to China,” 110; Chiu, “The Iconic and the Personal: Ah Xian,” 184; Russell Storer, “Ah Xian: Healing the Wounds,” *Broadsheet: Contemporary Visual Art + Culture* 43, no. 1 (2014): 39–40; Lee, “Ah Xian: Challenging the Spatial Limitations of Sculptural Art,” 51.

⁵¹¹ Ah Xian, personal conversation with Claire Roberts in January 1999, cited in Claire Roberts, “Ah Xian: ‘China. China’ . Recent Works in Porcelain,” in *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, ed. Jennifer Webb (Brisbane, QLD: Queensland Art Gallery, 1999), 228.

⁵¹² Feinstein, “A Journey to China,” 110.

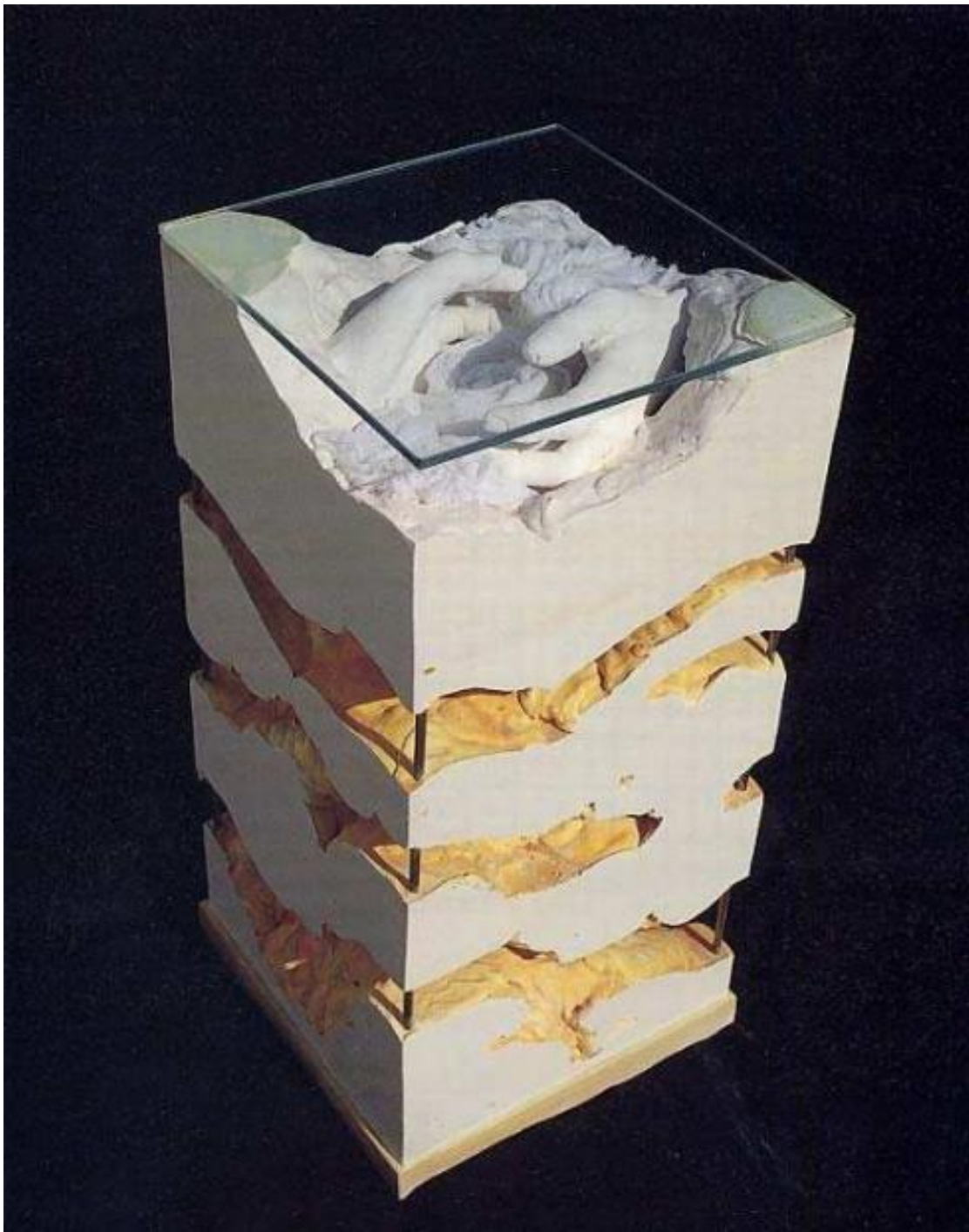


Figure 116: Ah Xian (b. 1960), Site perspectives no. 4, 1992, plaster, cotton gauze, glass, wood, metal, synthetic polymer paint, 58 x 28 x 28 cm.

As the first successful works that Ah Xian produced following his relocation to Sydney, as well as the first in which he experimented with the body-casting processes that would later become a signature aspect of his artistic style, it seems very likely that *Heavy wounds*, *Site perspectives* and *Pervasive spirit* impacted the reception of his later *China china* series. It is undeniably true that Ah Xian's decision to create busts of friends and family using cast-plaster moulds grew directly from his earlier casts of his own hands and feet while other points of comparison – the lines of numbers in *Heavy wounds*, for example, find a parallel in the numbering of works in the *China china* series – suggest a conceptual connection. The influence of *Site perspectives* and *Pervasive spirit* is also apparent in the initial concept for the busts, which the artist had intended to distort by flattening the tops of his subjects' heads and compressing their facial features within narrow, confining transparent plastic boxes.⁵¹³ Yet Ah Xian's decision to add another layer of meaning to his plaster casts by using them as a mould for more resolved works in porcelain marks a crucial distinction between these two moments in his artistic career. As already noted, Ah Xian's choice of plaster was motivated primarily by its affordability and the ease with which it could be cast into various forms, though he eventually came to dislike its unappealing and clinical appearance, attracted instead to porcelain as a more visually appealing and conceptually evocative material. The tactility of porcelain brought a new sense of life and warmth to his cast body parts, the inviting softness of an unctuous glaze contrasting starkly with the unyielding solidity of plaster, luminous and resonant rather than dull and opaque. Porcelain allowed Ah Xian to create deeply affecting replicas of his close friends and family, to capture their inner vitality to

⁵¹³ Feinstein, "A Journey to China," 110.

an extent that is unachievable in plaster, replacing suffocation and constriction with a new focus on bodily experience and empathic connection.

Death masks, or life masks? The China china busts as empowering and affirmative revelations of inner humanity

The contrast between this prevailing interpretation of Ah Xian's *China china* busts as lifeless and pessimistic and an opposing identification of more life-affirming qualities can be brought into focus through reference to one of the most enduring descriptions of the busts as analogous to death masks, associating them with decay and disease. Both Jaivin and Bullock, for example, writing of those works like *China china: bust no. 34* (1999; fig. 117) which have been embellished with three-dimensional applied ornamentation, have likened the motifs to branding or scarring, while Feinstein describes such adornments as 'a rash or disfiguring ... birthmark.'⁵¹⁴ Stuart Koop takes this analogy further by writing of 'pustulating weals ... bulbous cancerous growths bursting [through] the skin, or inflamed spreading sores ... on a stony pallor.'⁵¹⁵ The most frequent parallel evoked is that of the death mask – a comparison largely inspired by the fact that Ah Xian depicts his subjects with closed eyes.⁵¹⁶ The *China china* busts do bear comparison with death masks, both in the process of their manufacture – like funerary portraits, the moulds in which each bust was formed were taken directly from the upper body of the subject –

⁵¹⁴ Jaivin, "Ah Xian: Recent Works in Porcelain," 29; Bullock, "'China, China': Autoethnography as Literal Translation in Ah Xian's Porcelain Forms," 123; Feinstein, "A Journey to China," 111.

⁵¹⁵ Stuart Koop, *Beep...Crackle...: Contemporary Art from the Middle of Nowhere* (Brisbane, QLD: Institute of Modern Art, 2008), 167.

⁵¹⁶ See, for example: Dieter Brunner, "Die Büste und die Unsterblichkeit: Ein Chinesischer Künstler auf den Pfaden Westlicher Kultur ["The Bust and Immortality: A Chinese Artist on the Paths of Western Culture"]," in *Ah Xian: Skulpturen*, ed. Marc Gundel et al. (Bonn: Edition Braus, 2007), 45; Courtney Kidd, "Cultural Passports," *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 11, 2001; Benjamin Genocchio, "A Master Craftsman Busts on to the Scene," *The Australian*, April 20, 2001; Anon, "Ah Xian Cloisonne Enamel Sculptures at Queensland Art Gallery," *Museums Australia Magazine*, February 2004, 22; Bullock, "'China, China': Autoethnography as Literal Translation in Ah Xian's Porcelain Forms," 122.



Figure 117: Ah Xian (b. 1960), China china: bust 34, 1999, porcelain with underglaze iron-red decoration, 39 x 40 x 21 cm.

and in their apparent stasis, suggestive to so many of morbidity and bodily decay. Yet they can also be equated with the parallel production of life masks, historically produced in fewer numbers and usually for reasons of ‘vanity, curiosity or fashion,’ or to achieve a life-like portrait before the proliferation of photography.⁵¹⁷ This shift in emphasis from death to life can be used to highlight a parallel shift in the emotive content of these works. When considered as life masks – which, in reality, they are, as the artist’s subjects are alive at the time of casting – the agency of representation in the *China china* busts shifts from viewer to subject, no longer passive and concealed but physically present within material and motifs as reclaimed markers of a cultural identity to be celebrated rather than denigrated as damaging stereotypes.

This identification of Ah Xian’s busts as a form of life mask reinforces the primary shift in emphasis proposed here for their reinterpretation – from the motifs that adorn the surface of each bust to the materiality of the porcelain from which they’re formed, and through which they retain the imprint of their subjects’ features. Both death and life masks, despite the different relationships of agency that they construct between subject and viewers, can be termed indexical forms of representation created through a physical interaction of subject and material whereby sitters’ features are literally impressed into the wet plaster. In addition to the abstract significance of the symbolic (the designs which cover their surface) and imitative resemblance of the iconic (their verisimilitude), the *China china* busts therefore carry a physical connection with the people depicted. There is a sensuality about body-casts that imbues both them and any subsequent casts with a living presence, and it is in this affective dimension that the distinction between life and death masks is most evident. While the fixed, compliant features of the latter

⁵¹⁷ M.H. Kaufman and Robert McNeil, “Death Masks and Life Masks at Edinburgh University,” *British Medical Journal* 298, no. 6672 (February 25, 1989): 506.

betray the lifelessness of the subject, in the former there are signs of discomfort – clenched lips, creases around the eyes and brow, and muscles in shoulders and neck held taut with tension – that are incidental to the process of casting yet create a striking impression of inner humanity.

Foremost among these unavoidable artefacts of the casting process are the subjects' closed eyes. Although habitually interpreted as a sign of death, the denial of vision or a refusal of empathic connection, the eyes of Ah Xian's busts could also be indicators of an unrepresented and un-representable inner world, enhancing rather than suppressing the felt presence of the person represented. As the artist has explained, his subjects' closed eyes evoke 'a much wider spiritual space ... in which to be living and enjoying life.'⁵¹⁸ They are a sign of retreat into an inner world of reflection and tranquillity, a world that can only be known and visited by the anonymous subject, and that can never be voyeuristically intruded upon by those who see only the external signs of identity. Far from being constricted or suffocated by the motifs which adorn them, then, Ah Xian's replicated friends and family can easily shrug off such stereotypes, self-confident and secure in the knowledge that the core of their being remains intact.

In contrast to the sexually objectified and culturally stereotyped shells of humanity depicted in Liu's *Games* (figs. 34, 106) and *Obsessive memories* (figs. 84, 85, 87), then, the *China china* busts are neither pessimistic, deterministic nor irredeemably critical. Their subjects, though not named, retain self-confidence and private existence beneath their embellished porcelain surfaces, and it is through this celebration of the capacity to escape stereotyping and to reincorporate cultural emblems within personal identity that

⁵¹⁸ Ah Xian and Kathryn Wells, "Ah Xian: Ancient Crafts, Contemporary Practice - A New Language of Art," *Craft Australia*, September 28, 2011, <http://www.craftaustralia.org.au/library/interview.php?id=ah-xian-ancient-crafts-contemporary-practice>; Ah Xian, "A Light towards the Future," in *Porcelain City - Jingdezhen*, by Amanda Game (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2011), np.

these busts attain their most potent resonance. These are not images of suffocation and death, but monuments to the mundane, the humble and the inner world of the individual. Every crease and wrinkle, every hollow and undulation of muscle and bone, the contours of posture, every mark and scar accumulated through life – all are tenderly recorded and recreated through the process of body-casting and moulding in porcelain. Ah Xian neither idealises his sitters nor attempts to alter or disguise ‘slouched shoulders, weak chins and prominent ears,’ but instead cherishes these idiosyncrasies as the most humble yet also the most expressive markers of identity, ‘small memorials for the flawed human condition.’⁵¹⁹ These works, then, are not cold and devoid of life, but are intimate portraits that commemorate rather than constrict the personalities of their subjects, undeniably marked by the outward signs of Chinese identity but nevertheless able to retain an inner dignity, poise and confidence.

The transexperiential symbolism of the tattoo and the redemptive transformation of cultural stereotype from imposition to self-adornment

There is one final shift in the terms of analogy used to describe the *China china* busts that must be proposed here to offer a counterpoint to the critical consensus that these are images of death, disease and branding with a more empathic vision of them as emblems of life and transformation: from death/life mask to tattoo. The comparison of the motifs that adorn the busts with tattoos has also been made many times in published comments on Ah Xian’s work, though this analogy has yet to receive sustained critical analysis.⁵²⁰ A tattoo is applied to (usually living) skin, so the suggestion that the

⁵¹⁹ Storer, “Ah Xian: Healing the Wounds,” 41.

⁵²⁰ For examples of the identification of Ah Xian’s decorations with tattoos, see: Dennis, “Absence Makes the Artist Ponder and Cast His Past in China”; Kidd, “Cultural Passports”; Feinstein, “A Journey to China,” 109; Jaivin, “Ah Xian: Recent Works in Porcelain,” 29; Chiu, “The Iconic and the Personal: Ah Xian,” 188;

busts resemble tattooed figures shifts our view of their glazed surfaces from brittle, unyielding shell to soft epidermal canvas. Additionally, tattoos are commonly perceived in many contemporary nations, including China, as a form of adornment and a deeply personal expression of identity, rather than an involuntary imposition – though there is a long history in China of the use of tattoos as a form of punishment or branding for criminals. A parallel thread within this history, however, also suggests a very appropriate heritage of travel across cultural contexts, and the transformations of identity that accompany this movement. In contrast to the morbid stasis of the death mask, this would seem to be much more fitting analogy for these works as a product of the artist's own experiences as a migrant and movement across cultural contexts.

Although long used in many parts of the world as a means to mark significant life events or group membership, tattoos are now largely seen across the world as a means of self-expression. Much like clothing, jewellery and other wearable accessories, they have become central to the process of defining and displaying identity in social settings. However, unlike other identity-forming adornments, their permanence and closeness to the body means that tattoos are uniquely compelling. They are always “worn”, altering the appearance of those who bear them to more closely conform to personal values, tastes and groupings, as expressed in the images or motifs chosen. In situations where clothing or other external means to express identity are made unavailable, for example in prison, being tattooed can become a symbolic act of self-assertion, a reclamation of individuality that cannot be easily removed or taken away.⁵²¹ Conversely, against the deluge of images and opportunities for expression available in contemporary society,

Schwalm, “‘China, China’ Oder ‘Ich’ Ist Das, Wozu ‘Du’ Gesagt Wird’ [‘China, China’ or ‘I’ Is What You Say ‘You’ To’],” 31; Storer, “Ah Xian: Healing the Wounds,” 39.

⁵²¹ Clinton R. Sanders, *Customising the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1989), 38–40.

they give an anchoring sense of stability, and a line of defence against accusations of superficiality or dilettantism.⁵²²

The relative stability of tattoos can be contrasted with the constantly shifting dictates of fashion, exemplified by the development of the *qipao*. While this dress was subject to multiple changes in appearance, popularity and meaning over a relatively short space of time, tattoos by their very nature are resistant to such variation. This has led some commentators to define them as a form of “anti-fashion”, a mode of adornment that exists outside the currents of the fashion industry and that constitutes a deliberate attempt to resist its unpredictable excesses.⁵²³ It is above all the application of tattoos directly to the body that renders them such an “anti-fashion” statement, imprinted indelibly under the surface of the skin as an apparent guarantee of consistency and authenticity. They are physically embedded within the flesh and so, unlike clothing, cannot be easily removed and yet also do not conceal that which they adorn. They are both permanent and undeceiving (with the exception of certain medical and cosmetic tattoos, intended to replace or enhance an aspect of the bearer’s body); though it should be noted that their meaning and associations are subject to change over time.

The distinction between clothing as fashion and tattoos as “anti-fashion” offers a useful model through which the different approaches to the body taken by Liu and Ah Xian can be viewed. On one hand, in *Obsessive memories* (figs. 84, 85, 87), *Games* (figs. 34, 106), *Concealed* and *Disharmony* (figs. 109-112), Liu creates bodies that are defined by the presence or absence of clothing. Finely-sculpted folds of material cling to the contours of figures that would otherwise remain invisible, while exposed buttocks, thighs and

⁵²² Paul Sweetman, “Anchoring the (Postmodern) Self? Body Modification, Fashion and Identity,” *Body & Society* 5, no. 2/3 (1999): 52–53.

⁵²³ Sweetman, “Anchoring the (Postmodern) Self?,” 62–63.

genitals are rendered overtly erotic by the implication of disrobement, by the absence of clothing to cover their nakedness. At the same time, the diversity of colourful motifs adorning Liu's *qipao* also alludes to the superficiality of these sexualised garments, further reinforcing their use as an invitation to caress, to consume, to indulge in fleeting pleasures, of the erotic or exotic kind.

Ah Xian's *China china* works on the other hand, like antique Roman portrait-busts, seem immovable and eternal. Though adorned with a comparably eclectic range of motifs, the embedding of these within the surface of the sitter's "skin" imbues them with a sense of tangible significance that is intentionally avoided in Liu's sculptures. Like tattoos, they appear to be intrinsic to the personal identity of those who bear them, expressions of some inner truth made visible. While the women in Liu's sculptures are divested of the power to resist and exposed to the fleeting whims of those who view them, Ah Xian's subjects are in control of their representation, poised and serene, maintaining absolute ownership over both external and internal aspects of their identity. Furthermore, these two complementary facets of the self are fused together by the application of the tattoo-like designs, which not only display the cultural identity of the subject but also draw out the details of their anatomy. Blooming just below the skin, lotus petals accentuate the firm yet yielding pressure of gently closed lips, a drifting cloud enhances the hollow of a collarbone, while a billowing wave reveals the slight convexity of a closed eyelid.

A more conceptual parallel can also be drawn between Ah Xian's *China china* busts and the art of tattooing in their shared relation to narratives of travel and the exotic, in both a European and Chinese historical setting. The word "tattoo" in English is derived from the Polynesian *'tatau*, first recorded in an entry for July 1769 in the journal of Captain

James Cook.⁵²⁴ Cook and his crew had encountered tattoos during their exploratory voyages in the South Pacific, particularly Tahiti and New Zealand. For those in England who read stories of Cook's exploits, or who saw the tattoos acquired by his crew, this practice rapidly came to exemplify 'all that [they] found fascinating, repellent, appealing, and absurd about [Tahiti, New Zealand] and their inhabitants.'⁵²⁵ In China, too, one recurring understanding of tattoos from the Han to the Qing dynasty was as a marker of exotic difference, 'the epitome of uncivilised practice, since it patterns the human body like the skin of an animal,' and an indication of ethnic distinction from the sphere of Han civilization.⁵²⁶ This was not always a derogatory identification, however, and was often motivated by curiosity and even admiration, as comments recorded by the Western Jin-dynasty author and poet Zuo Si (左思, c. 250-305) in his "Wu Capital Rhapsody" (*Wudu fu* 吴都赋) indicate:

Warriors with tattooed foreheads
soldiers with stippled bodies
are as gorgeously adorned as the curly dragon.⁵²⁷

On his return from a second expedition in 1774, Captain James Cook determined to satisfy such curiosity in England with a "guest" from the island of Raiatea, known only as Omai or Mai.⁵²⁸ Omai was extensively tattooed and was presented as 'a delightful curiosity, a corporeal token whose physical presence seemed to bring the entire Orient

⁵²⁴ "Tattoo, n.2," in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press), accessed August 4, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/198122>.

⁵²⁵ William Cummings, "Orientalism's Corporeal Dimension," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2003), <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/45732>.

⁵²⁶ Carrie E. Reed, "Tattoo in Early China," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 120, no. 3 (September 2000): 363.

⁵²⁷ Zuo Si, "Wu Capital Rhapsody," cited in Reed, 362.

⁵²⁸ Harriet Guest, "Curiously Marked: Tattooing and Gender Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Perceptions of the South Pacific," in *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, by Jane Caplan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 83.

into London society.⁵²⁹ Rather than being regarded as a source of first-hand information about his home culture, he was seen instead as a representative of the “Orient”, his tattoos a physical guarantee of his exotic otherness. One of the most often cited accounts of Omai famously compares the tattoos on his buttocks to an inlay in mahogany veneer, effectively reducing him to an ornately decorated work of art, ‘the exotic ... object of a curiosity that finds its gratification in the singularities of nature and culture.’⁵³⁰ Similarly, on Cook’s first voyage to the South Pacific, an on-board surgeon described the tattoos on the forehead of a man they encountered ‘as if a plate ... had been grave with numberless little flourishes confined within two arched lines.’⁵³¹

In the case of this anonymous man and that of Omai, the parallels drawn with woodwork and engraving transform them into “living pictures”, aestheticised representations of an unassimilable exoticism. Similarly, in China, there are many terms for the art of tattooing used in historic texts that equate tattoos and their wearers with a form of art, including “engraving the body” (*lou shen* 鏤身, or *lou ti* 鏤體) and “embroidering the face” (*xiu mian* 繡面).⁵³² In both a European and a Chinese historical context, tattoos have long been viewed as visual markers of difference, transforming the body of the tattooed into a canvas for the projection of the exotic, as in Ah Xian’s *China china* busts.

A further parallel between Ah Xian’s busts and the long history of tattoos is the partial representation of his sitters, which recalls the fragmented depiction of the subjects of ethnographic analysis, especially those with tattoos. In the first impression of tattoos recorded by another passenger on Cook’s voyage, for example – one of the ship’s artists

⁵²⁹ Cummings, “Orientalism’s Corporeal Dimension.”

⁵³⁰ Guest, “Curiously Marked: Tattooing and Gender Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Perceptions of the South Pacific,” 86–87.

⁵³¹ Ibid, 95.

⁵³² Reed, “Tattoo in Early China,” 361.

– they are depicted in isolation from their bearers, on ‘disarticulated knees, thighs and buttocks,’ with particular attention given to the creation of ‘precise maps of elaborate facial incisions ... dislocated from the features they adorn ... represented as mask-like.’⁵³³ The tendency toward dissection in these drawings soon took a more overtly violent, dehumanising turn with the development of a thriving market for severed tattooed heads, first initiated in 1770 by Joseph Banks, who returned from Cook’s first voyage with the preserved head of a Maori man. The fascination with these morbid artefacts attained such a peak that Maori warriors produced them on demand, tattooing slaves and prisoners-of-war before decapitating them and trading their heads for European guns, the distribution of which in turn caused further conflict and the export of an ever greater number of heads. By 1831, the trade had become so damaging that it was decreed illegal, though it did not finally end until the early twentieth century.⁵³⁴

The marking of slaves and prisoners was also the primary function of tattoos throughout much of Chinese history, and especially during the Song, Yuan and Qing dynasties, when tattooing as punishment was often combined with exile, merging the association of tattoos with difference and their use as a mark of delinquency. The effectiveness of this punishment derived the pervasive stigma attached by the Confucian social order to any mutilation or marking of the body, and the subsequent shame that the criminal would feel on returning to society, deprived of the fullness and complexity of identity by being reduced to the singular role of “criminal”.⁵³⁵ Considered alongside this history, both Liu’s dismembered women and Ah Xian’s busts could be viewed as products of an analogous

⁵³³ Guest, “Curiously Marked: Tattooing and Gender Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Perceptions of the South Pacific,” 95.

⁵³⁴ Cummings, “Orientalism’s Corporeal Dimension.”

⁵³⁵ Reed, “Tattoo in Early China,” 364–65.

process of forced marking and fragmentation, to be scrutinised by the curious and circulated as trophies of a fetishised exotic.

Yet the exoticism in Ah Xian's busts is not one imposed by an external observer, but is rather an autoethnographic display that reveals cultural identity to be constructed rather than essential. The decorative motifs adorning his figures are markers of a *flexibility* of identity, of a chameleon-like adoption at will of different cultural "skins". In these works, the body is presented not as a fixed quantity, but as a continuing process of self-creation, 'a plastic resource onto which a reflexive sense of the self is projected' to suit the various and varying self-perceptions of that body's "owner".⁵³⁶ This aspect of *China china*, too, can be best expressed through analogy with the art of tattooing, also one of self-creation by which those who are tattooed can convey the metamorphoses of their identity.

Tattoos have long served as markers of transitional identity, 'something that has arrived from somewhere else – from another culture, another country, another epoch.'⁵³⁷ Following the fascination with tattoos inspired by Cook in Europe, they became popular among sailors, who used them as an indication of 'membership in a maritime fraternity separated from the rest of society,' a proof of exposure to many cultural contexts and incorporation of "otherness". The act of being tattooed marked travelers as 'inhabitants of [the] watery limen ... that separates and links the known and unknown, the familiar and the dangerous ... [a] zone in-between ... neither here nor there.'⁵³⁸ In China, too, the tattoo was perceived as a form of "boundary-crossing", recorded by the Tang poet and

⁵³⁶ Sweetman, "Anchoring the (Postmodern) Self? Body Modification, Fashion and Identity," 68.

⁵³⁷ Jane Caplan, ed., *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), xv.

⁵³⁸ Cummings, "Orientalism's Corporeal Dimension."

author Duan Chengshi (段成式; c. 800-863) in his *Miscellaneous morsels from Youyang* (*Youyang zazhu* 酉阳杂俎) in the same category as dreams and lightning, phenomena linked by

... the entrance into the human world of light, sound, wonder, and danger from the heavens; the entrance into the waking, conscious world of events and things from the sleeping unconscious; and the entrance into the realm of civilised, proper folk ... of the markings of the uncivilised or deviant.⁵³⁹

As an insertion between the layers of the skin, neither fully inside nor fully outside the body, the tattoo is particularly suited to this symbolism – it is quite literally created by the injecting and incorporation of a foreign body.⁵⁴⁰ Both by association and in its very production, then, the tattoo is emblematic of transexperience.

Reinserting narratives of self into the narratives of history in Ni Haifeng's Self-portrait as a part of the porcelain export history (1999-2001)

To return now to the history of the global ceramics export industry from which all the works of contemporary porcelain art discussed in this thesis draw inspiration, there is one more work that must be mentioned in this discussion of tattoos which, although the artist has not used porcelain, is closely connected to the history of the medium. In 1999, while Ah Xian was introducing artisans in Jingdezhen to his idiosyncratic approach to the material that they and their families had been trained for generations to produce, in Amsterdam Ni Haifeng started work on his own artistic exploration of the analogy

⁵³⁹ Reed, "Tattoo in Early China," 375.

⁵⁴⁰ Caplan, *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, xiii–xiv; Juliet Fleming, "The Renaissance Tattoo," in *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, by Jane Caplan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 81–82.

between porcelain and the body: his photographic series, *Self-portrait as a part of the porcelain export history* (1999-2001; fig. 118). This series consists of seven photographs of various parts of the artist's naked body, adorned with foliate patterns, an image of a ship, and several passages of text, all painted directly on his skin in blue. As the title of the series suggest, this imagery is derived from Chinese export wares of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – the foliate patterns a conventional design on such wares, the ship taken from a piece produced to European specifications. A citation just below a passage of text in one of the photographs identifies the source of this and the other passages as *China for the West* (1978), a canonical study of export porcelain by English authors David Howard and John Ayers. While Ni has chosen not to work in porcelain, the series nevertheless draws directly from the stylistic conventions and history of the medium, literalising its connection with the body and with a certain image of “China”.

Overlaying his skin with stereotypically Chinese motifs and passages of “ethnographic” exposition written for non-Chinese readers, Ni presents an autoethnographic expression of cultural identity analogous to that in *China china*. Like Ah Xian, Ni has appropriated the representational tools of the “coloniser” and reclaimed them for his own purposes, willingly exoticising himself as an object of acquisitive curiosity while at the same time inserting his voice and physical presence into the history of such objects. It is the latter aspect of this dichotomy that takes precedence; when asked whether the images are intended to embody ‘the pain of colonization,’ Ni explained:

The inscriptions I used are not ... tattoos, but paint that can be washed off and put on again and again. They show the body as a palimpsest. They're not there to expose the pain caused by colonisation, but to reclaim the lost body in order

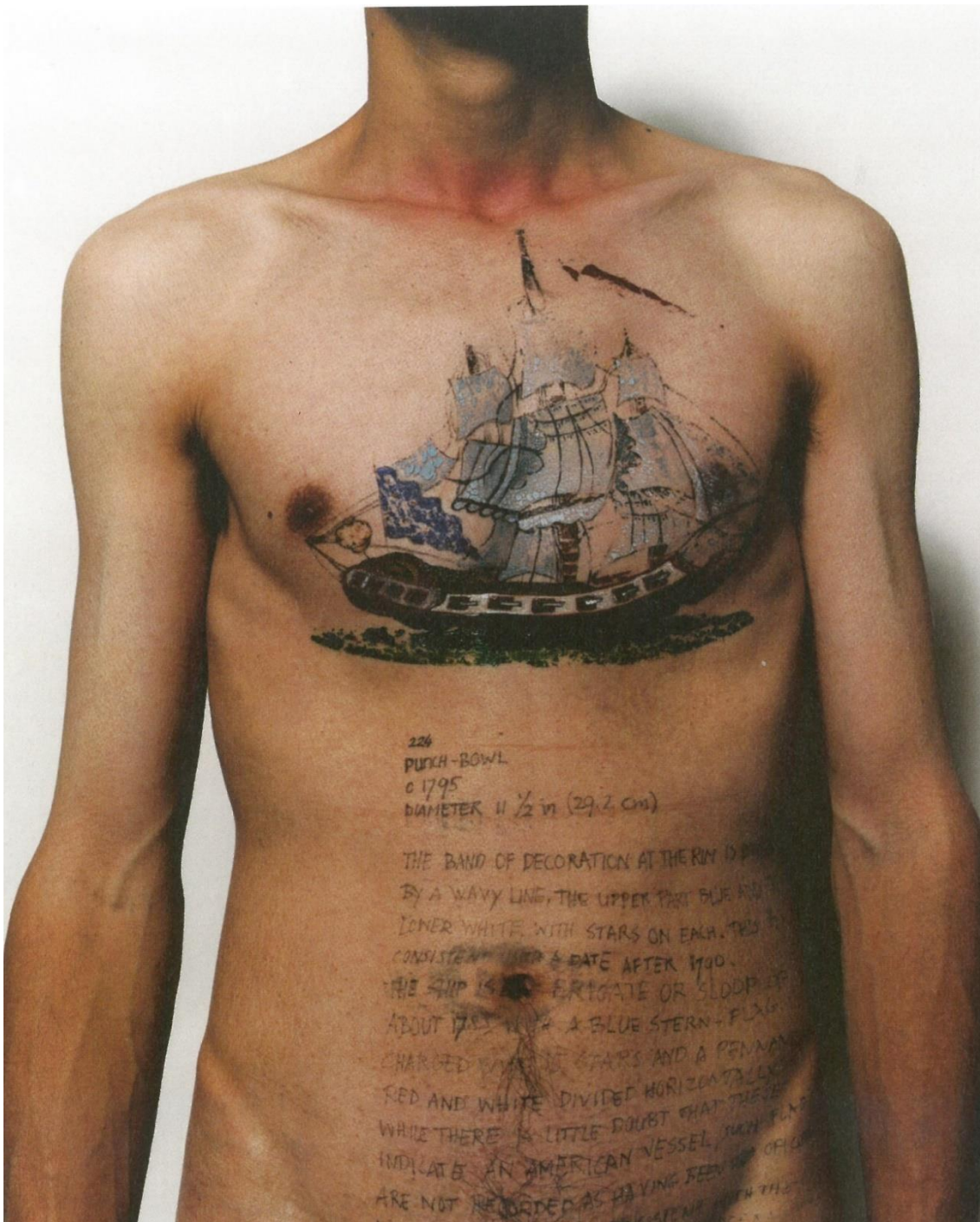


Figure 118: Ni Haifeng (b. 1964), Self-portrait as a part of the porcelain export history, 1999-2001, C-type photograph, 165 x 127 cm.

to name it again, in order to redefine who you are.⁵⁴¹

Like Ah Xian, then, Ni envisions the body as an on-going project, 'as something that can be ... used, transformed, improved.'⁵⁴² Rather than creating a porcelain replica on which to enact such transformations, however, he objectifies his own body, fragmented by the composition of the photographs into seven discrete "canvases". Nevertheless, in both artists' works, the body is represented as a means to express a fluidity and flexibility of identity, to incorporate, adapt and disempower essentialising impositions. It is in this capacity to discard and adopt at will that Ah Xian's busts and Ni's *Self-portrait* extend the transformative symbolism of the tattoo. As Ni made clear in his comment cited above, his photographs depict a *painted* rather than a tattooed body – and paint can be washed off and re-applied with relative ease. Similarly, though the designs on the *China china* busts may resemble tattoos, it must be remembered that they are not additions to the body but an imprint or surrogate. Like a shed second skin or discarded cocoon, they are removed and given an independent existence of their own, always attached to but ultimately separate from the person they represent.

Alongside their attraction to the surface appeal of glazed porcelain surfaces, the artists discussed in this dissertation also share a fascination with the perceived exoticism of this material. In expressing and interrogating this exoticism, however, a distinct parallel emerges in their work between the experience of being exoticised and the experiences of the body. The tension between these two spheres is particularly apparent in Ah Xian's *China china* (figs. 33, 68-74, 114, 117), and in Liu Jianhua's *Games* (figs. 34, 106) and

⁵⁴¹ Ni Haifeng, "A Zero Degree of Writing and Other Subversive Moments: An Interview with Ni Haifeng," in *Ni Haifeng: No-Man's Land*, by Roel Arkesteijn and Ni Haifeng (Amsterdam: Artimo, 2003), 52–53.

⁵⁴² Ni and Brouwer, 52.

Obsessive memories (figs. 84, 85, 87) series, in each of which stereotyped markers of Chineseness are reduced to a costume. Both artists create what could be termed an autoethnographic representation, appropriating denigrated symbols of an essentialised Chinese cultural identity only to expose the artificiality of all such putative essences, and to reclaim these symbols by returning them to the dynamic currents of a lived existence. In *Games* and *Obsessive memories*, however, emphasis is overwhelmingly given to the negative, critical aspects of this process in sculptures that overtly objectify, sexualise and dehumanise women as proxies for the debased Other. A more positive, constructive form of autoethnography can be found in Ah Xian's *China china* busts, in which the humanity of the subjects is celebrated despite their enforced anonymity, and the motifs adorning their skin assume the self-expressive flexibility of tattoos rather than the self-denying determinism of a mutilation.

Conclusion

Ah Xian's *China china* and Liu Jianhua's *Games* and *Obsessive memories* exemplify the transexperiential movement across cultural contexts that typifies all works of porcelain art considered in this dissertation. Interpreted differently by Chinese, North American, Australian and European art-historians, these works have accrued divergent yet parallel meanings in different settings, generating what Chen Zhen has termed an 'overlapping of experiences' in which binary distinctions break down and are replaced by an organic interpretive continuum.⁵⁴³ When paired with Ni Haifeng's *Self-portrait as a part of the porcelain export history*, the mobility and flexibility of *China china*, *Games* and *Obsessive memories* can also be shown to possess historical resonances. These and most other works discussed in this dissertation were produced by teams of artisans in Jingdezhen, the former imperial Porcelain Capital, while the motifs chosen to ornament them were derived from pattern-books that have been used for centuries in this city's factories. Yet the connection with the history of porcelain making and export in and from China is not limited to such generational legacies but is even more so one of conceptual resonance. It is not only the material traces of history that have influenced contemporary artistic practices and perspectives but, as observed by ceramics historian Stacey Pierson, the intangible vestiges of history as well. These include 'literary and pictorial references, changes in local approaches ... [and in] physical spaces for Chinese ceramics,' and, most importantly for this thesis, the perceptions of and attitudes toward ceramics cultivated by the historic export trade.⁵⁴⁴

⁵⁴³ Chen, *Transexperiences*, 1–5.

⁵⁴⁴ Pierson, "The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History," 12–13.

A different aspect of these historically-inflected visions of porcelain has been considered in each of the five chapters above, which it seems appropriate to summarise here with reference to the work by Liu Jianhua that opened this dissertation: *Discard* (2011; fig. 1). Each of the five criteria and artistic motivations identified as defining aspects of New Export China are central to this installation, created by one of the first Chinese contemporary artists to incorporate porcelain within his artistic practice, and perhaps the only globally-renowned artist with extensive professional experience in the factories of Jingdezhen. The use in *Discard* of historic reproduction wares, broken into pieces and submerged in a reflecting pool, perfectly encapsulates the binary impulse underlying contemporary Chinese artistic uses of porcelain: to harness its historical pedigree while simultaneously interrogating the coherence of inherited authority through disruptive strategies of destruction, preservation and replication. The mass-production of these reproduced wares and of Liu's *qingbai*-glazed replicas of contemporary commodities is an ideal case-study for the overlapping of art and industry, and the frequent artistic eliding of artisanal realities in favour of individualist conceptualism. Liu's fabrication of such quintessential markers of Chineseness as blue-and-white, celadon and *qingbai* glazes and their merging with the standardised forms of global consumerism reveal the extent to which cultural identity, like historic authority, is an artificial construct that can be adopted and adapted almost at will. These glazes also hold a more general visual and tactile appeal enhanced by the presentation of the work: a mass of fractured shards made iridescent by the blinding sunlight of a Shanghai summer and the shimmering surface of reflecting pool, their smooth outer faces, jagged fractures and exposed clay alternately attractive and repellent. Finally, the ambiguous boundary in these material, cultural and historical disintegrations between inside and outside, authentic and superficial, points to a similar instability underlying stereotyped images of Chineseness.

Rather than a confirmation of the equivalence between china (the material) and China (the country), *Discard* obscures distinctions between past and present, self and other, here and there, shifting emphasis to the passage of artists and their works between cultural contexts in a global contemporary artistic community.

Aside from its overwhelming materiality, the most immediately affecting characteristic of *Discard* is its association with archaeological excavations of distant antiquity, the mass of cast-off fragments and their immersion in water or burial in earth drawing attention not only to the patina of age but also to the inevitable passage of time. The appeal of porcelain for Liu, Ai Weiwei, Ah Xian, Sin-ying Ho and other contemporary Chinese artists lies principally in the great prestige and authority attached to such venerability. In their work, however, as in *Discard*, defects in the historical record are exposed to interrogate the fragility of the often artificial divide between fact and fiction, the authentic and the embellished. In *Dropping a Han-dynasty urn* (1995; fig. 2) and *Breaking of two blue-and-white "Dragon" bowls* (1996; figs. 27-30), Ai records himself smashing what appear to be antiques, an act of destruction that could be read as confirmation of their authority – the work is shocking only if viewers consider such ceramic artefacts precious. Yet Ai's commissioning of historic reproductions like *Blue-and-white moonflask* (1996; fig. 24) and his later *Ghost Gu coming down the mountain* (2005-06; figs. 19-23) raises the possibility that the vessels depicted are not antiques, thereby exposing the extent to which the apparent realities of the past are often more recent fabrications. Ai has also revealed the tension between destruction and preservation in works like *Untitled* (1993; fig. 6), *Tang-dynasty courtesan in bottle* (1994; fig. 7), *Souvenir from Beijing* (2002; fig. 8), *Dust to dust* (2009; fig. 9) and *Spouts* (2015; fig. 10). In each of these, fragments of the past are preserved inside bottles, a hand-made wooden box, an apothecary jar, or a

museological typology of form and function. These methods of conservation and classification parody those developed for museum display, through which a formerly mobile object is fixed in place and removed from the fullness of a lived existence, rendering it static and ornamental. The reverse is suggested by Liu's *Regular-Fragile* (2001-10; fig. 11) installations of commodities cast in *qingbai*-glazed porcelain, in which the impermanence rather than the fixity of material culture is emphasised. In these and Liu's sculptural works in celadon, he cultivates a "blandness" that not only recalls Song-dynasty literati aesthetics but enhances the fragile materiality of the medium. A similar tension between a recognition of historical authority and a desire to critique the bases of this authority reappears in *Discard*, in which the juxtaposition of the same porcelain commodities with historic reproduction wares submerges both past and present within the currents of time, confusing the usually rigid divide asserted between them.

A parallel tension can be identified in *Discard* between the labour involved in the mass-production of its components and the conceptual intent of their installation, displaced from Jingdezhen to the metropolitan global hub of Shanghai. This tension is reflected in the comparable compartmentalising of conceptual and practical spheres of meaning-production by other contemporary Chinese artists who have created works of porcelain art in collaboration with artisans in Jingdezhen. Such binary separation is clearest in Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower seeds* (2010; fig. 51), the components of which were manufactured entirely by teams of artisans in Jingdezhen who, despite their pivotal role in the making of the work, were rendered voiceless and effectively invisible in its display at the Tate Modern, London. It can also be noted, in varying degrees, in Liu's *Regular-Fragile*, and Barbara Diduk's *The vase project: Made in China – Landscape in blue* (2004-06; figs. 52-54). Each of these three projects can be positioned along a continuum of interactions

between artist and artisan, from exploitation to the possibility of empowerment, though each nevertheless adheres to the separation of artistic concept from artisanal making. And although all are premised on the mass-production of multiple objects, the finished work in each case is presented as an individual artistic project in which the modularity of their making is sublimated into a calculated interpretive multiplicity. This conceptual modularity is clearest in the installation of *Regular-Fragile* at Oxburgh Hall, Norfolk (figs. 35-40), and the display of works by Ai Weiwei at Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire (figs. 45-50). Both exhibitions can be compared with the massed display of porcelain by European aristocrats during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, though in contrast to the singular intent of displaying power and wealth with which these precedents were associated, works by Ai and Liu invited a range of interpretations. In Oxburgh Hall, the sheer number of pieces and their intrusive occupation of the estate's interiors combined to create a sense of malevolence and competing narratives, while Ai Weiwei's strategic interventions at Blenheim Palace, like his earlier works, cast doubt on the authenticity and singularity of the historical record by confusing fact and fiction. In both installations, however, as in *Sunflower seeds*, *Regular-Fragile* and *The vase project*, there is little room in this interpretive range for the artisans commissioned to produce the components of each artist's work. The mass of objects contained within these works and in *Discard* are projected as a realisation of the artist's personal creative ideas rather than a product of collective industry, just as ceramics displayed in European aristocratic estates were seen as emblems of their owners rather than commodities mass-produced by anonymous labourers on the other side of the world.

A comparable association of porcelain with the construction of identity can be noted in the siting of *Discard* outside the Sino-Italia Design Exchange Center in association with

the Overseas Chinese Town Public Art Project, affirming the shared identity of artist and organisers, even if this identity is created by movement between cultural contexts. For many contemporary Chinese artists, and especially those who currently live outside of China, porcelain has fulfilled a similar function as a conduit for their “rediscovery” of a heritage from which they have been separated by time, distance, and circumstance. Sin-ying Ho and Ah Xian, for example, resident in New York and Sydney, initially chose to use porcelain to cultivate a sense of Chineseness, and both returned to China for after their migration at least in part to work with artisans in Jingdezhen. As such, they are participants in what has been identified as a renaissance of global artistic interest in this city, joining an ever-greater number of ceramicists whose presence has inspired the founding of art residency initiatives like SICV and PWS, where China and Chineseness are marketed to eager visitors. Ho and Ah Xian soon discovered that the China they sought is little more than the accumulation of such fabrications, which only gained meaning for them when they found themselves isolated in an unfamiliar environment and searching for a sense of identity. In Ah Xian’s *China china* series (figs. 33, 68-74, 114, 117) this realisation is communicated through the transposition of the artist’s search for cultural identity to a recognition of the bonds of family and friendship with which he was already surrounded, and the multiple private worlds that always exist beneath the surface of an apparently unified culture. In Sin-ying Ho’s *Identity* (2001; fig. 55), *Binary code: The link* (2004; fig. 63), *Matrix, no. 1* (2005; figs. 64, 65) and *Gibberish no. 3* (2005; fig. 60), identity is revealed to be a combination of linguistic and ornamental codes from multiple contexts, rather than a cohesive or consistent classification. *Discard* too can be viewed as a composite statement of cultural allegiance, juxtaposing Chinese ceramic antiquity (albeit in reproduction) with allegedly universal global commodities, in front

of an institution dedicated to fostering Chinese-European exchange and design, for an event celebrating the identity of the diasporic Chinese community.

Beyond such concerns of cultural and historic identity, however, the most visible aspect of glazed porcelain is its visual and tactile appeal, the lustre within which all complexities of interpretation seem to dissolve into an amorphous, sensuous fascination. This was the initial attraction of the medium for each of the artists considered in this dissertation, and it was only over time that its other associations assumed prominence. Many works by these artists correspondingly seem to emphasise superficial appearance over deeper meaning. Ai Weiwei, for example, in *The Wave* (2005; fig. 78), *Bowl of pearls* (2006; fig. 80), and his *Watermelon* (fig. 81), *Oil spill* (fig. 82), and *Dress* (fig. 83) series (2006-present), cultivates a preoccupation with the creation of aesthetically-appealing objects, apparently with little regard for content or depth. Yet the immaculate surfaces of these works conceal a critique of consumerism and the global commodification of Chinese contemporary art that appears also in Liu's *Obsessive memories* series (figs. 84, 85, 87) of *qipao*-clad women draped on armchairs and bathtubs. Extending the Gaudy Art aesthetic of the mid-1990s, both artists juxtapose an alluring surface and inner vacuity to induce a feeling of disorientation and discomfort. Sin-ying Ho, on the other hand, in *Confucius, Jesus Christ and John Lennon no. 1 and no. 2* (2003-06; figs. 88-91), *Music* (2004; fig. 96), *Hero no. 1 and no. 2* (2007-09; figs. 97-99), and *Trilogy no. 1 and no. 2* (2007-09; figs. 100, 101), is neither critical nor celebratory of the vacuous products of commodity culture and the entertainment industry. Instead, she shows these products to have the possibility of a greater depth, drawing on a cast of pop-culture icons to reveal aspects of her personal life and her experiences of travel, translation and diaspora as a Hong Kong-Chinese-American woman. These works may appear superficial in intent and

based entirely on an appreciation of surface, but they also conceal a hidden complexity and a diversity of personal associations, just as the glassy surface of the reflecting pool and apparent monotony of a consummately-applied *qingbai* glaze in *Discard* disguise and refract the conceptual density of the work and its multiple frames of reference.

Nevertheless, despite this complexity hidden just beneath the surface, the visual and tactile appeal of porcelain have historically been and are sometimes still associated with a flattening, stereotyped vision of Chineseness – a preconception that Liu and the other artists considered here have determined to interrogate and critique. The exoticising of porcelain is intimately intertwined with the sensuous surfaces and voluptuous contours of ceramic vessels, evoking comparison with the curves of a woman's body and arousing a similar form of possessive desire. This merging of the exotic and the erotic is rendered literal in Liu's *Games* (2000-02; figs. 34, 106) series of dismembered women, dressed again in *qipao* but displayed on plates rather than sofas or bathtubs. Though often read as a critique of the commodification of Chinese art, the unaddressed objectification of sexuality in these works is deeply problematic, especially when shown outside of China, where the symbolism of the *qipao* as an emblem of a specifically Chinese identity might not be so easily recognised. They present a stark contrast with Ah Xian's *China china* busts, on which the markers of a stereotyped Chineseness are transformed into a form of self-expressive bodily embellishment, analogous with a tattoo and imbued with the same aura of movement between cultural contexts. While tattoos are usually indelible and difficult to remove, however, Ah Xian's busts have already been detached from their anonymous subjects, cast off like a cocoon or a second skin. Both Liu's and Ah Xian's works can be considered autoethnographic representations, yet while Liu focuses on the deconstructive critique of cultural stereotypes, creating images that are unsettling and

visceral, Ah Xian balances such critique with a constructive narrative of reclamation and transcendence. The deconstruction, or rather destruction of cultural stereotypes is also central to Liu's *Discard*, in which emblems of China's past are not only debased by their contemporary fabrication, but are smashed into pieces and heaped in a pool of water, alongside porcelain replicas of discarded contemporary commodities.

In answer to the question posed at the start of this dissertation – “Why have so many contemporary Chinese artists decided to use porcelain to express their ideas?” – I propose the following motivations: the historical authority of the medium; its suitability for modular and mass-production; the artists' personal associations with ceramics as a material representative of Chineseness; the visual and tactile appeal of the medium; and its suitability for interrogating issues of stereotyping. These motivations correspond to the five features of New Export China outlined above: a critical awareness of historical fabrications; an attempt to separate conceptual from artisanal labour, even while relying industrial techniques of modularity and mass-production; a desire to reconnect with a lost heritage that ultimately leads to recognition of the composite multiplicity of cultural identifications; the creation of a tension between surface appeal and conceptual depth; and an interrogation of stereotyped markers of Chineseness, paired with a reclamation and transformation of these markers as a source of pride. Underlying each of these traits is an enduring awareness of the mobility and flexibility with which porcelain, as a medium that has long been exported around the world, is indelibly associated. These artists and their work exist in an in-between space of global artistic practice, at the dynamic intersection of multiple cultural and historic contexts. At the same time, they are grounded not only by the specific settings of their diverse life experiences but also

by a shared fascination with the Porcelain Capital of Jingdezhen, and with the clay from which the artisans of this city have built its reputation.

The term “New Export China” is not intended as a rigid or limiting classification, but as an open-ended interpretive framework for these and other works of contemporary Chinese art, including those in porcelain as well as other media. In addition to the much-needed attention given to a material that has yet to receive sustained analysis as a medium for contemporary artistic expression, the principal innovation of this thesis is therefore to propose an art-historical model in which the assumption that works by Chinese artists are solely derived from or reflective of a Chinese context can be displaced by a recognition of the multiple contexts and frames of reference in which works of art exist, across time and space. Without entirely disregarding grounded aspects of Chinese artistic practice, I argue for an interpretive model that accounts for the indeterminate, ambiguous and combinatorial. The impact of historical and cultural specificity can’t be ignored – artists are always influenced by the environments in which they live and work, and are driven to engage with the signs, symbols and materials associated with those environments, like porcelain. Yet this does not limit them to a single form of expression or an isolated artistic context. To cite Chen Zhen, even if an artist has never lived outside of China, their view of the world can be expressed in an ‘overlapping of experiences [whereby they] do not belong to anybody, yet are in possession of everything.’⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴⁵ Chen, *Transexperiences*, 1–5.

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Appendix 1: Abbreviations and Chinese terms used

BAF	-	Blenheim Art Foundation
BMG	-	Bristol Museum and Art Gallery
CAGM	-	Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum
CCP	-	Chinese Communist Party
CCYCA	-	Chinese Contemporary Young Ceramic Artists' Biennale Exhibition
HICCB	-	Hangzhou International Contemporary Ceramic Biennale
JCI	-	Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute
LSU	-	Louisiana State University
NSCAD	-	Nova Scotia College of Art and Design
PMG	-	Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent
PRC	-	People's Republic of China
PWS	-	The Pottery Workshop
SCA	-	Sydney College of the Arts
SF	-	The Sculpture Factory
SICV	-	Sanbao International Ceramics Village
SMFICA	-	Sidney Myer Fund International Ceramics Award
V&A	-	Victoria & Albert Museum

anhua 暗花: "secret decoration", a technique for decorating porcelain in which shallow incised designs are partially concealed beneath a thick application of glaze, popular from the early Ming dynasty and usually associated with smaller luxury wares.

ao 袄: a type of surcoat worn by Han Chinese women during the Qing dynasty, usually loose-fitting with sleeves so long that they often hang to the wearer's knees; worn over a skirt (裙 *qun*) or trousers (裤 *ku*).

bianhu 扁壺/**baoyueping** 宝月瓶: “moonflask”, a porcelain vessel typified by a round, almost spherical body, bulging sides, short tapering neck, and small handles or lugs.

Changnan 唱南: the Tang-dynasty name for Jingdezhen, can be translated literally as “South of the Chang River”. Some believe this to be the origin of the term “china” (porcelain).

Cidu 瓷都: “Porcelain Capital”, an honorific appellation for Jingdezhen in use from the Yuan dynasty, formalised as an official title during the Qing dynasty. Reassigned by the Chinese Communist Party government in 2004 to Chaozhou, Guangdong Province, in recognition of that city’s more economically significant ceramics industry.

ciju 瓷局: the “Porcelain Bureau” established in Jingdezhen by the first Yuan emperor Kublai Khan (r.1260-94) in 1278 to oversee the ordering, quality-control and transport of ceramics for the Imperial court.

doucai 斗彩: “joined colours”, an early overglaze technique for decorating porcelain in which underglaze cobalt-blue outlines are “filled in” after glazing and firing with red, yellow and green enamel pigments; first gained widespread use under the Ming-dynasty Chenghua Emperor (r.1464-87), further refined under the Qing-dynasty Kangxi Emperor (r. 1661-1722).

fanggu 仿古: literally, “imitation of the antique”; an archaistic impulse expressed through the creation and collection of ceramic, jade, bronze and other objects that imitate or allude to forms of the distant past.

fencai 粉彩: “powdered colours”, an overglaze decorative technique that makes use of a pink enamel developed in Jingdezhen’s Imperial Factory under the Directorship of Tang Ying (1682-1756). Known outside of China as *famille rose*, a term coined by the French collector and connoisseur Albert Jacquemart (1808-75) to highlight the dominant pink tones in overglaze wares of this type.

gongbi 工笔: “fine-line” painting, a technique for applying ink to paper first developed for use in ink-landscape painting as an alternative to the more fluid and free-hand *xieyi* (写意) or “sketch conceptualism”; adapted for underglaze painting on porcelain during the Ming dynasty and subsequently becoming an industry standard.

gongjiang 工匠: artisan.

gongmin 公民: “citizen”, literally “public person”, a term used to refer to politically-aware and politically-active members of the Chinese population who assert their rights and stand against the authoritarian excesses of CCP rule.

gongren 工人: “worker”, once a heroic appellation for the proletariat during the Maoist era, but now more often used as a label for China’s disenfranchised migrant labourers.

guan 罐: a ceramic vessel typified by a spherical body, broad shoulder, and a narrow collared mouth.

guan gu 官古: “official old”, the most admired and high-quality type of reproduction ware produced in Jingdezhen during the 19th century, created in a range of Ming- and early Qing-dynasty styles and forms.

hu 壶: a ceramic vessel typified by a spherical body with a long, tapering neck, wide mouth, and prominent rim and foot-ring, intended to hold wine.

Jingdezhen 景德镇: literally “market town [named in the] Jingde era,” a city in the southeastern province of Jiangxi that was for centuries the centre of porcelain production in China; now a popular destination for ceramicists and contemporary artists who seek to incorporate ceramics into their practice, from both China and elsewhere.

Jingdezhen Taoci Xueyuan 景德镇陶瓷学院: Jingdezhen Ceramics Institute, the largest tertiary education provider in Jingdezhen and only specialist ceramics college in China.

Lang yao 郎窑: “Lang ware”, a monochrome red glaze recorded as the invention of Lang Tingji (1663-1715), Director of the Imperial Porcelain Factory from 1705 until his death in 1715; referred to as *sang-de-boeuf*, “ox-blood”, by European collectors.

meiping 梅瓶: “plum vase”, a ceramic vessel typified by a broad, rounded shoulder that tapers to a narrow, flared base, with a very narrow collared mouth.

nan qing, bei bai 南青北白: “southern green, northern white”, a *chengyu* (成语) or idiom that refers to the manufacture of green-toned Yue ware in Zhejiang Province from the 2nd century, and white Xing ware in Hebei Province from the Tang dynasty.

pingdan 平淡: “blandness”, an aesthetic term that refers to the cultivation in ink-landscape paintings of monotonous and sparse compositions to express feelings of isolation, exile and detachment from everyday concerns.

qingbai 青白: “blue/green-white”-glazed porcelain, developed in Jingdezhen during the Northern Song dynasty as an imitation of the Tang-dynasty Xing ware associated with Hebei Province, though later valued for its own aesthetic merits and traded widely around the world. Typified by a translucent green-blue colour, incised decoration and thick glazing.

qingci 青瓷: “green/blue ware”, known as celadon in English

qipao 旗袍: also known in Cantonese as a *cheongsam*, a single-piece garment that developed during the early decades of the twentieth century as a more functional and androgynous alternative to the *aoqun/aoku*, subsequently adapted into a form-fitting dress with long side-slits, short sleeves and a high “Mandarin” collar.

sancai 三彩: “three-colour” ware, a form of ceramics primarily produced during the Tang dynasty (618-907) on which brown/amber, green and off-white glazes predominate.

Sijiali 四家里: “Four Household Village”, a former Ming-dynasty farming community just outside of Jingdezhen, now the site of Sanbao International Ceramics Village.

Xinping 新平: the generic name given to the area of present-day Jingdezhen during the Han dynasty, can be translated literally as “Newly Pacified”.

Yansu yishu 艳俗艺术: “Gaudy Art”, a term coined by Beijing-based art critic Li Xianting in the mid-1990s to describe a short-lived sub-genre of Political Pop typified by the combination of Chinese folk forms with consumerist cultural icons in a self-consciously gaudy, flamboyant style.

yishujia 艺术家: artist

yu qichang 御器厂: the “Imperial Porcelain Factory” or “Imperial Porcelain Depot” established in Jingdezhen by the Ming Hongwu Emperor (r.1368-98) in 1369, on the grounds of and as a successor to the Yuan-dynasty Porcelain Bureau.

yuhuchun 玉壶春: a ceramic vessel typified by a long, narrow, tapering neck and bulbous, globular body, also known as a “pear-shaped” vase.

zhifu 制服: the “uniform” worn by both men and women throughout the Maoist era and especially during the Cultural Revolution, consisting of a plain grey or navy-blue jacket over trousers.