Situating Ai Weiwei: Historical and Cultural Contexts for Ceramics in China (excerpt from 2,000-word essay)
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Technological Contexts

Some antique Chinese ceramics can also represent the technical virtuosity of China’s past, bearing in mind that China has a very long history as a manufacturing nation and that ceramics often reflected some of the most advanced technology of their time. This technology has for the most part continued to be used in the present day. Thus a contemporary artist working in ceramic can tap into the expertise that has been built up over thousands of years in China, especially at Jingdezhen, which is located in Jiangxi province and is known as the “porcelain city.” It was here that the porcelain which went around the world in the early modern period originated and it was here that production of blue-and-white became industrialized. In the Yuan period (1279–1368), large quantities of blue-and-white porcelain were produced, and these were exported globally and consumed voraciously, even though their decoration made few if any concessions to foreign taste. Yuan blue-and-white is still avidly collected today, with some rare examples fetching unusually high prices, and this indication of “value,” along with the style and decoration of Yuan blue-and-white, has inspired contemporary potters and artists.

In Ai Weiwei’s reinterpretation/re-creation of one particular Yuan jar, in Ghost Gu Descending the Mountain, 2005, the cultural references are numerous. In choosing this particular piece, Ai is first and foremost commenting on its high market value which, until recently, was unusual for a blue-and-white jar from that period. Even ten years ago, Yuan blue-and-white was not considered “precious” or valuable in the same way that, for example, a Ru ware vase from the preceding Song dynasty (960–1279) might have been. Ai Weiwei has also reproduced it in multiple, which references and replicates the mass-production technique used to create the model. Ai’s re-creations, of course, are also reinterpreted, with some painted in red and others painted inside-out, which is a technically difficult style to create. For example, most blue-and-white forms of this type, whether ancient or modern, are painted with cobalt blue under a layer of clear glaze on the outside of a circular form, such as the guan-type jar illustrated here. Painting on the inside of jarlike vessels, as in Ai’s Ghost Gu jar in this exhibition, does have a long history in China, the earliest examples being Neolithic, but it was not done on porcelain as early as the 14th century, when the jar-form Ai copied would have been made. In fact, complex, figurative inside painting of the type seen here was actually developed in the 18th century for small-scale luxury items like snuff bottles. Thus while the technique of underglaze painting on porcelain in general is not difficult, painting a round, closed vessel on the inside is. In many craft traditions, such techniques might have been lost over time, but this is not the case with ceramics in China. It is notable therefore that artists like Ai Weiwei can commission production of nearly any ceramic conceived of from Jingdezhen, a site where traditional and advanced techniques of ceramic production can still be sourced.

Another important feature of these “inside-out” jars is that the decoration is visible only when the jars are viewed from above, and this has associations with another aspect of ancient Chinese ceramics, so-called anhua or “secret” decoration, which can only be seen when the object is viewed up close. This type of decoration typically appeared on high-quality, “imperial” porcelains from early in the Ming period (1368–1644). Its essential invisibility gave the owner of the vessel a privileged knowledge of what the piece actually features, a knowledge which can indicate social and cultural status. Similarly, in the case of Ai’s Ghost Gu, the narrative content of the decoration of the original Yuan-period jar was also attractive for its symbolism as it referenced an ancient moral tale, one which would have been known by an educated viewer, and therefore recognized. Such narrative designs appear on Chinese ceramics from an early date, and in the Yuan period can be related to the development of woodblock-printed book illustrations at that time.

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1 See the Yuan blue-and-white jar which sold for GB£15.7 million at Christie’s, London, Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art, Including Export Art, July 12, 2005, lot 88.
2 Ai Weiwei made copies of an actual jar that was sold in 2005. When that jar was first made, it was not a unique object, but it is one of about seven examples with that decoration known to survive today.
3 These were recently published in Sue-an van der Zijpp and Mark Wilson, eds., Ai Weiwei (Rotterdam: Groninger Museum; London: Art Data, 2008), 86–87, 89.