

# Ahead of the Curve: new china from China

By Claire Blakey, The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery. Helen Brown, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery.  
Kate Newnham, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery.



Exhibition poster for Ahead of the Curve exhibition at Bristol Museum & Art Gallery  
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## Introduction

Ahead of the Curve: new china from China was an exhibition that toured to three UK museums between 11 October 2014 and 31 May 2015, attracting over 50,000 visitors. It presented the work of twenty Chinese artists, fifteen working in ceramics and five working in glass, most of whom had not previously shown their work in the UK. Funded by Arts Council England (Grants for the Arts), the project was a partnership between four organisations: Bristol Museum & Art Gallery; The Potteries Museum, Stoke-on-Trent; The Wilson, Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum and **twocities** gallery, Shanghai. Its aim was to provide new insights into Chinese ceramics and glass for UK audiences and developed over a four-year period. The exhibition was co-curated by Claire Blakey, Curator of Art at the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent; independent curator Helen Brown formerly at Cheltenham, Kate Newnham, Senior Curator, Visual Arts at Bristol Museum & Art Gallery and Shannon Guo, Associate Professor at Shanghai University and co-founder of **twocities** gallery, Shanghai.



Jar, Cizhou ware, Song dynasty (960-1279), bequest of F.P.M. Schiller, 1946 © Bristol Museums, Galleries & Archives



Glass altar set, Qianlong mark and period (1735-95), bequest of H.R. Burrows Abbey through The Art Fund, 1950 © Bristol Museums, Galleries & Archives



Dish, porcelain with doucai enamels, Yongzheng mark and period (1723-35) © The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent



Vase, porcelain, Jingdezhen, c.1920-30, seals of Lang Shining © The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent



Dish, porcelain with under-glaze blue design, Yuan dynasty (1280-1344) © The Wilson, Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum



Chinese Gallery, The Wilson with jars from S. Berkeley Smith collection on top of cabinets © The Wilson, Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum

All three of the UK museums involved in the project have good collections of Chinese ceramics. Bristol Museum & Art Gallery has over 1500 Chinese ceramics built around the collection bequeathed by Max Schiller in 1946. It also holds a world-class collection of Chinese glass (300 pieces) from the bequest of H.R. Burrows Abbey, given through the Art Fund in 1950.

The Potteries Art Gallery & Museum, well-known for its fine English ceramics from the Potteries area, also has a good collection of Chinese ceramics including some interesting early twentieth century pieces. At The Wilson, Cheltenham, the Chinese holdings include some stunning individual ceramics such as a large Yuan dynasty (AD 1271-1368) dish part of an unusual collection of Chinese ceramics collected in India in the early twentieth century by S. Berkeley Smith, including a group of large storage jars made for the Indian market. Given these rich historic collections, which were however lacking in twenty-first century material, our project began with the question 'What is being made today in China in the way of studio ceramics and glass?'

The project presented challenges in terms of trans-cultural curating. Firstly there was the task of gaining familiarity with the art-forms of contemporary studio ceramics and glass in a country as large as China, followed by the charge of selecting individual artists from amongst many potential artists. We were aware of the potential pitfalls of choosing artists' work based on westernised notions of 'Chineseness' whilst also keen to select works which made links with the historic Chinese collections, in turn selected in the past by western collectors and curators, at the three UK museums. In addition there was the logistical challenge of negotiating international shipping and customs to bring a selection of work to the UK.

Study visits to China made by Claire Blakey, Helen Brown and Kate Newnham, funded by the British Council and The Art Fund, proved invaluable. In 2009 Claire Blakey attended a British Council tour to China for UK curators and museum staff, visiting Beijing, Xi'an, Guangzhou and Hangzhou. The following year in 2010 Claire and Kate visited Beijing, Nanchang, Jingdezhen and Shanghai<sup>1</sup> and in 2012 Helen, Claire and Kate travelled to Jingdezhen and Shanghai<sup>2</sup>. In 2010 visits were made to universities with ceramics and glass courses in Beijing (Tsinghua University), Jingdezhen (Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute) and Shanghai (University of Shanghai). At Tsinghua and Shanghai we were able to meet with heads of the relevant programmes and learn about their courses and their students.



**Ceramics Studio, Tsinghua University, Beijing, 2010 © Kate Newnham**

It goes without saying that these three institutions represent only a small proportion of Chinese universities offering ceramics and glass courses. China is so vast with such a large number of artists and craftspeople that it would be impossible to claim that the works we selected are representative of current Chinese studio ceramics and glass. There are currently about thirty Chinese universities offering Bachelor's degrees in ceramics with a further 100-150 that offer ceramics as an elective part of an art course<sup>iii</sup>. The Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute is one of the best known and has about 1700 students of ceramics at any one time<sup>iv</sup>.

The first studio glass courses in China were established in the year 2000 at Tsinghua University, Beijing and Shanghai University by Guan Donghai and Zhuang Xiaowei, both of who had taken MA courses in glassmaking at the University of Wolverhampton in the UK. Since 2000 their pupils have gone on to set up new glass courses at other universities such as the China Academy of Art, Hangzhou and there are now twenty-two university glass courses in China<sup>v</sup>.

Our research visits, although short (between a week to ten days in each case) went some way to introducing us to the ceramics and glass scene in China. Personal introductions proved vital and we are grateful to many people who were generous in this regard including staff at the British Council offices in Beijing and Shanghai.



**twocities gallery, Shaoxing Road, Shanghai, 2014 © twocities gallery**

A key issue in terms of trans-cultural curating was the language barrier: none of the three UK curators are fluent Chinese-speakers. Crucial to the project in this regard was our partnership with **twocities** gallery, Shanghai, a small commercial gallery founded by Shannon Guo and Scott Crosby in 2005. Shannon Guo, a fluent English speaker with many years' experience of working with contemporary artists, helped to make recommendations for and shape the exhibition shortlist. Her English-speaking colleagues Chelsea Horvath, Mandy Fung and Joy Yin provided invaluable support in communicating with individual artists and helping to arrange transport. Once the project had received confirmation of funding from Arts Council England, it was possible to recruit a Chinese-speaking exhibition officer, Alexandra Nachescu, who was based at Bristol and helped to deliver the exhibition along with the exhibition catalogue and public events programme.



**Worker at the Jiayang Porcelain Company, Jingdezhen, 2010 © Kate Newnham**



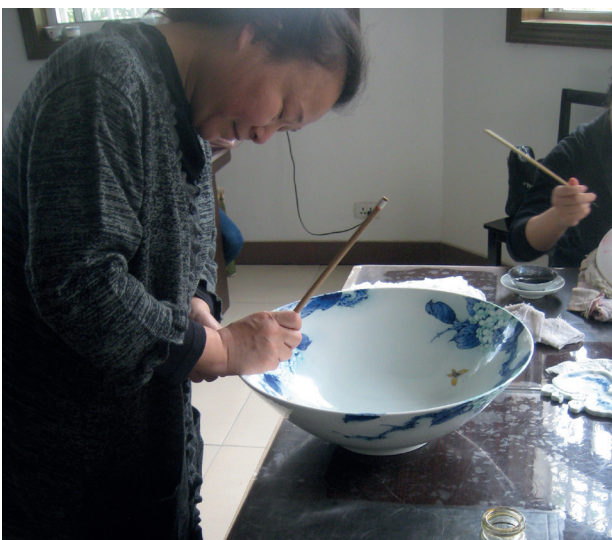
**Showroom of the Jiayang Porcelain Company, Jingdezhen, 2010 © Kate Newnham**

In Jingdezhen we were able to see a range of ceramics being made and marketed. The city is well-known for its substantial production of and trade in reproductions of earlier Chinese ceramics, particular imperial wares. Businesses such as Jiayang Porcelain Company in Jingdezhen, co-founded by Huang Yunpeng, make high quality, hand-painted copies of historic ceramics. Workers at Jiayang take care to match historical styles and colours, for example appropriate shades of cobalt blue are used on reproductions that imitate Yuan (AD 1279-1368), Ming and Qing dynasty wares<sup>vi</sup>.



**Wang Ping in his studio, Jingdezhen, 2012 © Kate Newnham**

Another model for production could be seen in the studio of Wen Youzai who makes ceramics at her own home in Jingdezhen with the help of two assistants, firing them in her own kiln. Wang Ping, one of the young artists selected for the exhibition, also works from home but without assistants. When we visited he was making slip-cast tea-sets, marketing through his friends living in other Chinese cities, as well as more expensive hand-thrown or hand-carved works.



**Wen Youzai in her studio, Jingdezhen, 2010 © Kate Newnham**



**Spin Ceramics, Shanghai, 2012 © Helen Brown**



**Chinese Kung Fu vases, designed by Gary Wang  
© Spin Ceramics**

A more commercial example of contemporary ceramics can be seen in the company Spin Ceramics co-founded in Shanghai in 2002 by designer Gary Wang (1950-2013). Wang was born in Hong Kong and studied in Taiwan and New York<sup>vii</sup>. Spin was established when he was helping a friend design Shintori, a Japanese restaurant in Shanghai; when they couldn't find sufficiently stylish or appropriate tablewares, they decided to commission some to be made in Jingdezhen. Following the success of that venture Wang assembled a collective of young designers to design trendy functional wares in porcelain which are made in Jingdezhen or stonewares made in Yixing in Jiangsu province. This set of so-called Kung Fu vases designed by Gary Wang is representative of Spin wares, they have playful and anthropomorphic organic forms. In addition to the Shanghai shop, Spin now has branches in Beijing, Changsha, Singapore and New York. When we visited the Shanghai shop in 2010 and 2012 the wares, tastefully arranged on shelves and tables, were proving noticeably popular with overseas customers.

Our visits to China enabled us to develop a long-list of artists to include in our exhibition, to which were added further suggestions from Shannon Guo and twocities gallery. We whittled the number of artists down to about twenty and then set about, with input from Sophia Wilson, Exhibitions Manager at The Wilson, Cheltenham, selecting from the ceramics and glass works that were available from individual artists. The artworks needed to work at the individual UK venues, all three of which have very different exhibition spaces. **twocities** gallery arranged for the works to be gathered in Shanghai where they were packed into a container and loaded onto a ship bound for Felixstowe<sup>viii</sup>. A bond for a third of the value of the exhibition was paid to Shanghai customs to enable the works to leave China on an ATA (temporary export) carnet for a maximum time period of a year.

We identified the target audiences for the exhibition in the UK as: students of art and design; artists and makers; school children aged seven to fourteen (Key stage 3); art lovers and Chinese people in our localities. At each venue a programme of events was drawn up to appeal to these groups including talks, poetry and ceramics workshops and family activity days. To reach the first of these audiences: students of art and design, Helen Brown contacted all universities and art colleges in the UK with courses in ceramics and glass, offering a free lecture to their students about the exhibition. This was taken up by eleven institutions. In addition some universities and colleges arranged outings for their students to see the exhibition at the different venues. A symposium to accompany the exhibition was held at The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent in April 2015 with three speakers from China: Shannon Guo and artists Wan Liya and Shelly Xue.

In the following section, Helen Brown explores the works in the exhibition themselves, reviewing what they can tell us about contemporary Chinese ceramics and glass.

### **Chinese ceramics and glass as media for concepts**

Chinese makers are using ceramics and glass as media for concepts. This is something many contemporary craft makers are concerned with, particularly in Europe and North America (such as potter Paul Scott who uses printed decoration as a vehicle for social commentary), but not in China. Here it is new territory. The main concepts explored are around the individual in society, change and the environment, and personal meaning and identity. Makers also explore their materials and the making process.

The importance of ceramics in the history of Chinese invention, and the long tradition of ceramics and glass making, mean that Chinese people are very familiar with the media. The makers in Ahead of the curve exploit the conservatism of glass and ceramics, materials everyone knows and feels comfortable with, to say things they may not easily be able to say otherwise. They draw their power from their use of these familiar media. Of the ceramic artists, all but one have a connection with Jingdezhen; they either grew up or studied there or have moved to the city to work (Guo 2014:14).



**Shao Changzong, Dreamer, 2011 © Shao Changzong**

A number of makers explore the place of the individual in society. Among these is Shao Changzong (b.1981) who teaches at Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute. He uses traditional Chinese ceramic decoration (under-glaze blue or fencai enamels) which draws on historic designs in his large-scale figures. These are sometimes totally featureless, sometimes without mouths (only their eyes visible). The relationship between the figures and us and how they communicate is important, Changzong plays on their silence.



**Wang Xiao, The Road series, 2013 © Wang Xiao**

Wang Xiao (b.1988) is a much less established maker and the youngest in the exhibition. After training at Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute he was invited for a one-year residency at the Pottery Workshop in Jingdezhen as part of its programme of support for young potters. When we first saw his work in 2012 it reflected the inspiration of science fiction and Japanese manga with often strongly personal elements, images of himself and friends in imaginary landscapes. His works The Road made in 2014 for Ahead of the curve are more subtly and finely crafted combining detailed textural work with delicate hand building to create figures, half human half otherworldly. Do they represent migrant workers living their lives on the roadside or are they more generic symbolic figures?



**Han Xi, Lost, 2010 © Han Xi, now in the collection of Bristol Museum & Art Gallery**

Also concerned with the individual in society is the glassmaker Han Xi. Born in 1981 he is now a lecturer at the China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, where he also trained. He spent a year as a visiting scholar in Germany where seeing Gothic stained glass windows and art nouveau glass had a profound influence on him. 'Lost' from 2010 shows the influence in his work of this encounter in its richly coloured material. It also shows his interest in exploring light and shadow and positive and negative spaces. Although the work is only 34cm high it seems much larger in our imagination. He is interested in scale and here the glass landscape threatens to overwhelm the tiny figures created in the shadows.



Huang Chunmao, *Ambiguous Relationship*, 2006 © Huang Chunmao

The older generation of makers, born in the 1960s and early 1970s, often make work in response to the vast pace of change in Chinese society including looking at environmental issues. Huang Chunmao (b.1971) studied and taught in America and is now Assistant Professor at the China Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. He talks about the rush towards materialism and the ‘numbing of the spirit’ (Nachescu and Newnham 2014:23) this creates. His response to this is to find an anchor, a ‘home for the heart’ (Nachescu and Newnham 2014:23), to celebrate the ordinary and the everyday, in *Ambiguous Relationship* fruit and vegetables, creating them in porcelain and using gilded decoration.



Wan Liya, *Birds’ Twitter and Fragrance of Flowers*, slip-cast porcelain, 2010 © Wan Liya, now in the collection of Bristol Museum & Art Gallery

In the 1990s Wan Liya (b.1963) was one of the first generation to establish his own ceramic studio, having previously trained as a navigator. In *Birds Twitter and Fragrance of Flowers* an installation of plastic coffee cups, cleaning product containers and coke cans, he comments literally on a throwaway society whilst making his objects in porcelain hand-painted with ‘famille rose’ designs that might have appeared on Imperial 18th century ceramics.



Xu Hongbo, *Clones – position*, 2007, porcelain © Xu Hongbo

Also commenting on change and the environment is Xu Hongbo. His *Clones* series comments on the idea of biological cloning of humans. His pyramid of deformed babies was made working closely with a porcelain workshop in Jingdezhen. Made using four-part moulds put together in different combinations these link ideas of mass production with those of cloning. He works in a way more closely aligned to contemporary art practice, often working with others to create the work. Jacques Kaufmann has described his practice as ‘social acupuncture’ (Nachescu and Newnham 2014:44) referring in particular to his *Swiss Bowls* project. On a residency in Switzerland Xu was surprised to find beggars on the streets and so he made begging bowls, the slot for coins in the form of the cross on the Swiss flag.



Guan Donghai, City Gate series, Xin, 2009, cast glass © Guan Donghai



Zhang Jingjing, Spring Up Series No. 9, 2012, thrown and carved porcelain on wooden stand © Zhang Jingjing

Exploring materials and processes is important to all the makers in *Ahead of the curve*, but for some this is particularly important. Guan Donghai (b.1966) studied for an MA in glass art at Wolverhampton in 2004 and subsequently took a PhD at Sunderland. He is an Associate Professor at the Academy of Art and Design, Tsinghua University, Beijing. His *City Gate* series in cast glass shows his interest in exploiting pigments to create glass surfaces that resemble other materials such as bronze and jade. Zhang Jingjing (b.1963) is one of China's most successful ceramicists, interested in pushing her material to extremes. In her *Spring up* series she creates large thrown and moulded abstract forms. These were originally inspired by the form and tension of a misshapen rim of an ancient Chinese tea bowl.



Shelly Xue, Gather Series – Angel is Waiting 11, glass, 2014 © Shelly Xue



Shelly Xue, Gather Series – Angel is Waiting 11, glass, 2014 © Shelly Xue

Exploring personal meaning and identity is more unusual amongst Chinese ceramic and glass artists than those in Europe. Shelly Xue (b.1981), who studied for an MA at Wolverhampton in 2005 and later took a PhD there, works in a range of different styles in her glass work. She sees these very much as separate areas, clearly defined and controlled, her more personal work occupying just one of these areas. Her Gather series, inspired by birth of her daughter and in the form of angel's wings, shows her interest in interior and exterior space and extending the possibilities of glass limited by kiln casting and reveals, just a little, of the personal. In contrast, the work of Yao Jiliang (b.1985) is a very personal expression of where he finds himself in life. Like Wang Xiao he was invited for a one-year residency at the Pottery Workshop in Jingdezhen where he explored, often using the form of an animal or bird, his own experience of being exposed and vulnerable.

What has influenced Chinese makers to explore concepts in their work? There are many reasons but particularly important has been the development of international influences. Of these possibly the most important have been in glass and in particular the influence of the University of Wolverhampton. Professor Zhuang Xiaowei who is a pioneer of the Chinese glass movement went to train at Wolverhampton in 1998 and subsequently set up the glass course at Shanghai University with the support of Andrew Brewerton and his colleagues at Wolverhampton. Some of the leading Chinese glass makers have subsequently trained in Shanghai. In ceramics there are links with America particularly with Alfred University in New York State where Huang Chunmao and Chen Guanghui both studied, whilst the potter Wu Hao studied ceramics in Japan at Kyoto and the distinct palette of Kutani porcelain can still be seen in his work.



**Zhuang Xiaowei, Poetics of the Handmade VI, 2013 © Zhuang Xiaowei, now in the collection of Bristol Museum & Art Gallery**



**Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute 2012 © Helen Brown**

Within Jingdezhen (the historic centre of Chinese porcelain manufacture) Jackson Li's Sanbao Ceramic Art institute just outside the city runs workshops and residencies for international potters and these influences are slowly filtering through. Within the city itself, the Pottery Workshop set up by Caroline Cheng and Takeshi Yasuda and now run by Caroline Cheng operates in a similar way, although with a strong mission to re-invest in the community with its Saturday markets to show the work of local potters and supported residencies for young local makers. Also in Jingdezhen Felicity Aylieff works with Mr Wu's factory to make her large-scale ceramics. The factory make traditional temple wares but are themselves are branching out, for example, working with a Chinese student currently studying at Cardiff to make new designs.

Looking at the work of Chinese potters and British makers it is easy to spot shared concerns. Both have used traditional Chinese decoration to explore their interests. This can be seen in the work of Wan Liya, Shao Changzong and in that of Jackson Li. Jackson Li's Neo-Guan series carefully deconstructs the designs of imperial wares, which are then used often in single elements to decorate his pieces.



**Work by Felicity Aylieff awaiting firing at The Big Pot Factory, Jingdezhen, 2012 © Helen Brown**

British potters have also been interested in using traditional Chinese decoration. Felicity Aylieff, Head of ceramics at the Royal College of Art, uses low fired enamelling known as fencai as one aspect of her work, often scaling up traditional Chinese motifs on fencai decorated jars. Claire Twomey's Made in China (2010) a set of seventy-nine giant jars were ordered online, from a standard Chinese transfer-printed gold-coloured pattern made by a Chinese factory.

The eightieth vase was made at Royal Crown Derby and hand decorated with real gold leaf taking twenty-one days to make (as long as the Chinese-made vases) and it cost more. Twomey chose to use Chinese examples to raise questions about value and skill in a global society. Robert Dawson's Willow Pattern for Wedgwood (2005) takes elements from the iconic design based on Chinese patterns and uses digital technology to distort, blur, and make us look again.



**Jiang Yanze, Assemblage – 6, 2007, bone china © Jiang Yanze, now in the collection of The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent**

A more specific shared concern is an interest in shards and wasters. The work of Jiang Yanze and Neil Brownsword, although completely different visually, comes from a similar interest in seeing discarded wasters in factories that both have given new life to in their work. Jiang Yanze (b.1975) trained at Jingdezhen Ceramic institute and is Associate Professor at Nanjing University of the Arts Design School. Her work is influenced by seeing discarded pots in factories and kiln accidents where pots are fused together. She saw these could have new life when reconstructed. Her work is in some ways a comment on a throwaway culture and how for her the discarded can be turned into a memorable object. For her losing the original meaning 'new meaning emerges' (Nachescu and Newnham 2014:24). She is particularly interested in the interior life of every day objects. Neil Brownsword comes from Stoke-on-Trent and was apprenticed, age sixteen, at Wedgwood. He subsequently studied ceramics at the Royal college of Art.

His work draws on the decline of the ceramic industry in Stoke-on-Trent and the subsequent demolition of many of the original factory sites. He gathers wasters, fusions and meltings from abandoned pottery sites which he resubmits to the kiln where they are further fused, warped, and mutated. The assemblages he creates like Jiang's work have a new life, and as David Whiting has written, 'a strong sense of regeneration' (Whiting 2008). In making these he subverts traditional craft and skill at the same time commenting on their loss.

### **The legacy of Ahead of the Curve**

The Ahead of the Curve project leaves a firm legacy. Works from the exhibition have been acquired by Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent and the Victoria & Albert Museum for their permanent collections. An English/Chinese exhibition catalogue was printed and is also available online on the website of Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives, where readers can learn further information about the project. ( <http://museums.bristol.gov.uk/narratives.php?irn=12922> )

A version of the exhibition has been displayed at twocities gallery, Shanghai in 2015 -16 and there is a possibility that there will be a further showing in autumn 2016 at a new ceramic museum under construction in Jingdezhen. Further long-term benefits of the project have been the experience gained by those involved (curators, museum and gallery staff, artists and shippers) of working internationally. This had led to increased confidence amongst them, increased profile for each of the four institutions involved and left some strong personal relationships on which to build. Finally, and not least, we hope that the exhibition has left a lasting impression on the visitors of all ages who came to see it.

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<sup>i</sup> Funded by The British Council, Connections Through Culture programme.

<sup>ii</sup> Funded by The Art Fund, Jonathan Ruffer Curatorial Grants programme.

<sup>iii</sup> Shannon Guo, personal communication, 10/4/2015

<sup>iv</sup> Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute, figures correct as of 2010

<sup>v</sup> Shelly Xue, personal communication, 10/4/2015  
Chen Zhou Mei Zi, salesperson at Jiayang Porcelain Company, Jingdezhen, personal communication 22/10/2010

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.spinceramics.com/designer/gary-wang> accessed 11/4/2015

<sup>vii</sup> The Yang Ming Ubiquity

<sup>ix</sup> eleven works with assistance from the MLA/V&A Purchase Grant for the Regions, the Art Fund, the Friends of Bristol Art Gallery and Simon Baker.

<sup>x</sup> three works by Jiang Yanze and Wang Ping with assistance from the Art Fund and the Friends of The Potteries Museums & Art Gallery

<sup>xi</sup> two works by Jiang Yanze and Jackson Li