

# 15 Days in Jingdezhen

## *Robyn Phelan describes A research trip and residency at the Pottery Workshop and Experimental Sculptural Factory, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, China*

*“My sculptural ceramics combine two distinct pottery practices: ancient hand-building techniques, and mechanised production. Contrast is explored through the juxtaposition of colour beside white, light shades with dark, hardness and soft, smoothness upon patination and shallow depth compared to volume. Wheel thrown vessels are intuitively attached to a pinched form and then pierced through to the internal space. This action triggers for me, a range of subjective associations.” ~ Robyn Phelan, 2007.*



*Top: Celadon Landscape – Lán Shán.  
2008. Big Ware Porcelain,  
underglaze decal, celadon*

*Above: Mountain-scape – Two Views.  
2009. Southern Ice Paper Clay and  
stoneware glaze*

I HAD HEARD ABOUT JINGDEZHEN in a lecture given by Fiona Wong to fellow Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) colleagues and students in 2006. Her Hong Kong students attended an annual study trip to Jingdezhen, Sanbao and Anhui Province, China. The lecture was full of evocative images of traditional practice and preindustrial ceramics villages, a cultural history not part of our Australian experience. Although I had not pursued specific study in Chinese ceramics, the lecture left a lasting im-

pression. Following this I was fortunate to win an undergraduate scholarship comprising a lump sum of money to be spent on international travel related to artistic practice. With endless possibilities but limited time available due to having a young family and a tight budget, I decided on the total immersion in another culture devoted to ceramic practice on offer at Jingdezhen.

I organized for the trip to take place in the autumn when the weather is more temperate and I arrived in late April 2008. Online communication was swift and clear after transferring fees of \$300 USD per week. This included two meals per day, accommodation, studio and studio assistants. The Pottery Workshop (PWS) took the responsibility of booking my hotel in Shanghai as well as the local flight at reasonable prices. This was a most desirable aspect of this residency and averted the daunting task of independently arranging a tour of China for a mere two weeks.

I arrived in time for a communal lunch in the workshop dining/lounge/lecture area. Two large round tables filled with staff, the other international residents and a sensationally fresh and diverse Sichuan meal greeted me. I would have the opportunity to watch this lively group of about 20 people over the next two weeks.

My room was clean and basic, located in the upper mezzanine with three other residents and a shared bathroom and laundry. I was taken immediately to my studio space, a light and airy place with sturdy tables, shelves and a pottery wheel. The building complex is a multi-levelled communist-block affair that houses not only the studios but also the PWS office, glaze area and kilns along the entire length the building. My fellow artists were an

interesting mix of international and Chinese artists.

By good luck rather than good management both PWS directors were in attendance for most of my visit. Director, Caroline Cheng is the visionary for the workshop and a powerhouse of ideas and enthusiasm. Born in the UK, schooled in USA and living in Shanghai, Cheng's ceramic installations reveal her conceptual ideas about China made tangible by the ceramic skills and techniques of Jingdezhen crafts people. In Jingdezhen I observed Cheng's energy in directing the creative output of the downstairs studio. This is a production house where the hand-chosen, cream of China's young ceramists make production ware for sale in the Workshop Cafe. This is predominantly tea ware with a fusion of traditional and contemporary design. This area was open late into the evening where the staff would often be making their own experimental work and were open to discussion about their practices.

First thing in the morning, I met with Cheng's fellow director Takeshi Yasuda and the studio staff. What followed was a thorough and stimulating discussion about my work and aspirations and what PWS could offer. I was soon to realise that my residency was an unusual one. Most people attend with a specific project in mind and are quickly introduced to relevant local crafts people. Yasuda confirmed earlier advice that a fortnight visit would prove difficult, as a block of six weeks minimum was needed to satisfactorily complete a project. He encouraged me to see as much as I could of the Sculpture Factory, attend the field trips organised by PWS and perhaps undertake smaller works with press moulds in multiples. I decided after this meeting to describe my visit as a research trip. Yasuda's studio is part of the network of buildings that make up PWS and his observant presence was a key part of my experience there; whether this was part of mealtime conversation, chairing the Friday night lecture or gathering people up for an early morning visit to the antique and shared market.

Swiftly following this meeting was a whirlwind tour of museums, factories and retail shops. I was completely astounded by the range and breadth of ceramic industry that exists not only within the boundaries of the Sculpture Factory but also in the greater environs of Jingdezhen city. It did seem that most of the population was employed in the production of ceramics from the small family businesses to huge industrial factories. And from the most vulgar of tourist tack to sensitive installation art by contemporary ceramists. I had imagined the Sculpture Factory to be a single building where specialised crafts people were employed and available for the resident artists to utilise. My Australian model of contained craft production as in the Jam Factory in Adelaide or the Melbourne Meat Market Craft Centre of the past could not have been further from what I was experiencing.

This entire area was an ever-changing cornucopia of ceramics activity. Neighbouring ceramics production factories are within walking or cycling distance. For most of my travels I used the PWS cycles on wonderfully traffic-free roads. When I did not have the energy, taxis were plentiful and well priced. The close proximity of the Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute encouraged diverse ceramic experience specifically for local ceramics students both on campus and by PWS. This included specialised firings, attending lectures or volunteering to assist as translators and tour guides for the residents.

My first tour of PWS was guided by volunteers Lifang and Lingzhi and



*Above: Side view of the Pottery Workshop and Experimental Factory studio & office building.  
Top: Glaze Shop.*

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additional assistance was on hand from staff member, Baixu. Lifang and Lingzhi were undertaking a ceramics degree alongside the study of English making them perfect ambassadors for their town and their craft. I spent most of my time with Lifang, whose diligence and energy enabled me to see a large number of craftspeople and suppliers in a short amount of time. I can not stress how valuable Lifang and Baixu's assistance was to the ease and success of my work. Their help in sourcing material or equipment and answering my ceramics and cultural questions was invaluable. As practitioners themselves they have an innate understanding of ceramics processes and an intimate understanding of their city, often supporting me in the negotiations of quality and pricing necessary as most suppliers had little or no English and my Mandarin extended to a few pleasantries.

After two and a half days of stimulating touring and three nights of absorbing my experiences, I quickly decided on a small project. During my sightseeing I had purchased some tools and some tissue-paper underglaze decals. A series of *maquettes* and small thrown vessels, if made and dried quickly, would give me enough time to explore at least three of the porcelain clay bodies available, to play with both under- and overglaze decals and luxuriate in a half dozen of the wide range of glazes available from the many glaze suppliers.

In the work created during my undergraduate studies, I thematically explored the idea of objects that could be used as viewfinders or recorders of information. I mostly make forms that contain holes that would make one feel observed or that could be looked into. My behaviour in Jingdezhen as the constant observer, not only of the local Chinese people but also my fellow residents and pottery workshop staff, was uncomfortable for me. In addition to this awkwardness I restrained my desire to get my hands into clay hoping that Jingdezhen would filter into my consciousness and direct a course of action. Reflecting upon these

Top: Pottery Workshop studio area upon my arrival. My pottery wheel was yet to arrive.  
Above: Speedily printing cobalt tissue underglaze decals.

issues consolidated my interest in forms that act as viewers and recorders. I found that my digital camera became a permanent attachment to the palm of my hand. Works made at the PWS exploring this notion are *Jingdezhen Cameras*. I was amazed at how willing and seemingly comfortable the citizens of Jingdezhen were to have their daily work observed and noted. I can not imagine any other situation where the general public can wander around a neighbourhood knocking on doors to shops or small private factories and be invited to watch the production of all forms and qualities of ceramics.

Jingdezhen's long international history of ceramics commerce might possibly explain this open environment for dialogue between visitors and local maker. Jingdezhen, the Porcelain Capital, became the centre of China's ceramic production predominantly in the 14th century Yuan Dynasty when craftsman were able to produce a superior, white porcelain of increased strength and reduced distortion which was desirable for export. This excellence was achieved in no small part by the proximity of kaolinite sourced (now depleted) at nearby Kao-Ling (High Hill) and floated downstream to Jingdezhen's ceramics factories.

At the end of the first week I had completed a range of small-scale works that were ready to decorate. I also attended the Friday night lecture, cycled to Sanbao for the day and visited the antique and shards market. There was

Shanghai Museum has one floor devoted to ceramics with a substantial section on the history of Jingdezhen, beginning in the Song Period. For a person who is interested in authentic and historical ceramics it is worthwhile to study this museum before visiting Jingdezhen.

a studio visit to the countryside, the Tianbo Dragon Kiln and what remains of Mt Kaolin. The work ethic at the residency was admirable. Most are in the studio by eight a.m. and return to work in the evening. Coffee is on hand at two cafes operating next door to the studio building. Lunch and dinner at noon and six p.m. provide a routine against distractions and encourage a commitment to work.

It rained steadily for much of my visit and the extravagance of this amount of rain to someone from the dry southeast of Australia felt like a cleansing of the soul. I was the only one not to complain. The humidity, however, stalled the drying of work, to reach a point where I could glaze at greenware stage, which I wished to try. Fortunately, a fellow resident had set up a tent and a personal heater to speed up the drying.

I had chosen to use the Big Ware clay as it was recommended for press moulding and big sculpture as the name described. It was flexible clay and I learnt quickly (being a porcelain clay novice) that too much water in either throwing or handbuilding meant for quick absorption and the form going floppy. The Sculpture Factory Middle White was difficult to use to handbuild, being dense and short. Surprisingly the famous Tai Do 609 Super White behaved quite well for flexibility. All three clays were challenging to turn after throwing. I had been trained in a western style of throwing with the finishing happening at the leather hard stage. The porcelain kept catching and chunks would pull away from the surface. Frustrated, I finished as best I could. Later, I watched professionals turning with ease almost dry vessels under a shower of clay.

My usual work method is to make many separate component pieces by throwing and pinching. The final form evolves through cutting and rejoining at leather hard allowing for some finessing of form and cleaning of join marks. In Jingdezhen, the joining of thrown-ware happens green to green, speedily and with a quick slap of water to adhere. If joining press moulds, the clay is still plastic and a network of inner coils supports the form. If I were to pursue my hand-building technique I would need to change either my process or the clay.

Learning from this I decided to pinch from a solid block thereby avoiding the need to join. I was keen to use the charming decal landscape scenes I had seen being applied to many hundreds of vases destined for cheap retail stores around the world (rarely did I see freehand brushwork). In *Celadon Landscape – Lán Shán*, I tried to capture the allure of the mountain view outside of my studio window, a range that seemed to enfold the city. By cutting up multiple decals and rearranging the images based on the relative scale of the figures and mountains, I was attempting to expand the two dimensional pictorial illusion destined for the flat surface of a pot to the sculptural form of a mountain. The multiple prints that may have been in production for generations and used on thousands of pots had become my singular experience of a Jingdezhen mountain range.

With my works now decorated, I decided to employ the local glaze master



*Top: Shards & Antique market held early every Monday morning. Above: Jingdezhen Cameras. 2008 Tai Do Porcelain, underglaze decal and celadon glaze.*

*The antique and shards market is a seemingly spontaneous yet large event where local and rural people spread their wares on the ground on the marginal land around a shopping precinct. Predominantly the ceramics are shards with blue and white decoration of endless variety, excavated from the ruins of kilns from Jingdezhen's heyday. There is a heady mix of reproduction, antique and bric-a-brac. I visited each week of my stay and the experience is a feast for the artist's eye.*





Top: Nearby gas fired reduction kiln.  
 Above: *Blue Shadow*, 2009.  
 Southern Ice Paper Clay, Jingdezhen  
 decals and stoneware glaze.

The Pottery Workshop studio has at least five clays in large supply which can be purchased by the kilo. The web site is becoming more informative. See <http://pottery-workshop.org/jingdezhen/materials-and-techniques/clay-bodies/> for full details on clay bodies. As I was using such small amounts, I was fortunate to be 'handed-on' clay by residents who were finishing up their time.

to see if I could pick up any tips on glazing. With Lifang's help I was told that it would be too difficult to glaze separately with white and the body of the sculpture in a celadon glaze. We settled on a clear glaze inside the lens to highlight the decal and the celadon was used on the remaining area of the sculpture. To my chagrin, the glazing problem that challenged me at university also proved problematic for the Sculpture Factory master. This was my first and only example of working alongside the skilled artisans of the Sculpture Factory. He had an excellent knowledge of all of the different glazes that I had purchased and his spraying was impeccable. He would, however, only work to the point of his own experience rather than to achieve the end that I envisioned. Perhaps this relationship could have been a two-way collaboration. In the end I relented, believing that his way would give the best results and after all I was there to see him work. If more time and works had been made available, I would have loved to see him push past the boundary of the familiar.

I carried the pieces around the corner to the nearest kiln to be fired that night. This was a structure on metal tracking, about the size of a small truck and piled high with work from the neighbouring studios and factories. For a nominal fee your work would be reduction fired to 1320°C over 24 hours. This speedy firing means that your work needs to be sturdy and dry, which was a concern after the amount of glaze that had been applied. I did note that most work in the Sculpture Factory was of a solid vertical nature, I assume to prevent warping. Collecting the work the next day was exciting and I was fortunate to have no losses.

For the remainder of my time, I observed the transit of work by two residents who were generous in sharing their experience both then and since. Next to my worktable was the workspace of Roger and Deidre Law who have been visiting Jingdezhen since the 1990s and who freely gave satirical and wise answers to my endless questions. Roger Law was hand drawing exuberant underwater scenes on large, hand-thrown pots made by the family from The Big Pot Factory. After much trial and error he had found a young man with superior relief carving skills and already sourced factories and expertise to complete the glazing of this project. His web site shows the quality and scale of work that can be achieved collaboratively over many visits.

Christiane Haase from Berlin has recently begun working in clay. Haase had a specific conceptual project to pursue and had sourced the particular skills she required the workshops of the Jingdezhen Factory. Her collaborative working process, as with Law, was a symbiotic one. Haas worked hand over hand with the man who modelled the clay to create the forms from her sketches and then watched as the plaster moulds were cast. Even with this close attention, some problems arose but in Jingdezhen there is always a solution. It seems that no matter how clear the translation or how detailed the drawings, a slight skewing or misinterpretation can occur. It is compulsory to be on hand when any making was happening rather than to hand over the manufacture to the expert. Haase's resulting nine large sculptures called, *Geister* or *Ghosts*, are fluid pieces and seem to defy their source material in their ethereal floating nature.

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Watching Law and Haase at work allowed me to reflect on what a future Jingdezhen residency might look like for me. I remain committed at this early stage of my practice to developing my own ceramics skills. By simply watching many people making with clay I gained knowledge of what was possible. The ease of using the studio at the Pottery Workshop and the low cost of materials makes it a place ripe for undertaking experimental work. With frequent firings available, the turnaround between making and result is swift and exciting. Not surprisingly, Chinese students from other cities hire small tables in one of Jingdezhen's many shared studios, appreciating the relative advantages of completing a folio of ceramic work in such a creative culture.

I do daydream about undertaking a larger project sometime in the future. What is certain is that the projects would only be possible in the environment of Jingdezhen. By this I mean practically and culturally. The cultural experience of the city and its people are evocative to me and my hundreds of digital images are proof of the visual load. It would be exciting and challenging to attempt objects that are larger than the kilns that I use in Australia. Also, making work that consists of many multiples, glazed or unfired is also tempting.

I am halfway through my current degree program. My Jingdezhen experience is a dominant conceptual force in my work. My evanescent love affair with Chinese porcelain has been successfully replaced with the use of Southern Ice Paper Clay. This clay allows for large scale, hand coiling pieces with a brilliant ice-white unglazed finish. I have continued using mountain forms, combining them with shadows, cobalt glaze features and Jingdezhen tissue decals. These works express my memories and fascination with Jingdezhen's ceramic history.



*Top: View of Lán Shān or Blue Mountains and Jingdezhen kiln chimneys from studio window. Above: Mt Kaolin Remains. 2009. Porcelain paper clay, Jingdezhen decals, and stoneware glaze.*

*Sanbao Ceramics Art Institute was created in the forested outskirts of Jingdezhen in 2000. It is close enough that I was able to ride a pushbike there for Sunday lunch. In a tranquil traditional wooden Chinese building you can have a reclusive and intensive ceramics experience. It includes an attached high quality restaurant, wood-fired salt, gas, Anagama and Dragon kilns and studios complete with electric and Chinese stick wheels.*

Robyn Phelan is a Melbourne based visual arts and craft writer, educator and manager. She is currently completing her Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) in Ceramics at RMIT. All Jingdezhen photos by Robyn Phelan. All photos of artwork by Christopher Sanders.