

Maris Boyd Gillette, *China's Porcelain Capital: The Rise, Fall and Reinvention of Ceramics in Jingdezhen*

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For centuries, “Jingdezhen” has stood as the synonym for the world’s best-quality porcelain with its formal perfection and refined decoration. Starting from the Song dynasty (960–1276), Jingdezhen ceramists have been producing porcelain for all sorts of Chinese tastes and international consumers, the most famous being probably the icy-blue glazed celadons (*qingbaici*) and the blue and white porcelain (*qinghuaci*). Whereas most scholarly interests hitherto are laid on the artistic fineness of Jingdezhen porcelain and the technical processes of their production, in this book Maris Boyd Gillette centers on the artists, artisans, and workers who “throw, press, and decorate these renowned and measured wares” (2–3). Drawing on historic, economic, and ethnographic sources, Gillette sets out to investigate the conditions that facilitate and influence the lives of ceramists. In particular, she outlines the significant role of the Chinese state as it “consumed, invested in, taxed, and managed Jingdezhen porcelain” and how it has “profoundly shaped ceramists’ lives, the local environment, and the quality, quantity, and types of wares produced” (3).

The core of the book consists of seven chapters that proceed chronologically to delineate the history of Jingdezhen and its ceramists from the ancient to the present, focusing in particular on the period from the mid-nineteenth to the early twenty-first century. The first seven centuries of porcelain production in Jingdezhen, up to the last decade of the Qianlong Emperor’s reign (1735–1796), stand as “a golden age in terms of the quantity and quality of wares manufactured, the size and degree of specialization of the workforce, and the overall economic wellbeing of the populace” (28). The next century and a half witnessed a prolonged period of “decline and disarray” (29) of Jingdezhen porcelain, in which China underwent constant incursions, rebellion, and war, so that the Chinese state withdrew from directly supporting and administering the porcelain industry.

When the Communists marched into Jingdezhen in April 1949, the history of the porcelain capital took a vital turn. The new government “reinitiated state management of Jingdezhen’s porcelain manufacturing, recognizing the industry around production and politics” (45). As a result, the first four decades of the Peoples Republic saw Jingdezhen’s porcelain industry reviving to be “bigger, more stable, and better managed” and the scope of proceeded wares “more diversified” (69). Even the Cultural Revolution did not present many obstacles to Jingdezhen. As policy changed and conditions became more favorable during the Reform era, both collective and private porcelain manufacturing expanded quickly.

However, as banks were told by the government to tighten credit to state and collective enterprises in 1994, a considerable number of porcelain factories in Jingdezhen went bankrupt and at least a half million workers were laid-off. The situation further deteriorated as the state interest shifted from porcelain to other sectors, such as aviation and tourism, despite consistent complaints of porcelain manufacturers. Many

responded by producing historic replicas and fake antiques for the rapidly growing art market, and the glory of the porcelain capital gradually faded away. From the late 1990s onward, porcelain production became “smaller-scale, comparatively homogenous in output, less stable, and employed few people” (131). Instead of investing in the industry, local officials now focus more on promoting Jingdezhen’s imperial and handicraft heritage and selling the culture and heritage as tourist appeal. The large-scale manufacturing that had once made the city an international force has gone and the ceramists are left to figure out for themselves how to get work and get by.

By way of examining the different stages in the historical development of porcelain production in Jingdezhen, Gillette masterfully links various episodes with lively stories of porcelain manufacturers and embeds them in a larger narrative to depict the expansion and decline of the once world porcelain capital. What emerges from this lucidly written book is a vivid picture of the particular role that the Chinese state has been playing in the industry’s rise or fall and in ceramists’ success or failure, happiness or misery. Jingdezhen’s success in becoming the porcelain capital, as Gillette cogently observes, is closely linked to the “big government” in which “state management, investment, and consumption kept the industry strong” (3–4). As the state retreated from supporting research, directing production, and commissioning large orders since the late 1990s, the whole porcelain sector dropped dramatically and the number of manufacturers decreased. The trajectory of Jingdezhen thus provides vivid instances for those who want to understand the particular role of political and economic arrangements in other sectors and other parts of the world.

Next to the importance of the state in Jingdezhen’s porcelain manufacture, however, we should not forget that international trade also played a key role in the success of Jingdezhen, since a large portion of the porcelain were specifically designed and produced for foreign markets. The high demand from abroad has greatly shaped the porcelain sector from the Song dynasty onward. But how was the porcelain for foreign trade (*waixiaoci*) produced? How were the relationships of the manufacturers of *waixiaoci* to those of the imperial kilns? In what ways did the production of such *waixiaoci* influence the porcelain industry and lives of ceramic workers in Jingdezhen in different times? All these questions are not touched in Gillette’s book.

In her effort to depict Jingdezhen’s story, Gillette has based her arguments on a wide array of sources, ranging from primary historical texts written in literary Chinese, translations of various documents, as well as personal experience and observation and interviews with local ceramists, entrepreneurs, and researchers. Yet those better versed in the history of Jingdezhen’s porcelain production in the imperial period may wonder why Gillette has not consulted the *Jingdezhen taolu* (Records of Jingdezhen Ceramics) by Lanpu (fl. late nineteenth century), a voluminous work of ten volumes, which not only describes the materials and producing technologies but also the ways of organizing different labors in the production process during the nineteenth century. The works by Tang Ying (1682–1756), the famous supervisor of the Imperial Kiln during Qianlong’s reign, are largely missing too, although Gillette occasionally mentions consulting an English translation of his *Taoye tushuo* (Illustrations of the Manufacture of Porcelain). Moreover, a correction of some minor points concerning historical terms and Chinese language may better satisfy critical readers.

These quibbles aside, *China's Porcelain Capital* is a valuable book for scholars and non-specialists of ceramics, Asian art, and Chinese ethnology, and it is bound to inspire further future studies of other fields and comparative global history.

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