

Working in China

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Why go to China to make pottery? Obviously, China is one of the great ceramics culture in the world and its influence is to be found worldwide notably in all the ubiquitous Chinatowns. To work in ceramics is to be aware of Chinese ceramics and in awe of its various accomplishments, highly influential throughout time.

The first time I went to China was on a tour organized by Jackson Lee for a small group of Canadian potters. We went for a month, touring Shanghai, Yixing, Nanjing, Jingdezhen, Wuhan, Xian and Beijing and numerous other smaller places, all connected to ceramics somehow. The highlight of the tour for myself and possibly for all the others as well, was the working week we spent in the porcelain capital, Jingdezhen. One day while returning from a trip to an ancient Song dynasty kiln site where there was a feeding frenzy on the shard pile (which I basically ignored since I do not collect much when I travel and do not even bother to take any photographs), we stopped on the outskirts of Jingdezhen, in a beautiful narrow valley surrounded my steep mountains, covered with small rice patches on each side of the dirt road and a rushing stream. A small farm of packed-earth buildings, many derelict, was waiting across a small bridge over the stream. Jackson told us he intended to buy this property and develop there an artist residency where we could all come back to work soon. I don't think any of us believed him. Yet, the potential to return entered my mind right then and for the rest of the week in JDZ, I looked at the place differently, asking myself what I would do, how I would take advantage of the place and its many offerings, if I were to return. I was particularly intrigued by a group of enamel painters, all workings in small shops opened to the street near the city center. Their specialty consisted in reproducing photographs on porcelain tiles, examples of which could be found on their small studio walls, assorted Maos, Lenins and Marxes and for the more skilled among them, kitschy reproductions of European academic paintings. I kept wondering how I could make use of such extraordinary and specific skills.

A few years after that first research trip, Jackson let everyone know that he had made good on his intention and the San Bao International Ceramics Residency was now open for business. At that time I had just won the Chalmers Award for Excellence in Crafts and I took a leave of absence from Emily Carr University (then Institute of Art and Design) in Vancouver where I teach. Meanwhile I had given much thought to the possibilities of working in China and I had prepared myself. I knew what I wanted to do. I wrote Jackson and told him that I intended to work not with the other foreigners in San Bao, which is a few kilometers from JDZ, but by myself in the city itself, at what is called the Sculpture Factory, where figurative knick-knacks of all sizes, some of them quite large, are made. Could he organize for me to work there and could he provide me with a personal assistant to translate for me and negotiate with all the workers I intended to collaborate with? He replied that this was not a problem and all would be done according to my wishes.

So I arrived in JDZ for a first real stay of three months, from late September to mid December. I was bunking in San Bao (room and board) but every day I would bike to town (my great assistant Min Shen would take a taxi as she wouldn't be caught dead riding a bike, too *déclassé* for her) to

work at the Sculpture Factory. Jackson had arranged for me to have a small space on the second floor of one of the ruined buildings that constituted then this nonetheless very charming and fascinating area of town. All windows were broken, very cold water was to be found at a single spigot downstairs and I will pass over the personal hygiene facilities which are quite simply indescribable, everywhere in China! Every surface was covered with a thick layer of dust, probably toxic. When I tried to sweep the floor, the workers vehemently stopped me. Better not to disturb anything... Everyday, I would work there by myself, the only foreigner in the whole town, it often seemed, with my fabulous assistant Min and happily surrounded by the other workers press-molding away their daily quota. I abridge here for there is so much more to relate, possibly elsewhere one day. Anyway, everything I needed was organized by Min. She arranged for molds to be made, then various painters to decorate for me (blue and white and over-glaze enamels), and for the work to be glazed, fired, packed, shipped, etc. etc. She negotiated everything and was quite simply invaluable. None of this would have been possible, even remotely, without her. Thank you Min, thank you Jackson.

The beauty of working in JDZ is that the whole city in its myriads on expertizes is available to everyone (after long negotiations) at all time. At the time, everything was really cheap. Now the prices have gone up, astronomically. One day Jackson came by and asked me how much I was paying for various services. When I told him, he became very upset and scolded for paying too much; that I would ruin everything for everybody and besides, I was creating resentment among the workers by such disparity. One time, a worker I was paying really well did very bad work. I asked Min why was the work so bad when I knew I was being more than generous. She replied: "He thinks you are a fool for paying so much! Why should he do good work for someone he doesn't respect? You need to negotiate until the agreed price is fair for you and for them too." To her credit, Min was always a ferocious negotiator for me, but I would get bored with hours (literally, it seemed) of back and forth offerings and would always agree to the price too soon, when it appeared reasonable to me yet was still way too high. Now I couldn't do the work I did then, I couldn't afford to!

JDZ is a veritable encyclopedia of knowledge and cornucopia of skills, so much so that it becomes overwhelming. I wanted to take advantage of it all. Meanwhile, the other artists "stuck" in San Bao where basically making the same things they could easily have kept making by themselves at home! I knew even before leaving for China that this was not very clever. One might as well stay home if one is to do the same work anyway. Of course most would add a bit of Chinese flavor to their production, by working with porcelain, getting a try at blue and white painting, etc. Of course, there are artists and designers who go to China to take advantage of the cheaper workforce. I have no personal problem with that, yet it was never my intention, although I could not have done all the work I did with the same (limited) financial resources anywhere else. My intention was to make work that could only be made in JDZ, that would be a reflection on how Chinese porcelain can be explored as a stand-in for "ceramics" itself, as an easily recognizable icon for the field of ceramics as a whole, as a basically universal language.

To make a long story short here, I returned to JDZ seven more times, over many years, to continue and complete a vast, varied and complex body of work, a process in some ways still ongoing (most of it has not been shown in Canada and things being what they are here, they may never be...). Expectedly, the other foreigners quickly caught on as well and followed my lead

(Chinese artists had been working this way for years already, of course). Most residents, if not all, started to take fuller advantage of the resources of the city and if not to work directly in town, at least work with various experts to help in the making of their production. On my third working visit, Barbara Diduk was also there. She had started her usual work in San Bao yet when she saw how I operated, clever girl that she is, she quickly decided to do as I did. My assistant then was Joey Shao, found for me by Min as a replacement while she was in Graduate school. “Balbala” (as she was called by everyone) would at times borrow Joey from me and a bit too quickly, do what can only be described as “steal him away from me”! I must say that although it was often quite inconvenient, I was happy to be of help as I knew she would make great use of his many talents and deep knowledge of the city (following in Min’s footsteps, he was trained really well and he knew where everything was), the spectacular results of which can be seen at the Gardiner Museum right now too.

I went to China to do what can only be done there, the way I say things with ceramics that can only be said with ceramics (and pottery). I took full advantage of the place in all its great potential, working with probably hundreds of different experts all over town and making a large body of works of great variety in the process. The work I did with the “photo painters” is unique and if many Chinese artists go to JDZ to work there and do what I did (I got the idea from them after all) very few use the photo painters (too tacky and kitschy probably, if such a thing is possible in JDZ!). Those who do are friends of mine that I introduced to the great potential offered by such unusual mix of pottery, ceramics, photography and painting.

Eventually San Bao changed. It became more “touristy”, less of a community. For other reasons as well, I continued the work at another artist residency, the Pottery Workshop JDZ under Caroline Cheng and Takeshi Yasuda, at the very heart of the Sculpture Factory, across the street from my old second floor, windowless, dusty and cold studio. In fact, I will take credit where credit is due: it is when Caroline saw me at work there, collaborating with and working among Chinese workers that her idea to start another residency was reinforced and confirmed. The Pottery Workshop facilities are outstanding, with hot and cold water in the studios, running toilets and showers, real heating in the winter and air conditioning in the summer. In fact it is a bit too clean and aseptic for China, and while in the middle of things, it remains somewhat cut-off from its surroundings. I miss the old San Bao, where we would all eat together around the kitchen table, and I miss my funky old studio at the original Sculpture Factory where Min would leave me alone for hours while running errands for me, surrounded by the Chinese workers who would nonetheless continue to give me advice by showing me how things had to be done, scolding me with their fingers if I was out of line somehow and also talk to me incessantly, knowing very well I couldn’t understand a word! Such friends I made there. In fact, negotiating the culture of China, and to learn to get things done in a place where nothing works like here, and where what appears familiar is actually much different, especially human relations, was essentially the most pleasurable, educational and worthy aspect of my time there. All the (extraordinary!...) work I did and under these conditions will probably remain of very little interest to anyone for a very long time. For me, making the work (and I was phenomenally productive) was secondary to the knowledge and appreciation I gained for another culture.

More recently I have also done experimental design work at the invitation of my colleague and friend Janet de Boos from Australian National University in Canberra, at the Huaguang bone

china factory in Zibo, south of Beijing. This is also an amazing opportunity and experience, also best related eventually elsewhere. Meanwhile I would direct the curious mind to go to my websites:

www.paulmathieu.ca on my studio works and writings

www.ceramicsresearch.ca on my research and work on the relation between ceramics and computer technologies, including some of the China, Bone China works

and also read my new book “The Art of the Future” on the History and Theory of ceramics available for FREE, text (400 pages) and images (thousands) at:

www.paulmathieu.ca/theartofthefuture