

## sehepunkte 22 (2022), Nr. 2

### Anna Gerritsen: *The City of Blue and White*

*The City of Blue and White* sets out an excellent model for historians of Chinese ceramics whose institutional base is outside specific museums and archaeological institutes. The fine-grained big picture depicted through this analysis of artefacts housed in institutes around the world and the latest available textual sources shows the strength of a historian working on Chinese ceramics, unburdened by a curatorial obligation. To me, the contribution of the book is threefold - conceptual, organisational, and evidential.

Conceptually, this is a historiography focusing on Jingdezhen, the premier town of production, rather than on its products, despite the extensive and meticulous visual observation of significant pieces included in the book. It truly integrates the local and the global sides of the story. Compared to Finlay's *The Pilgrim Art* [1], this book digs deeper into the natural resources, administrative units, labour organisation, productive process, and formal and informal economic practices in Jingdezhen from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The chronological presentation of production in Jingdezhen not only makes the historical stages accessible, it also allows the author to cover categories of ceramics beyond the blue-and-white and to examine earlier white wares and Qingbai wares in chapter 3. In explaining the birth of blue-and-white porcelain, the author exercises a robust visual analysis to argue for the introduction of underglaze painting from Jizhou, a neighbouring ceramics production town, and Cizhou, a distant but related centre of production to Jingdezhen (chapters 4 and 5). This investigation of the interregional circulation of techniques and artistic forms demystifies and historicises their invention in the long and complex regional exchange. More importantly, by examining the global circulation of white, Qingbai, and blue-and-white porcelains, and the interregional nature of their production, the author points out the deep socio-economic pattern structuring the continuous yield of porcelain of varying quality and stupefying quantity in Jingdezhen. The key point bridging the local and the global, as Gerritsen asserts, is the connection between imperial porcelain and the export ware ceramics in workshops and trading barges in this town, which has long been overlooked (214 Kindle position). As the author notes, both imperial demand and management, and global markets such as those in Korea, Italy, and the Islamic world have always jointly driven the porcelain industry in Jingdezhen.

The book's second contribution is the craft of organisation, with which the author navigates the reader inside and outside the city and follows numerous leads towards its regional, imperial, and global connections. The shift between the regional and the global scenes across chapters 2 and 3, as well as chapters 5 and 6 and chapters 9 and 10, is refreshing and deft. Chapter 7 resumes the examination of the imperial state's intervention in production begun in chapter 1, and the author dives into the multiple layers of the city's socio-spatial organisation. Many fellow historians and students can learn from the effective analytical scaffolding - namely the physical, administrative, manufacturing, and imperial spaces - with which the author maps out the city (134-50 Kindle position), and the three ways in which she identifies that cohesion and diversity were achieved in the vast network of production and trade (214-16). These three ways are the targeted adjustment of quality but with the same pool of resources and skilled labour, the commonality of visual languages, and potters' material translations across various media.

Gerritsen's third contribution is the brand new textual and artefactual evidence that she introduces to the English-speaking world. She has collected many figures from local gazetteers on the labour force, wages, and the size and quantity of kiln sites, and organized them in this way for the first time, readily solving queries about such numbers which have heretofore been notoriously hard to answer. Thus, chapters 8 and 9 satisfy readers who are particularly interested in the precise estimation of resources and labour organisation in porcelain production. In chapter 10 - and indeed throughout the book - the author's formal

analysis of pieces from archaeological institutes, collections, well-documented shipwrecks across the globe, as well as shards that she has examined in Jingdezhen's shard markets, debunks occasional assumptions about historians' lack of experience with or attention to actual artefacts. While her formal analysis is remarkable for its efficiency and purposefulness, her use of previous scholarship is also impressive, due to its thoroughness and accuracy.

If there is any possible quibble, it might, surprisingly, concern this thoroughness in drawing on available scholarship. The author introduces Kessler's controversial claim on the existence of blue-and-white porcelain in the Song dynasty [2], and then the criticism of this theory with a detailed explanation of what is at stake. Instead of endorsing dating judgements from either side, the author aims to call readers' attention to the *longue durée* interregional dynamic that entailed the eventual maturation of what was later categorised as blue-and-white. Rome was not built in a day. Yet, if unfortunately read in haste, the mentioning of Song blue-and-white porcelain could be misunderstood as suggesting that commonly known blue-and-white was created before the Yuan dynasty, which, I believe, is not what the author intends. Further evidence of this amazing thoroughness in combing the scholarship is found in her confirmation of the death year of Tang Ying, the supervisor of the Imperial Porcelain Manufactory of the Qing dynasty (285 Kindle position). The author finds Hsu Wen-chin's dating, 1755. Her even-handed documentation of contradictory opinions also impresses, as it is not overly judgemental, being primarily concerned with the much larger issue of why Jingdezhen became the global centre of porcelain production in the late medieval and early modern world. In this work, the author makes it abundantly clear that it resulted from the complex contingencies of natural resources, skilled labour, and mature techniques drawn from various production centres, and the influences of the imperial administration and regional and global market demands.

#### Notes:

[1] Robert Finlay: *The Pilgrim Art. Cultures of Porcelain in World History*, Berkeley 2010.

[2] Adam T. Kessler: *Song Blue and White Porcelain on the Silk Road*, Leiden 2012.

#### **Rezension über:**

Anna Gerritsen: *The City of Blue and White. Chinese Porcelain and the Early Modern World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020, XV + 332 S., e-book, ISBN 978-1-108-60753-7, USD 36,00

#### **Rezension von:**

Kaijun Chen  
East Asian Studies Department, Brown University

#### **Empfohlene Zitierweise:**

Kaijun Chen: Rezension von: Anna Gerritsen: *The City of Blue and White. Chinese Porcelain and the Early Modern World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020, in: *sehpunkte* 22 (2022), Nr. 2 [15.02.2022], URL: <http://www.sehpunkte.de/2022/02/35621.html>

Bitte geben Sie beim Zitieren dieser Rezension die exakte URL und das Datum Ihres letzten Besuchs dieser Online-Adresse an.