

The Construction of Cultural Identity and Development Path of Chinese Modern Ceramic Art

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Abstract: This paper examines the origins, characteristics, and developmental trajectory of modern ceramic art in China. From initial exploration to pluralistic growth, it has progressed through international exchanges and artistic experimentation. However, its cultural identity remains a core challenge. The article contends that establishing a distinct position at the intersection of tradition and global influences requires grasping the essence of modern ceramic art—reflexivity. Therefore, development must not sever cultural continuity; instead, it should return to tradition, achieving profound reflection and rediscovery. By integrating inheritance with innovation, Chinese modern ceramic art can sustain its growth and contribute a unique vitality to the global art stage.

Keywords: China; Modern Ceramic Art; Cultural Identity; Reflexivity; Development

1. The Rise and Characteristics of Modern Ceramic Art

Before examining the developmental trajectory of Chinese modern ceramic art, it is essential to review the origins and evolution of modern ceramic art globally. Given its foreign provenance, analyzing its background, history, and distinctive traits helps accurately grasp its typical features and is of great significance for exploring the future direction of Chinese modern ceramic art.

In the 1950s, the modern ceramic art movements led by Japan's Sōdeisha (Walking Clay Society) and Otis College in the United States emerged almost simultaneously, jointly propelling a fundamental transformation in creative practice and aesthetic concepts. This milestone marked the formal establishment of modern ceramic art as an independent art genre. Breaking through the traditional craft framework, it became a highly exploratory and experimental domain, driving innovation and vigorous development within the art world.

In the United States, artists represented by Peter Voulkos, deeply inspired by Abstract Expressionism and Action Painting, absorbed abstract concepts and unconscious creative methods. They boldly broke through the realist tradition long upheld by Western ceramic sculpture, pursuing a more unrestrained and spontaneous mode, thus opening a brand-new chapter. Meanwhile, Sōdeisha artists such as Kazuo Yagi profoundly reflected on and transcended the design mindset of traditional ceramic art, turning to sculptural language and stylistic expression. Their works displayed rich abstract colors and a strong modern sensibility, further propelling the global rise of the movement.

The development of modern ceramic art is inextricably linked with modern art. It reflects and innovates upon traditional techniques while embodying modern artistic trends. After World War II, Western modernist works exhibited in Japan inspired Sōdeisha members to fuse modern art with tradition. Concurrently, the post-war rise of the United States and its desire for independent aesthetic standards led to the widespread reverence for modern painting and sculpture, whose open attitude toward new forms significantly influenced American ceramic innovation.

Although inherently innovative, early modern ceramic art was accompanied by contradictions and ambiguities. Its development was gradual yet increasingly clear. Sōdeisha's early works displayed an eclectic style, initially combining modern elements with traditional techniques to harmonize modern painting and Japanese tradition. On the other hand, while Otis innovation seemed radical, its gestation was steady: Voulkos's early focus was on ceramic ware emphasizing form and decoration, gradually brewing later breakthroughs. Despite differing paths, both jointly promoted the pluralistic development of modern ceramic art toward maturity.

As modern ceramic art matured, "reflexivity"

became its distinctive trait, first reflected in the profound examination of post-war social reality. It is not merely formal innovation but also a carrier of thought and emotion. Through deep reflection on post-war disorder and industrial alienation, it demonstrates artists' keen insight and humanistic concern. Ceramic artists critique societal ills through transcendent creation while reconstructing their spiritual home.

Reflexivity is also reflected in the re-examination of traditional techniques and the breakthrough of conventional aesthetics. Kazuo Yagi's *Mr. Samusa's Walk*, inspired by Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, broke traditional boundaries. On a flat, wide ring-shaped body, he embedded tubular objects of varying sizes, expressing loneliness and despair. This subverted established concepts and conventional processes. Although using traditional ash glaze, its combination with the new form produced unique expressiveness, fully realizing ceramics' artistic language. Similarly, Voulkos's *Rocking Pot* challenged traditions with asymmetrical design and dynamic balance, breaking static beauty and making the form appear alive. This exploration demonstrates mastery of technique while questioning the boundaries of artistic tradition, serving as a powerful testament to the reflexive nature of modern ceramic art.



Figure 1. Mr. Samusa's Walk



Figure 2. Rocking Pot

2. The Germination and Development of Modern Ceramic Art in China

2.1 Early Exploration

From the 1950s to the 1970s, Chinese ceramic artists gradually encountered Western modern art and began exploring innovations upon tradition. As early as 1954, Hua Junwu represented China at the World Small-Scale Ceramics Exhibition in Yugoslavia, observing global developments. Inspired by modern artistic trends, leading academies actively sought new educational pathways. The Central Academy of Arts and Crafts made by Zhu Danian pursued a decorative style balancing tradition and modernity. The Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts (Tan Chang) integrated folk art with modernist concepts from Hong Kong. The Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute (Yao Yongkang, Zhou Guozhen) explored sculptural language, moving toward a sculptural style. This era broke traditional frameworks, emphasizing formal innovation and marking the preliminary exploration of modern Chinese ceramic art.

Concurrently, post-reform Sino-Western exchanges and market demands spurred innovation in Guangzhou's Shiwan area. Artists like Mei Wendin, Zeng Li, and Zeng Peng broke from the conventional figurine model, emphasizing ceramics' spatial aesthetics, volume, and artistic form. Their 1985 "Shiwan Modern Ceramics Exhibition" in Beijing sparked vital discussions on modernizing folk sculpture, standing as a significant milestone.

However, this germination stage remained scattered and localized. Creative activities were confined to specific academic groups or regions, lacking a unified style or extensive conceptual exchange. While this limited innovation's breadth and depth, it sowed essential seeds for the diverse styles and ideas that would flourish in subsequent decades.

2.2 Gradual Emergence

In May 1985, the China Ceramic Art Development and Research Center organized the First National Ceramic Art Symposium, the first seminar devoted specifically to modern ceramic art. It gathered domestic artists to discuss the concept's definition and developmental path.

The introduction of foreign modern ceramic art concepts was spearheaded by Chinese-American artist Lee Mau-chung (Li Maozong). In August 1985, Lee lectured at major institutions including the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts and the Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute. In 1987, invited by the Ministry of Light Industry, he organized a

seminar on modern ceramic product design and art creation. While the title reflected a persistent utilitarian mindset, Lee noted participants' strong technical foundation but lack of innovative design awareness and international perspective, resulting in creative confusion. Between 1987 and 1991, his repeated visits for lectures and exhibitions significantly advanced Chinese modern ceramic concepts.

In November 1988, the Hong Kong Chinese Culture Center hosted a symposium on traditional and modern Chinese ceramic art. Discussions and exhibitions emphasized balancing tradition and innovation, advocating new concepts while respecting traditional techniques. A subsequent joint exhibition enhanced local artists' understanding of global trends.

The 1990s saw more frequent international exchanges. The 1991 International Ceramic Art Symposium in Beijing, China's first, promoted Sino-foreign exchange and conceptual innovation. Core issues included tradition inheritance and modern creation. Exhibited works showed diverse explorations and conceptual breakthroughs, yet some revealed contradictions: efforts to change traditional forms were often constrained by existing conventions, hindering fundamental leaps. These differences reflected the complex conceptual state of Chinese modern ceramic art at the time, with artists facing contradictions and confusions common in artistic development.

In 1995, the Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute hosted the Jingdezhen Gaoling International Ceramic Art Symposium, further promoting exchange. Through discussions and displays, Chinese and foreign artists demonstrated unique styles and deepened their understanding of ceramic art's essence. The community realized that development requires integrating theory and practice, encouraging exploration of new directions. While technology remains important, creation should transcend traditional arts and crafts mindsets to pursue broader artistic innovation.

2.3 Rapid Development

After entering the 21st century, Chinese modern ceramic art has flourished, marked by a surge in exhibitions. The 2004 "East Asian Modern Ceramic Art Invitational Exhibition" promoted regional exchange among China, Japan, and South Korea. The 2014 "Ceramic Art Exhibition

of the National Fine Arts Exhibition" established ceramic art as an independent section, significantly elevating its status and highlighting its vitality.

This prosperity has attracted many artists to creative practice and aesthetic construction. Deepening international exchanges broadened horizons, facilitating a two-way flow of techniques and ideas. Notably, a new generation of young artists emerged, demonstrating unique perspectives and striving to break existing frameworks. These factors jointly propelled Chinese modern ceramic art toward greater diversity and openness, showing vigorous vitality. Young artists particularly emphasize conceptual expression, linking personal emotions with social environment to dialogue with reality and contemporary culture. They reveal a spirit of cultural rebellion and innovation. However, challenges arise: balancing inheritance and innovation to avoid excessive imitation of predecessors, especially mentorship influences; and while aligning with international trends under globalization, confronting the profound ceramic cultural traditions they must face.

3. Future Directions for Chinese Modern Ceramic Art

In the developmental trajectory of Chinese modern ceramic art, artists' international exchanges and their exploration of techniques have jointly propelled its remarkable progress. However, a core question remains unresolved: after integrating into the currents of modern ceramic art, how can the cultural identity of Chinese modern ceramic art be clearly defined and strengthened? As a nation with thousands of years of ceramic history, Chinese ceramic artists face the profound issue of how to approach tradition. How artistic creators understand the historically accumulated techniques and cultural essence, and how they interpret ceramic creation from the perspectives of inheritance and innovation, are crucial to establishing the cultural identity of Chinese modern ceramic art.

For the new generation of modern ceramic art creators, the expression of personal concepts has undoubtedly become a significant driving force in their creative practice. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that they are rooted in a country with a long history of porcelain-making; this profound tradition is an inseparable bond for every creator. Therefore, the question of "whether to uphold the traditional cultural lineage or choose to distance

oneself from tradition?" has become a long-debated and unresolved issue in the development of Chinese modern ceramic art. This core question further triggers a series of oppositional reflections, such as "Should ceramic art focus more on the refinement of technique, or on conceptual innovation and emotional expression?" and "Should one concentrate on expressing individuality and the inner world, or actively engage with social reality?"

A deep analysis of these issues reveals that they often fall into an either-or binary opposition. However, from a practical perspective, inheriting tradition and pursuing modern artistic expression are not mutually exclusive. The key lies in how to be courageous in innovating, skillfully integrating traditional elements with modern aesthetic concepts and technical means, and reinterpreting the connotations of Chinese modern ceramic art from novel and unique perspectives. Finding and establishing a path of inheritance combined with innovative development is the key to the sustained prosperity and progress of Chinese modern ceramic art.

If Chinese modern ceramic art is to establish its own position at the intersection of tradition and foreign cultures, it must grasp the essence of modern ceramic art—its reflectivity. As the analysis of the developmental history of modern ceramic art presented earlier shows, modern ceramic art emerged as a rebellious trend against the destruction of war, industrial culture, and traditional art. It expresses an artistic reflection on the post-war social disorder and the homelessness of the human soul, as well as a rebellion against and re-exploration of traditional artistic rules. Therefore, understanding modern ceramic art cannot be limited to its irrational and abstract forms, while neglecting the historical background and cultural connotations behind it. Without understanding this point, one cannot truly comprehend foreign modern ceramic art, nor can one engage in a dialogue with foreign modern ceramic art at a higher level.

Therefore, starting from the reflectivity of modern ceramic art, the development of Chinese modern ceramic art must not isolate itself from its cultural context; instead, it needs to trace back to tradition and achieve profound reflection on and rediscovery of tradition. As Hang Jian stated: "To examine the development of Chinese modern ceramic art, we need not only to observe the external factors of the post-industrial society

characterized by highly developed information since the 21st century, but also to look back to the more ancient traditions starting from the 1950s. Only in this way can we clarify the essence of the problem. " At the same time, only by deeply understanding tradition can we excavate the cultural connotations and artistic qualities that Chinese modern ceramic art should possess.

In this process, systematic theoretical construction and education in colleges and universities are indispensable. From creation to education, modern ceramic art lacks systematic and in-depth theoretical research and criticism. There is a severe shortage of theorists engaged in research and criticism, while ceramic artists mostly focus on creation and rarely care about theory. Ceramic art education lacks systematic courses on appreciation, criticism, and even theory and history, resulting in students' low theoretical quality and their lack of grasp of the concepts and essence of modern ceramic art, which can easily lead to misinterpretation and blind following of modern ceramic art works [16]. Therefore, it is imperative to further strengthen the theoretical development of modern ceramic art, cultivate students' appropriate creative outlook on modern ceramic art creation, and especially promote reflection on and rediscovery of the Chinese ceramic tradition.

Since the concept of modern ceramic art was introduced to China, Chinese modern ceramic art has been trying to find its own localized development path amidst tradition and modernity. Against this background, the Chinese ceramic tradition is experiencing a dual wave of revival and innovation, injecting profound heritage and infinite possibilities into the development of modern ceramic art. Looking to the future, with the deepening of domestic and international exchanges and the continuous advancement of creative techniques, Chinese modern ceramic art is expected to usher in a broader development prospect, contributing its unique charm and strength to the Chinese and even the world art stage.

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