

Spirit of Figures: Re-creation of Shiwan Figures

Weihua

“Economic globalization has gradually separated the connection between ceramic art and local culture. In many areas, the creation of ceramic art gradually leaves the stage of history created by local culture, merely existing as a craft isolated from the creation of contemporary art. Such Western misunderstanding emerging in the process of modernization theoretically deprives the time-honored ceramic media of its creative energy.”[1] On the one hand, the Western aesthetic system and cultural value dominate our concepts. On the other hand, several forms of regional culture have gradually become heritages to be protected, losing their vitality and spiritual value required to survive. Since 1999, I have started my exploration and re-creation of Shiwan figures, on the basis of my consciousness of “weak culture”, “folk culture”, “regional culture” and “local culture”. I have created works of unique aesthetic value reflecting “Chinese identity (or Shiwan identity)”, which have not been eliminated in the context of globalization, fully embodying the merits of traditional culture and diversity of cultural resources. Meanwhile, I have found my own way of artistic creation- by using the most oriental and traditional patterns of local art, real life and true emotions of contemporary people have been presented, an artistic style in line with contemporary aesthetic taste has been created.

In fact, Shiwan figure was originally attached to architecture, stemming from construction industry. With its strong publicity, Shiwan figure served as a reflection of life at the time. By specific processes and integration of components, Shiwan figure in modern space has realized its transformation from a craft to a form of art, reflecting contemporary humanity and contemporary artistic value. More importantly, along with the re-creation of Shiwan figures, the context of traditional art in Shiwan has not been interrupted. Instead, the identity of regional culture has been strengthened and the resources of local culture have been developed.

I. Origin and Background of Ceramic Art in Shiwan

Ceramic products such as ceramic figures, ceramic animals and ceramic objects are generally

described as figures by people in Lingnan. Actually figures are likely to be understood by people as ceramic figures or ceramic animals, which have long been loved and collected by people. In fact, Shiwan is one of the earliest ceramic producing areas in China. A large number of ceramic chips engraved with various geometric patterns, unearthed in Shiwan Hedang Beiqiu Relic, were witnesses of over-5000-year history of ceramic production in Shiwan. Looking at the history of development of ceramics in Shiwan, it can be found that on the basis of “imitation”, they absorbed strengths of a wide range of famous northern kilns. Besides, the market orientation of Shiwan kilns contributed to their popularity. “Shiwan tiles were the best in the world” especially after the Song Dynasty when Shiwan became a transfer station connecting the north and south of China. In the Ming Dynasty, Shiwan was one of China's top four most famous towns, and “ceramic products produced in Shiwan sold well in Guangdong and Guangxi and were exported to foreign countries.” [2] Shiwan kilns generally refer to ceramics produced in Shiwan after the Ming Dynasty. On the one hand, due to its lack of production of high-quality clay, official attention had not been paid to Shiwan. In terms of characteristics of materials, Shiwan clay is more expressive and plastic than porcelain clay. On the other hand, it can be seen from the ceramic work “Model of Paddy Field with a Boat Attached to It” unearthed in tombs of the Warring States and the Han Dynasty that Shiwan figures are close to life, caring about life of poor people.

Since the Qing Dynasty, ceramic figures created in Shiwan and attached to tile ridges of architecture had been preserved in Foshan Ancestral Temple and Guangzhou Chen Clan Academy, becoming the essence of traditional ceramic art. While ceramic figures separated from figures attached to tile ridges had gradually become the most representative achievement of ceramic art in Shiwan .

Ceramic art in Shiwan roughly experienced three phases of “modernization”. The first phase occurred after the founding of the People's Republic of China. Organized by the government, academic experts, craftsmen and artists excavated, sorted and carried forward traditional Shiwan figures, and created modern Shiwan figures combining realism and romanticism. The second phase occurred during the reform and opening up, which was promoted by commerce. The trend of thought of modern artists also had a great impact on ceramic art in Shiwan. Marked by “Exhibition of Modern Ceramic Art in Shiwan” held by Mei Wending, Zeng Peng and Zeng Li in Beijing, ceramic art in Shiwan started its modernist reform, and modern figures combining both traditional

and modern styles had been created. The third phase occurred after 2000, along with development of tourism and prosperity of artistic exchanges in Shiwan, the artistic activities in Shiwan by modern ceramists and artists from other areas showed a pattern of differentiation and coexistence of ceramic art in Shiwan. The proposition of “New Figures” marked the change of identity of ceramics in Shiwan. More than traditional Shiwan figures or modern Shiwan figures, ceramics in Shiwan have become more expressive in showing living and emotional states of contemporary people. Therefore, the excellent tradition and characteristic of Shiwan figures being displayed in space have been restored and carried forward. Artists with contemporary and international artistic vision gradually integrate into the context of contemporary culture.

II. About “New Figures”

In the early 1990s, when the discussion on “Back to Reality” was popular in domestic sculpture circle and modernism remained to be improved in China, elite modern art was soon deconstructed by the trend of thought in contemporary art. The criticism of modernism and mannerism from theorists confused a large number of artists who had explored formalism. On the one hand, I indulged in personal and stylish creation with a skeptical and resistant attitude. On the other hand, due to confusion, I had not created a truly meaningful work for nearly a decade, losing spiritual exchanges with society and environment. In 1998, I left Foshan where I had lived for a decade, and established my studio in Shenzhen University. The huge space of the studio and the tranquility of the campus made me feel very lonely. It seemed that I had lost certain roots of culture. In 1999, I went to Hong Kong for artistic exchanges, during which I accidentally bought a book called *Exhibition of Ceramic Art in Shiwan*. The book seemed to evoke all the visual memories of my life in Foshan for a decade. It occurred to me that Shiwan figures are so contemporary, free from modes and constraints of academic system, reflecting ties with times and connections with emotions of contemporary people. I have created a series of exaggerated, bizarre and vivid figures in line with patterns of Shiwan figures, paying more attention to living, emotional and mental states of contemporary people. Sculpture theorist Dr. Sun Zhenhua called the figures created by me using patterns of Shiwan figures to reflect living state of contemporary people “New Figures”. The proposition of “New Figures” is criticism of mannerism and modernism in ceramic circle, hoping that Chin’s art can get rid of Western aesthetic system, as well as an encouragement for artists to pay more attention to local culture and show more living and emotional states of contemporary

people.

“A change of taste can be found from the comparison of his past works with his new works, which surpasses abstract and representational changes. He has created a funny, popular and humorous style, which is an utilization of folk art, an enrichment of sculptural patterns, an introduction of an



artistic style popular with ordinary people, providing a civilian perspective for contemporary sculpture. The creation of “New Figures” is a subversion of people’s accustomed concepts. People who have seen too many monuments are used to defining sculpture as something positive, universal, majestic and solemn. When “New Figures” appearing with their witty and funny images, they impress people with their powerful charms.(Fig. 1)

(Fig. 1)The Wise Man

....first of all, I think they extend the feeling space of sculptures when they are appreciated. People are likely to be solemn, thoughtful, nostalgic and passionate in front of classical sculptures, while astonished, confused, terrified and excited in front of modernist sculptures. However, when we face sculptures like “New Figures”, all the feelings mentioned above dissolve into a smile. Finally people are able to free themselves from the invisible compulsion and oppression.”[3]

The creation of “New Figures” is rebirth of patterns, humor and wisdom of Shiwan figures. In the context of contemporary art, it serves as a model showing utilization of folk art by China’s sculpture circle in contemporary artistic creation, setting a precedent for the new generation of China’s cynicism sculpture. On the one hand, it is conducive to the recovery of free, natural and emotional creative way of ancient artists. On the other hand, the enrichment and development of ceramic creations in Shiwan call for creativity and imagination, and require us to hold positive attitudes towards and care about life like our ancestors.

III. Re-creation of Shiwan Figures and Utilization of Shiwan Figures in Urban Space

Shiwan figure originated from Guangdong opera, was once a subsidiary part of construction industry. With its strong publicity, Shiwan figure was also a reflection of life of people at the time. By specific modern processes, Shiwan figure has realized its transformation from a craft to a form of art reflecting contemporary humanity and contemporary artistic value.

At the end of 1999, I was invited to participate in the “One-thousand-year Firing” activity. Afterwards I returned to Shiwan and soon established my studio in Ancient Nanfeng Kiln. The return, in my heart, was a kind of sublimation of my understanding of ceramic culture in Shiwan. I started thinking about the utilization of traditional ceramic art in the context of China’s contemporary culture and actively put it into practice.



1. Column of Figures (Fig. 2)

At the end of 2000, the main sculpture in commercial and cultural street on Zumiao Road in Foshan was put out to tender. “Column of Figures” designed by me was accepted unanimously in the assessment of bidding. “Column of Figures” is a facsimile of Shiwan figures attached to tile ridges using unglazed firing method. It is the first time for Ancient Nanfeng Kiln to produce an 8-meter-high large-size work with firewood as its fuel. The meaning of “Column of

Figures” lies in:

- 1) It is the first time for Foshan to have an urban sculpture in line with its regional cultural patterns.
- 2) As the utilization of ceramic art in urban space in Foshan, the publicity of ceramic art has been restored.
- 3) A precedent for producing large-size public art has been set by Ancient Nanfeng Kiln with a 500-year history. Therefore, the connection between traditional and contemporary cultural life has been established.

2. “Wall of Figures” and “Creative Foshan” (Fig. 3)



“Wall of Figures” is a mural created by me for Guangdong Shiwan Ceramics Museum. In 2003, the museum required me to reflect the history of ceramic production in Shiwan through the work. The deep influence of the trend of thought in post-modern art and past years of ceramic creations contribute to my deeper understanding of the nature of clay, and my reproduction and utilization of Shiwan figures from different periods. By integration of bricks in a modern way, a strong artistic effect has been achieved, and a new form of Shiwan ceramic art combining both traditional and modern styles has been created. As ceramic products consumed by people, Shiwan figures are likely to be excessive in their production and sales, thus forming a cultural market incongruous with contemporary life. In “Wall of Figures”, by utilization of specific printing method of ceramic art, its inherent aesthetic form has been abandoned, by integration of surplus and abandoned figures, it is endowed with classical meaning. It has become a work of contemporary aesthetic value and meaning. Such process is actually an improvement and a re-creation of Shiwan figures. “New Figures Series” is an enhancement of style and spiritual value of Shiwan figures, while “Wall of Figures” and “Brick of Figures” are contemporary artistic creations entirely in line with post-modern art.

“Brick of Figures” is not merely an utilization but a re-creation of a new image. It bonds classical and popular ceramic figures of different generations at home and abroad together, creating a new

visual material. “Creative Foshan” is actually an improvement of “Wall of Figures”.



3. The Meaning of the Door of Asian Art (Fig. 4)

The “Door of Asian Art”, jointly created by Chen Shushu and me, is the largest outdoor ceramic work in China or even the world. It is 18 meters high, integrating three-dimensional shape of traditional Chinese character “Door” and plane composition of diagram of the universe. The door is inlaid with important cultural symbols and sculptures from Asian countries.

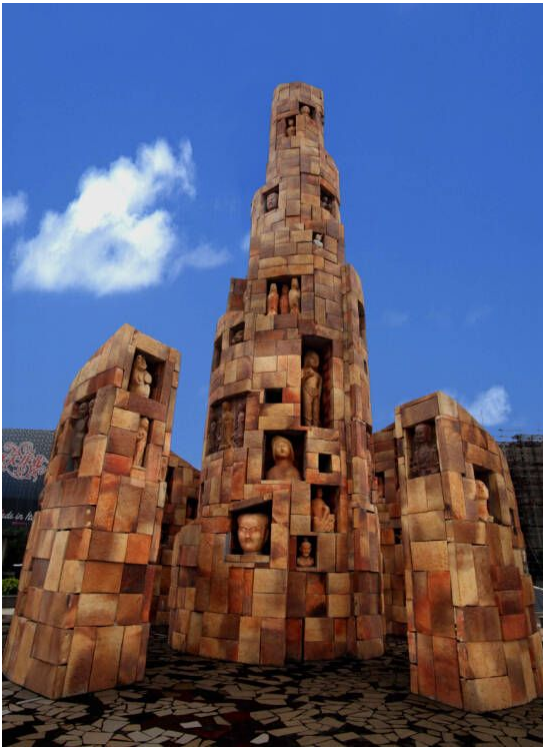
1) The “Door of Asian Art”, with a broad mass foundation, is an urban sculpture selected by all the citizens in Foshan for the first time. Along with the propagation of the Seventh Asian Art Festival and the ribbon-cutting ceremony participated by ministers of culture from twenty seven Asian countries, it has become a landmark of urban culture in Foshan, a collective memory of people in the city. Living in Asian art becomes a sign of success and good taste for people in Foshan .

2) It is an important event in the history of ceramic production in Shiwan and China’s public art circle, making the general public, politicians and officials reach a consensus that ceramic culture is a card of Foshan, and utilization of ceramic art in space is the key to its development.

3) It has enhanced the popularity of Ancient Nanfeng Kiln.

4. Ceramic Cultural Square

(Fig. 5)Light of China



Ceramic Cultural Square was built by ceramic headquarters with an aim to enhance its cultural core. It consists of the main sculpture “Light of China” (Fig. 5) (19 meters high) and many other groups of large ceramic sculptures such as “Wall of Pottery Figurines from the Han Dynasty”, “Wall of Pottery Figurines from the Qin Dynasty”, “Wall of Pottery Figurines from the Tang Dynasty”(Fig. 6) , “Sanitary Industry & Waterscape Wall”. By purchase, reproduction and integration of ceramic sculptures of different generations, I created a work providing audience with completely new visual experience, which is a new

release of contemporary humanity, and a full use of Shiwan clay, fire and characteristics of glaze. “Ready-mades” have become my sole creative components. No matter they are traditional sculptures or industrial ceramic products, all have been endowed with my visual experience, spirit and will. Construction and cultivation of a new cultural system and cultural value are the beginnings of construction of contemporary culture. Ceramic Cultural Square, in a sense, is a stage showing the emerging ceramic culture and creations in Foshan, an embodiment of contemporary ceramic creations in public space, and a successful practice reflecting contemporary humanity and contemporary artistic value.

(Fig. 6)Wall of Pottery Figurines from the Tang Dynasty



IV. Utilization of Re-creation of Industrial Ceramic Products in Public Space

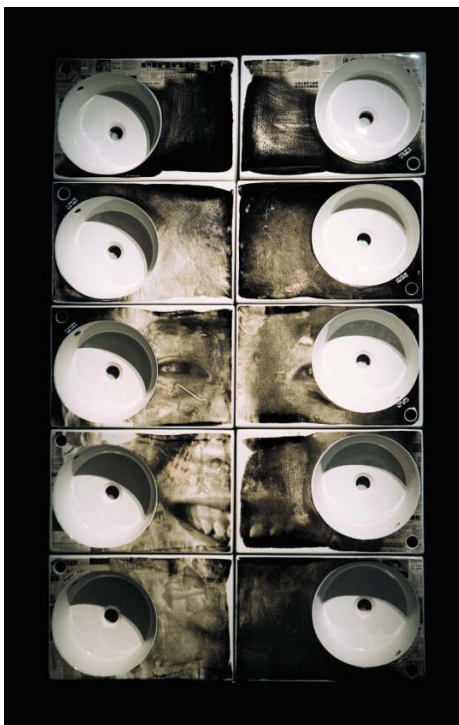
The significance of creation of industrial ceramic products is different from that of re-creation of Shiwan figures. The inexhaustible source of contemporary artistic creation is the powerful ceramic industry.

The art camp jointly organized by Gimhae Art Gallery of Korea and me in 2006

“Blue-and-White Toilet” is created by me with industrial ceramic ready-mades for the first time.

(Fig. 7)

Blue-and-White Toilet



"June 1st & Face" is created by me with a sink and digital screen printing technology according to a picture downloaded from network. (Fig. 8)

(Fig. 8) Face

“Tile & Waterfall”(Fig. 9)



“Vat & Waterfall” is a waterscape wall created by me with abandoned vats in Ancient Nanfeng Kiln.

(Fig. 10)



“Toilet & Waterfall”, established in Ancient Nanfeng Kiln, is a waterscape wall created by me with sanitary ware and bath products. (Fig. 11)



Tradition is a kind of historical inertia on the one hand, but a necessary condition for innovation on the other hand. Along with the transformation from regional traditional culture to contemporary culture, there are not only warmth and revivals, but also destruction and reconstruction. In fact, when we reexamine regional culture and traditional culture with contemporary vision, we will find that treasures once so dismal are shining brightly again. We are able to stimulate regional culture different from that of other regions, and create contemporary culture only belonging to specific region. Despite its insurmountable limitations, locality has its merit: it can preserve tradition and context of creation for us. In a sense, tradition is the basis of and nutrient for creation. To carry forward tradition is the goal of its reform. Only re-creation of tradition can present a cultural creation of contemporary value.

In a world, resource of regional culture is the basis and material of the realization of contemporary cultural and artistic value. This kind of material not only has its material characteristics, but also embodies the spiritual value inherent in regional culture. For example, the popularity of Shiwan figures among poor people leads us to consider the living state of contemporary people. The market orientation of ceramic industry in Shiwan contributes to its great development. Locality is not only a territorial concept, but also an embodiment of cultural concepts and cultural value shared within a region. Contemporaneity is not only a temporal concept, but also an orientation, a discovery, and construction of spiritual value. Similarly, the re-creation of Shiwan figures is not only a re-creation of regional culture, but also a product infused with spirit of times. Therefore, regional culture is endowed with charms and spiritual value, embodying the old saying that “People are shaped by the land around them”.