

# Exotic Dreams and Poetic Misunderstanding

By Lin Wang



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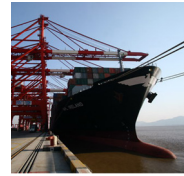
## Contents:



### Section One:

#### Exotic dreams and poetic misunderstanding

1. My Personal Experience of 'Exotic dreams' and 'Poetic misunderstanding'
2. World of Metaphors and Reconsideration of History
3. Cultural Diffusion - 'Poetic Misunderstanding' as Embodied in Chinese Export Porcelain
4. Ink Flowing Beneath the Skin
  - Sailor and Sailor's Tattoo
  - Symbolism of Sailor's Tattoo
  - Tales From the Harbor



### Section Two:

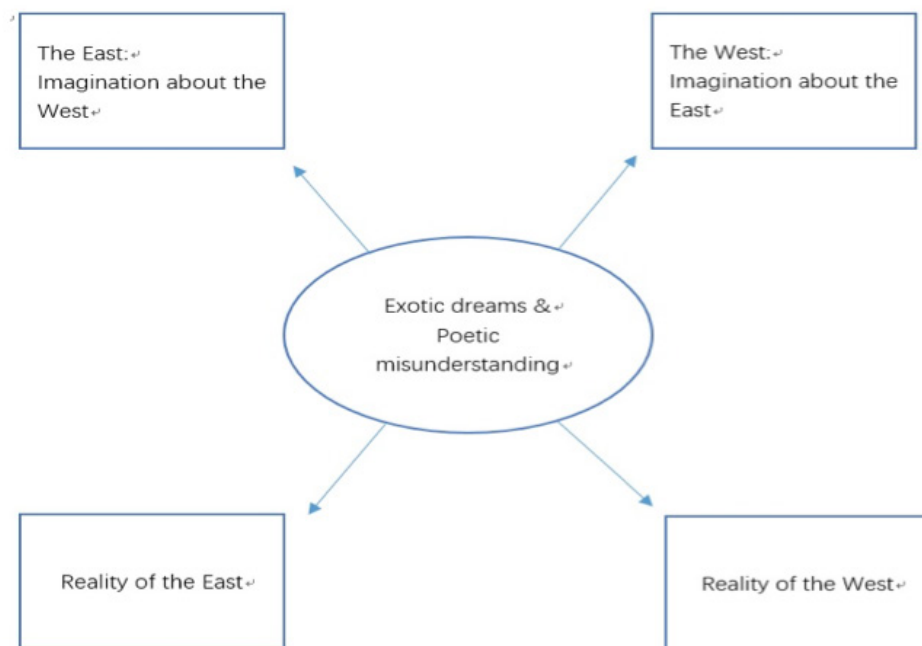
#### Made in china and shipping to Europe

1. History Reconstructed in the Form of the Contemporary
  - Exotic Dream and Poetic Misunderstanding Project Research And Practice Records in Jingdezhen China
2. Ink Flowing Beneath the Glaze
3. Summary
4. Appendix
5. Biography

# Exotic Dreams and Poetic Misunderstanding

## 1. My Personal Experience and Understanding of 'Exotic dreams' and 'Poetic misunderstanding'

Through my upbringing in China my grandparents read Scandinavian mythology to me. Thus I became besotted with western fairy tales about the sea. As a child in China, I considered Europe to be an exotic world partly due to the political dichotomy that separated the West from the East. It was during that time my 'exotic dreams' and 'poetic misunderstanding' of the West fermented and grew. I formulated the concept of 'poetic misunderstanding' as a result of attempting to explore the theme of 'imagination' and the cultural curiosity the West and the East had about each other. Herein, the histories of the West and the East as embodied in the production, export and interpretation of porcelain are treated as complex cultural-cognitive processes intertwined with my own subjective place-to-place experiences. Practically,



I wish to elucidate these histories through contemporary art. My project seeks to illuminate and transform the concepts of 'exotic dreaming' and 'poetic misunderstanding' through metaphoric imageries of sailors' tattoos of the West, and blue and white paintings on porcelain of the East. The project also depicts the moment when poetic misunderstanding from both West and East cross over each other simultaneously and cultural exchanges occur – often at a subliminal level.

## 2. World of Metaphors and Reconsideration of History

Imagery of the ocean embodies idealisation of the unknown. People relate to the ocean in various ways. The colour blue, which is alluding to the ocean, is prevailing in both tattoos and Chinese porcelain. Europe encountered China through porcelain. However, elements of ideology and symbolism associated with the East were not easily accessible through the familiar cobalt blue pigments and hand-painted imagery. As the porcelain market grew in Europe from the 16th century onwards, the production and exportation of porcelain facilitated a form of cultural transaction between China and Europe.

By the beginning of the 17th century the export of Chinese porcelain to Europe reached its peak. The Portuguese who had established their base in Macau, were the first to bring Chinese porcelain out of China through India through the Sea Silk Road, parts of East Africa and finally to Lisbon where products were assembled and shipped northwards to the rest of Europe (Carswell 2000: pp.126). The late 17th century was characterised by an increased level of cultural communication on a global scale. On these grounds, the commodification of stories of the Orient in addition to a new range of popular media that romanticised the Far East invoked general interest in exotic items such as Chinese tableware. Thus the Chinese export porcelain as a connexion with the exotic offered Europe 'a bite' of the exotic world (Carlino et al., 2012: pp.7).

During the Ming and Qing dynasties (17th century onwards) Jingdezhen porcelain was the primary commodity that was traded to Europe. European

importers would bring European made sketches or models of tableware forms over the Atlantic, around the Cape of Good Hope and across South-east Asia to Guangdong harbour and then further on to Jingdezhen, where they requested Chinese artisans to replicate the designs in porcelain and decorate the final products with Chinese patterns. Although Chinese artisans did not have any knowledge of the western table culture that this tableware was a product of, for instance not knowing how a sauceboat functioned, they took up the challenges to create moulds and to paint patterns based upon these models. This cultural exchange based on the cultural appropriation of physical models and selected Chinese patterns took place in such a way that the exported items embodied the Europeans' interpretation of China's 'exoticness' rather than cultural and social insight at an emic level.

It is from this interchange of cultural fragments I derive the concept of 'poetic misunderstanding'. In my point of view, the artist actively engages in the social life of the place he lives in. During my master's studies I kept considering the relations between myself and immediate society and culture, in addition to how an artist should come to terms with these relations. I also thought about how I experienced the differences and similarities of both cultures and how these can be bridged through my art practice.

### 3. Cultural Diffusion - 'Poetic Misunderstanding' as Embodied in Chinese Export Porcelain

On a macro level, it is also important to take into consideration the cultural continuity of Chinese export porcelain decorated by cross-cultural motifs that were selected by the western importers themselves. These inputs had significant effects on the entire aesthetics tradition of China as ceramicists of Jingdezhen strived to meet the Europeans' demands for porcelain decorated with family coats of arms, battle scenes and even erotic elements.

During the first half of the 18th century, these motifs that came primarily on porcelain but also fans and textiles that were transported from Guangzhou offered the Europeans a distorted impression of Oriental life and soci-

ety. In the works of artisans at Jingdezhen, a gradual transition from the use of traditional motifs to the depiction of people and places they had never seen such as those in biblical scenes and European paintings can be traced. Elements of eroticism were also usual.



Figure 1.2.3. (Wirgin 1998:pp.187,115,189)

Since the Medieval Times, European artists have striven to bring forth the illusion of depth and distance in paintings, whereas Chinese paintings, similar to the sailors' tattoos, had a legacy of emphasising symbolism instead. In the Chinese tradition, the bat, the deer and the peach are often associated with happiness, with success in scholarly achievements and with immortality and longevity. Another very popular motif is the pomegranate, which indicates fertility. While illustrations of typical cultural landscapes of China are common on Chinese porcelain, which is intricately associated with the Taoist ideal of living in idyllic seclusion, the sense of perspective was unfamiliar to the Chinese painter. Therefore, it is common to find landscape sceneries being drawn in the foreground rather than being put into a dimensional perspective in accordance with the European tradition.





Figure 1.(Wirgin 1998:pp.283) Figure 2.(Paul 2015:pp.73)

Moreover, Chinese artisans were not accustomed to depicting European faces. As a result, some of the European figures found on export porcelain are partially drawn with oriental characteristics. It is also common to find spelling errors in the Latin inscriptions since English was a completely foreign language to most Chinese artisans.



On the other side of the world, i.e. Dutch potters, blinded by their habitual understanding of perspective, assumed that pagodas and men were of the same size from looking at images on porcelain. Such a misunderstanding might have inspired them to produce the extravagant, oversized tulip holders as shown below.

Figure. Pagoda-formed tulip holders Gemeentemuseum Den, Dutch

These hybrid objects even stimulated thinkers to imagine China as a spectacularly well-ruled and well-structured empire. However, in the absence of anything else, scenes of rustic activities amid riverside pagodas were, for those with imagination, an invitation to dream. All in all, the charm of this cultural appropriation through trade is that it presents a picture of Asia that nothing else was capable of presenting. Notice that there were few realistic and holistic representations of what China was really like at that time and definitely no photographic records. This results in a filtered viewpoint...news now...contemporalise..

Under this premise, export porcelain carried incomprehensible cultural messages that were completely unfamiliar to the European purchaser clientele. Europeans were buying/commissioning into the idealised dream – not the everyday reality

#### 4. Ink Flowing Beneath the Skin

##### Sailor and Sailor' Tattoo

*"Sailors' tattoos bear witness to a belonging to a sailor's life, binding together and expressing who they were at home and abroad. Therefore, these are stories of seamen not just tales about the world at large, they are also tales about their (the sailor's) meeting with Norway at that time when the only people wearing tattoos were them."*

--Norwegian Sailors'Tattoos Magikon forlag, 2013

Those of us who have not been to sea often picture sailors as having a special knowledge of and closeness to the sea, with the poetic and romantic

overtones this carries. In my view, the sailors' tattoos are a medium through which my own imagination of Scandinavian maritime life is reflected. For the sailors, I regard their tattoos as signs mirroring their valiant, rigorous and yet romantic lives, giving them a sense of belonging and telling their stories.

Back to the age when overseas trading was not yet industrialised through modern means, seafaring professions were highly demanding both physically and mentally. For the sailors who frequently left their homeland for unknown lands, tattoos served as a means of identity construction and to convey their sense of belonging. Through generations, the sailors' tattoos evolved into an archive of their collective cultural memory recording their journeys around the world and their exotic experiences.

### Symbolism of Sailor's Tattoo

The tattoos of the sailors had dynamic connotations, however, all reflect the fundamental human pursuits and emotions such as life, love and belonging. What images could be used as tattoo motifs were also restricted by professional rules as well as cultural dogma. As time went by, many of these rules were abrogated.



*Nautical star:* To navigate and always find the way home.



*Full rigged ship:* For sailing around Cape Horn usually placed on the chest.



*Dagger and rose:* For willingness to fight and the courage to kill something fragile and beautiful.



*Mermaid:* Erotic fantasy. The only kind of women the sailor could dream of meeting at sea.



*Sailor's grave:* A sinking ship, often with a cross/flag/life buoy. Means want to protect against death at sea.



*Butterfly:* A symbol for beauty and freedom.



*Swallow:* For having sailed more than 5000 nautical miles. The swallow will always find its way home.



*Erotic women:* To always be in company of women.

(Norwegian Sailors' Tattoos Magikon forlag, 2013)

## Tales from the Harbour

Bergen is a harbour city with a rich and profound maritime culture, which has been an integral part of the lives of the city's inhabitants, cultivating their character and shaping their lifestyle. In addition to the profession of the sailor himself, the lives of his immediate family also manifest an important anthropological icon, which is perceived as a part of the cultural memory of the harbour's social sphere.

Recorded stories about sailors' families in the vicinity of the Bergen harbour:

During my research tutorials, a phenomenon I noticed and recorded was that most of my Nordic tutors intentionally began to tell stories about their own family members who were or still are sailors.

### Tutor C's story:

*Tutor C told me that all the men except him in his family had been sailors. His exotic dreams were derived from and inspired by one of his sailor uncles, who used to bring him different souvenirs from exotic lands such as magazines from Shanghai, a wooden box decorated with Chinese figures or a Japanese tin toy car. As a little boy, these items became the source of his fascination in the other side of the world. I was also told that he had no knowledge of his grandfather who was a foreign sailor. His grandfather visited Stavanger where he met C's grandmother who gave birth to C's father before sailing away. Thus C's grandfather is a missing link in the family history. Before her death, C's grandmother told his aunt the name of his grandfather, which, however, turned out to be a name his grandmother made up.*

### Tutor E's story:

*E's grandfather was a sailor who had a tattoo of a ballerina on the upper half of his arm. E once asked him why it was a ballerina and why specifically between the armpit and elbow, to which he answered, "so that I can always hug a lady when I sleep."*

### Tutor C's story:

*C had four uncles who were sailors and all of them died of cancer caused by heavy smoking during their journeys.*

### Tutor A's story:

*We were talking about my project when I casually asked A whether she had any relatives who were sailors. I realised a slight change in her facial expression and understood that she was considering whether she wanted to talk about it or not. After a short pause, she said, "my father was a sailor and I have never met him. He sailed away to the Far East when my mother was pregnant with me. He sailed away and never returned." I sympathised with her as I knew that it was difficult for her to talk about these things, yet I highly appreciated her openness.*

### Tutor L's story:

*Being from Denmark, L does not have a typically Germanic or Scandinavian face. "My father was a sailor", she said, "he sailed to The Philippines where he met my mother and got married. Since then, they had been living in Copenhagen until now. Yes, I'm mixed, a sailor's daughter."*

Due to my attention, my tutors' unconsciously became my interviewees during the conversation. In a tacit manner, they spoke about their local lives with reference to the topics of sailing and the sailors' tattoos. As I see it, those who in one way or the other have connections with the sailors are indirect witnesses of the implications of the sailors' culture. 'Exotic dreams' of the unknown land is something that my interviewees and I have in common. The reality from which these romanticised imaginations are derived from can, nevertheless, be quite controversial.

## Section Two:

### Made in China and Shipped to Europe

#### 1. History Reconstructed in the Form of Contemporary Art

In November 2015, I approached Jingdezhen, the homeland of Chinese export porcelain. As a Chinese person living in Europe, my identity bridges both cultural worlds. In the same way as the sailors who once came to China to import porcelain, I arrived with my sketches and concepts and had various artisans construct models of prototypes that were painted and fired—a set of huge “Porcelain dinner ware”.

After making, the final products were shipped to Europe. Installation: set on a huge dinner table, which is the most common place for discussion and is also a platform for the exchange of understandings. This also removes the works from everyday life and places them into a reflective space, as an installation in museum/gallery context.



*“Exotic Dream and Poetic Misunderstanding” project  
Research and Practice Records  
in Jingdezhen China*

To record and document the process of and my experiences in working with local artisans is an indelible component of my project.



## 2. Ink Flowing Beneath the Glaze

### Exotic Dream and Poetic Misunderstanding” Project Research And Practice Records in Jingdezhen China

I chose the typical export porcelain from the Ming and Qing Dynasties lasting from the 16th to the 18th century to be the prototypes of my works.

Employing impossible scale the conspicuously enlarged porcelain ware’s embody the ‘magical, exotic’. In a similar fashion, the stories the interviewees told about their relatives (uncles, grandfathers etc.) were often partly fictitious fused with exaggerations.

Like their historical prototypes, the final products went through a complex and rigorous process before arriving Europe, their final destination. Under the western cultural context, the works are ascribed and loaded with conceptual artistic connotations in addition to their functional nature.



12.11.2015 Jingdezhen China

### Tattoo on the Porcelain

I used a tattoo gun to inscribe the collected tattoos on the green production ware (un-fired). Blue symbolises the ocean. Most of the depictions of larger boats were tattooed on the chests or backs of the sailors. The boats sailing towards the window illustrates a journey towards the unknown.

The tattoos embody the wish of the sailors to preserve the images on their flesh. Such a phenomenon alludes to the dichotomy of human vs. nature, where human beings appear to be vulnerable and fragile before the open oceans. However, the concept of fragility is relative when it comes to porcelain. If not damaged intentionally, porcelain is resistant to corrosion for thousands of years, which resonates with the old Chinese proverb: Dynasties flourish and fall, but porcelain endures. With this in mind, can we preserve the dreams and desires that will eventually fade away with our flesh in the enduring porcelain?





*18.11.2015 Jingdezhen. China*

When making the plates I replaced some of the traditional patterns with non-Chinese elements such as the dragon, which is a common motif for western sailors' tattoos. The artisans showed their curiosity about these new images by asking me why the dragon has two tongues and why its body resembles that of a snake. This appeared to be an unserious way of depicting the dragon, which in the Chinese tradition is a symbol of Imperial power. On the other hand, when drawing the traditional Chinese patterns, the artisans were eager to explain to me the different cultural meanings that were associated with the drawings.

To have their products conform to the clients requirements as much as possible has been the ultimate goal of the Jingdezhen artisans for several centuries. Therefore, although not being able to comprehend the cultural politics behind western motifs, the artisans could still replicate the images in pure technical terms. This institutionalised production of export porcelain gradually became a local tradition of Jingdezhen, which still continues today. Arguably, these cultural images ascribed with colonial connotations have been shaping the local social and cultural landscapes on a structural level.





16.12.2015 Jingdezhen. China

### Miss Hong Kong (my work)

Traditional Chinese painting has a legacy of depicting the female as an obedient and subordinate figure with downturned eyes & drooping eyebrows. On one of my pieces, the artisan responded to the size of the male figure 'come on, he shouldn't be that small, the women are too big...' which in contrast to the females appears significantly smaller; he was responding to an unconventional set of gender politics in Chinese painting. However, he concluded his remarks by acknowledging that the modern Chinese female is no longer subordinate to the male.

The European importers continuously copied the Chinese characters of Hong Kong as '香港', which is an approximated form. Although correctly written as '香港', the loss was the '彡' component was not noticed by the Europeans. The painter also commented on the incomplete character several times. In comparison, 'TURE UNTIL DEATH' is merely an unknown symbol and not a misspelled phrase to those who are unfamiliar with the English language and western culture. It may thus be inferred that those who produced the export porcelain also suffered similar cultural confusions.







26.12.2015 Jingdezhen. China

### "Forget Me Not"

Before coming to Europe, I often noticed the peddlers who sold imperfect export porcelain on the streets also traded sauceboats. However, the sauceboats were almost never bought due to the absence of this utensil in the Chinese food culture. Even I assumed that the sauceboats were used for drinking milk. Arguably, those who produced these export goods hundreds of years ago had no knowledge concerning the sauceboats except for them being containers of liquids. Most of these were decorated with depictions of the 'willow tree and pavilion landscape'.

The mermaid is a common motif in tattoos embodying both romantic and erotic sentiments. The mermaid is the only female figure the sailors can imagine to encounter on the seas.

The rowing lady image on the bowl is also associated obliquely with eroticism in traditional Chinese painting. At the performance dinner, the mermaid shaped sauce bowl is deprived of its original function and used as a wine container from which the sailors will drink conforming to my earlier prejudices.

Inspiration from the lyrics of Tom Waits *On the Other Side of the World*:  
...In the spring the weeds will show that he brought back the only rose, and he gave it to his girl on the other side of the world. And I drink champagne from your thin blue veins...

An exclusive characteristic of the sailors' occupation is physical and emotional instability, in other words, the identity crisis they undergo after meeting different worlds. Their homeland, which once used to be familiar, they might seem to be unacquainted with, after being absent for a longer period.

The tattoo expression 'FORGET ME NOT' reflects the sailors' longing and the sentiments they might have had towards the new places where they came and left.



## Summary

I activate artistic and poetic universality through porcelain and sailors' tattoos in the form of contemporary art. Herein, the porcelain ware and sailors' tattoos serve as media that facilitate cultural exchange between the two cultures that I have experienced. Ultimately, I argue that the universality of art exists regardless of cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences.

In contrast to the Europeans' habit of meeting in coffee bars or splitting the bill when eating outside, inviting people for dinner is almost the most common way of socialising in my cultural framework. My project will be presented in a gallery/museum context in the form of a performance dinner. Retired sailors and many of their family members will be invited. Through the exhibition, I look forward to discovering new perspectives on related topics that go beyond the horizons of my own cultural epistemology.



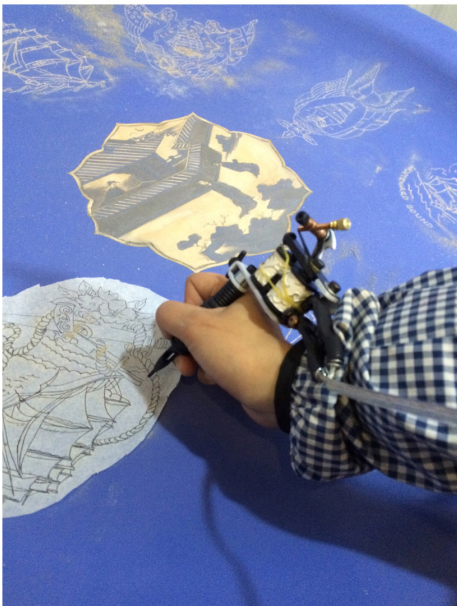
## Appendix

- I. Sketching and installing the dinner table.





2. Prior to firing, I used a tattoo gun to inscribe the sailors' tattoos onto the greenware (unfired).





3. Details: Inside pattern of the octagon window is the Romance of the West Chamber is a famous Chinese drama written by the playwright Wang Shifu during the Yuan Dynasty. The story is set during the Tang Dynasty and tells the story of a young couple consummating their love without parental approval. Patterns outside the octagon window are the swallows, the nautical star, the full rigged ship and the dagger and rose. (sailors' tattoos patterns)





4. Upper left: the original Chinese export plate. Qing Dynasty. Photo taken from exhibition in Jingdezhen, October 2015. Below are two of the plates used in my project, named 'Large Tattoo Plate 1' and 'Large Tattoo Plate 2'. Each has a diameter of 80cm.





5. Photographic records of my collaboration with Jingdezhen artisans. Blue and white porcelain artisan Mr. Bao. Project assistant Luo Jiali and owner of a porcelain factory Jiang Xin preparing greenware prior to firing. Expert of scanning lines for blue and white porcelain Miss. Ouyang Shufang.





Left: one of my works in the project The New Landscape  
Prototype for reference: large dish in Blue and White with Famille  
Rose decorated panels from the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty  
(1750 CE)  
Right: Prototype for reference: Export porcelain from the collection of  
the City Museum of Gothenburg & local artisan working in process .





6. First upper left image: Prototype for reference Export porcelain from the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty (1723-1735 CE). Diameter: 22cm.

The image inside of the reference plate is: Kunlun Nu (The Kunlun Slave) Kunlun Nu is a 'wuxia romance' written by Pei Xing during the Tang Dynasty. The protagonist is a Negrito slave who uses his supernatural powers to save his master's lover from the harem of a court official.

Second upper right image: one of the works in my project 'Miss Hong Kong' with sailors' tattoos replacing the traditional motifs. Diameter 70cm. Produced in Jingdezhen, January 2015.

Lower: details of my work 'Miss Hong Kong'





7. Making process of 'Miss Hong Kong'

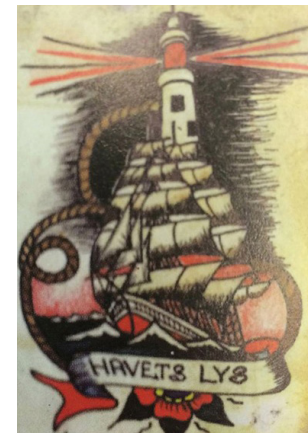
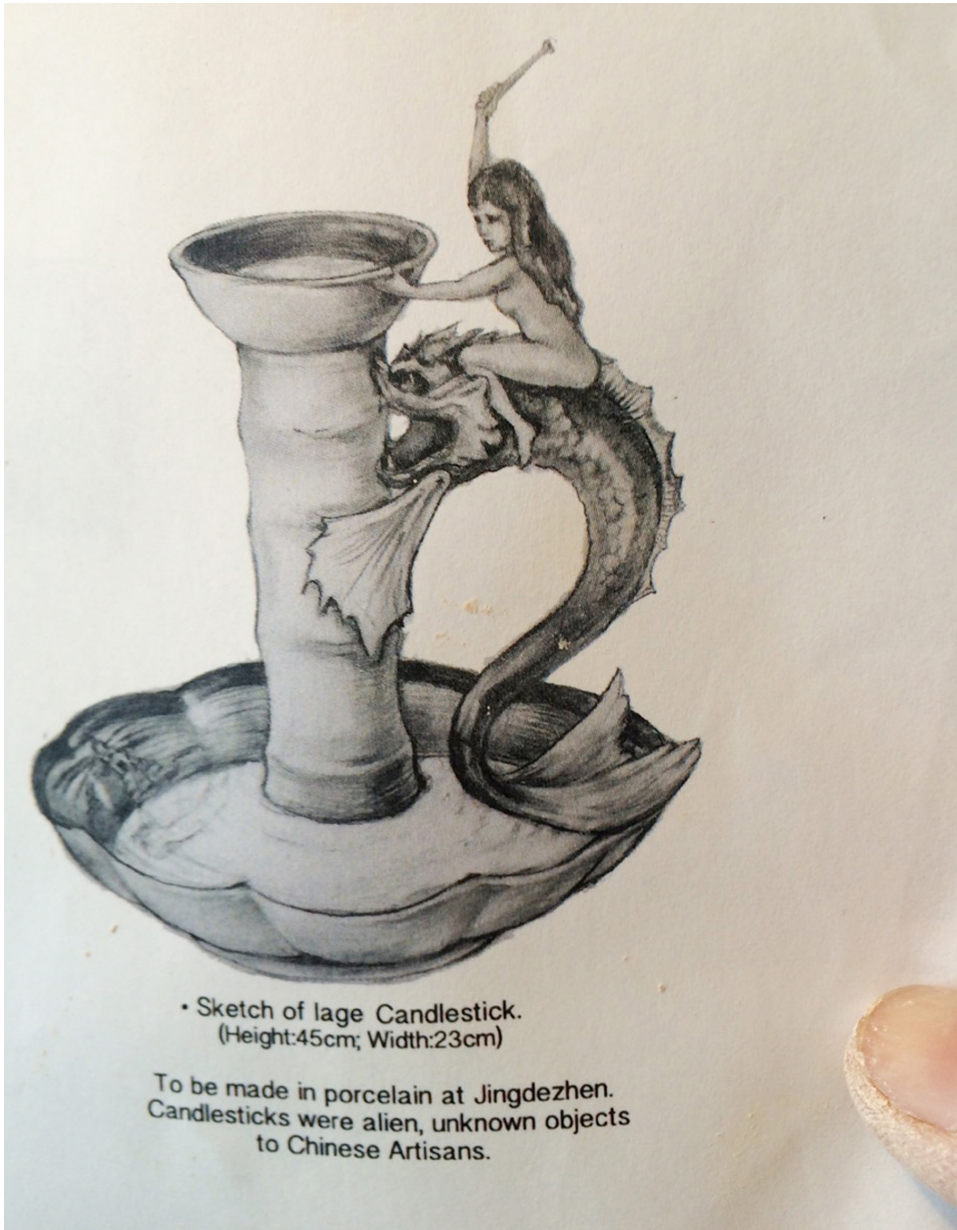




8. Making process of 'The Exotic Landscape'



9. Left: my sketch of candlesticks  
 Upper right: prototype of export candlestick. Collection of the City Museum of Gothenburg Blue and White Candlesticks from the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty (1780 CE). Md 5cm, H 12cm, dish d 10cm (Coll.: AW)  
 Lower right: collection of sailors' tattoos







10. Left: in collaboration with different artisans at Jingdezhen, prototyping, casting, painting, readying for glazing and firing in kiln.  
Right: my work 'HRVETS LYS'





II. Details of 'HRVETS LYS'



12. From upper left: 1. Tattoo of 'Forget Me Not'. 2. Prototypes of export porcelain for reference.  
Down left: Patterns on the sauceboat are taken from typical decorations on export porcelain (Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty, 1750 CE)





13. Sauceboat and 'FORGET ME NOT' in collaboration with local artisans



14. Details of 'FORGET ME NOT'





15. One of my works in the project 'Salt Cellar'. Diameter 20cm.  
Prototype of saltcellar. Saltcellars were unknown to the Chinese artisans. (working in process)





16. Assistant Luo Jiali packing the final products and preparing to ship to Europe.





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