

# Theatricality and Trans-Media Motifs in Early Qing Narrative Porcelain

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## Introduction

The Dresden State Art Collections (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, SKD) preserve an abundance of Chinese ceramics produced in Jingdezhen, Dehua and Yixing in the Transitional and Kangxi periods (1620-1722), during which the female figure was one of the major decorative motifs. This paper emerges from an investigation of female representation on porcelain in the Dresden collections, with particular emphasis on a dancer motif originating in paintings by Qiu Ying 仇英 (1494?-1552). Using case studies of trans-media variations of this subject on handscrolls, woodblock prints and porcelain, I argue in this paper for theatricality as a critical concept for defining “narrative porcelain” in the early Qing dynasty (1644-1735).

## Two prototypes of the dancer motif

Four basic visual elements define the female dancer motif: (1) a dancing figure; (2) a space in which she dances (in most cases in a Chinese or chinoiserie-style building); (3) the representation of musicians and musical instruments; and, (4) in many cases, a carpet on which the dancer performs. The origin of the dancer motif maybe traced back, at least to the mid-Ming dynasty when Qiu Ying painted *The Spring Morning in the Han Palace* 漢宮春曉圖 for his patron Xiang Yuanbian 項元汴 (1525-1590), and *A Hundred Beauties* 百美图 (figs. 2.1 and 2.2), both in the collection of the National Palace Museum in Taipei. In the two handscrolls, Qiu Ying created two prototypes of the dancer motif; one prototype of two females dancing together and the other of one female performing on a carpet. The two compositions can be found depicted in diverse media, such as woodblock prints, porcelain and lacquer. A keen observer will soon find that the second prototype is actually a component of the first one.

In another painting album by Qiu Ying, which was later mounted as a handscroll, a female dancer of the second prototype was painted in an outdoor setting. According to the title of this album, *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute* 胡笳十八拍, as well as the inscriptions on the specific leaf (the fourth leaf), the dancing girl can be identified as a non-Han figure. In a letter written to the supervising Jesuit missionary in China and India on September 1, 1712, the French Jesuit, François Xavier d'Entrecolles (1664-1741), mentioned that women of Han and Tartar (Manchu) ethnic groups were depicted on porcelain.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Du Hede, ed., 杜赫德编, 耶稣会士中国书简集: 中国回忆录(第二卷) [Correspondence of Jesuit Missionaries in China: China Memoir. vol. 2], trans. Zheng Dedi, Zhu Jing et al., 郑德弟, 朱静等译, (Zhengzhou: Elephant Press, 2001), 100. This is a Chinese translation of Pierre Du Hede ed., *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères: Mémoires de la Chine* (Paris: J. G. Merigot, 1781).

It is therefore possible to connect the literature and painted figure with existing porcelain bearing the image of Tartar (Manchu) dancers. However, due to the lack of related material evidence in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden collection, the dancer motif in this paper will be limited to the two prototypes of Han females.

The two dancers in the first prototype are the Zhao sisters. The story of these sisters is one with political implications from the Cheng Emperor's reign (33-7 BCE) in the Han dynasty. The elder Zhao sister was called Feiyan 飛燕 (literally a flying swallow) due to her superior dancing skills. She was favored by the Cheng Emperor, which led to the entitlement of Jieyu 婕妤 to her and her younger sister, Zhao Hede. In 16 BCE, Zhao Feiyan was made empress, and Zhao Hede was entitled Zhaoyi 昭儀. Zhao Hede proceeded to kill the son of the Cheng Emperor, which led to his nephew becoming the legitimized heir to the throne. When the Cheng Emperor died in 7 BCE, the empress dowager and some powerful officials believed the Zhao sisters should be the ones to blame. Zhao Hede committed suicide shortly after the death of the emperor, and so did Zhao Feiyan several years later.<sup>2</sup> From that point on, scholar-officials in China used this story to counsel the monarch to keep a distance from female charms, and images of this narrative continued to be used for various purposes. In the official review of Emperor Cheng's life, it is mentioned that the emperor was licentious and libertine, which led to the end of the Western Han (202 BCE-8CE).<sup>3</sup> Occasionally, a painting of this theme was even ordered by the emperor, as a means of demonstrating awareness of lessons from former dynasties. In the pictorial realm, later painters such as You Qiu 尤求, Leng Mei 冷枚 and Ding Guanpeng 丁觀鵬, among others, repeated this theme and even followed closely the style of Qiu Ying.

## Changing identities and trans-media variations

Beginning in the Wanli period (1573-1620) of the Ming dynasty, the dancer motif was most often selected from many pictorial motifs contained in the *Spring Morning in the Han Palace*. This subject, with slightly different elements as featured components, was appropriated in various media, such as woodblock print, porcelain and lacquer. The constituting motifs may vary but in most cases the four above-mentioned features remain, which leads to the question of the standard for selection. From the perspective of iconography, how were the visual elements that comprised the dancer motif chosen?

It is difficult to trace who made the decisions about selecting certain elements, but the results of the selection process are clear. An examination of objects with the dancer motif contributes to answering this question. Examining existing woodblock prints reveals that the dancer figure appears in at least six different narratives. In 1601, the Jizhizhai 繼志齋 workshop in Nanjing manufactured an illustrated volume of *The Re-collated Story of Hongfu* 重校紅拂記, written by Zhang Fengyi 張鳳翼 (1527-1613). In this story, Zhang Chuchen 張出塵, a maid in the villa of the prime chancellor during the Sui dynasty (581-618), dances on a carpet while the master hosts an outdoor, formal dinner with guests. Tu Long 屠隆 (1543-1605), a playwright and renowned connoisseur of his time, published a drama titled *The Story of the Night-blooming Flower* 新刻全像曇花記 (hereafter *Tanhua ji*), with woodblock illustrations carved by the Jizhizhai workshop. By 1619, Wang Tingne 汪廷訥 (1573-1619), a former salt merchant, playwright and publisher, finished a drama titled *The Story of the Peach* 環翠堂新編投桃記 (hereafter *Toutao ji*) printed by his Huancuitang 環翠堂 workshop. These three woodblock prints mentioned above all feature a young girl dancing on a carpet, each with slightly different gestures of the arms and

<sup>2</sup> Ban Gu 班固, 漢書 [The History of the Former Han Dynasty] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1962), 301-331; 3988-3999.

<sup>3</sup> Ban Gu, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, 330.

legs. The surrounding setting indicates that the location is a scholar's garden, decorated with a handrail, garden plants (osmanthus or banana tree), and Taihu rocks 湖石. In the *Tanhua ji*, the girl dances with her back to the reader, as a mirrored image of the prototypes. The cultural identities of the dancers vary and body gestures differ, yet the basic elements remain the same as prototypes.

In the late Wanli period, the pictorial narrative centered on the dancer motif shifted to Yang Taizhen 楊太真 (719-756), the imperial concubine of Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712-756) of the Tang dynasty. Yang Taizhen was originally the wife of Li Mao 李瑁 (?-775), the eighteenth son of Xuanzong. Xuanzong, however, took her from Li Mao in 736 CE, and titled her the Imperial Concubine 貴妃 in 745 CE. Due to the emperor's favor, Yang and her family members seized the political and military power of the Tang empire, which partly led to the rebellion of An Lushan 安祿山 (703-757) and Shi Siming 史思明 (703-761), as well as the decline of the Tang. Upon the firm request by loyal generals such as Chen Xuanli 陳玄禮, Xuanzong was forced to order Yang Taizhen to commit suicide.<sup>4</sup>

A Yuan dynasty drama written by Bai Pu 白樸 (1226-c.1306) featured the romance between Yang Taizhen and Xuanzong. The drama was entitled *Tang Minghuang [Listening to] the Rain Falling on Chinese Parasols on an Autumn Night* 唐明皇秋夜梧桐雨 (hereafter *Wutongyu*). In three different volumes of selected Yuan dramas published in 1616, 1619 and 1633, the text of *Wutongyu* was accompanied by three slightly different yet affiliated illustrations (fig. 2.3).<sup>5</sup> In these three illustrations, Xuanzong plays the drum, while Yang Taizhen dances on a carpet. In the 1633 edition, which was compiled by Meng Chengshun 孟稱舜 (1594-1684), Yang accepts certain offerings from a young man kneeling on the ground (fig. 2.4). This scene reveals the historical record of Yang's taste for lychees, judging from the accompanying inscription.

Xuanzong was criticized for being unable to learn from the mistakes of his uncle and predecessor, Emperor Zhongzong 李顯 (r. 683-684, 705-710). What Xuanzong and Zhongzong had in common was, as reviewed by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-1072), the failure to resist “the disaster of women.”<sup>6</sup> Although the stories of the Zhao sisters and Yang Taizhen became romantic legends in secular literature in later dynasties, the official and political implications of these stories were always to be reminders to men of noble characters and Confucian ideology to keep away from women's charms.

Apart from the two identities of the dancers reflecting court life and imperial anecdotes, the motif was also employed in illustrations of secular narratives. *Toutao ji* is about a Song dynasty romance between a student Pan Yongzhong 潘用中 and Miss Huang Shunhua 黃舜華, the daughter of General Huang Chang 黃裳. Although the drama script was written for performance, the illustrations in the volumes were the only imagery to guide the reader's visual imagination. From the previous chapters, the reader has learned that Pan Yongzhong and Huang Shunhua have privately engaged with each other in an intimate affair. In the nineteenth chapter (titled “Aggressive Proposal” 強婚), Xie Duan 謝端, the emperor's brother-in-law, aggressively approaches General Huang asking to marry his daughter. Due to Xie Duan's political power and family connections, it seems quite impossible for General Huang to refuse the proposal. He has no choice but to force his daughter to marry Xie Duan (Chapter Twenty-One, “Forced Marriage” 逼嫁).

It is between these two chapters that the image of the dancer appears. In the twentieth chapter (“Yearning in the Autumn,” 秋懷), Pan Yongzhong yearns for a reunion with Huang Shunhua, when his friend Peng Jie 彭傑 pays a visit. The latter leads Pan to a brothel where they meet the Wang sisters.

<sup>4</sup> Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 and Song Qi 宋祁, 新唐書 [The New History of the Tang Dynasty] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1975), 121-154; 3493-3496; and 3613.

<sup>5</sup> Lin Li-chiang, *Ming Paintings and Prints: Possible Sources for Kano Sansetsu's Chōgonka Scrolls*, chap. in *Chinese Romance from a Japanese Brush: Kano Sansetsu's Chōgonka Scrolls in the Chester Beatty Library*, ed. Shane McCausland (London: Scala Publishers, 2009), 152-163.

<sup>6</sup> Ouyang and Song, *The New History of the Tang Dynasty*, 154.

The elder sister 王二娘 is good at singing while the younger sister 王二娘 is a brilliant dancer (fig. 2.5). The Wang sisters try to seduce Pan, while Peng Jie tries to persuade Pan to forget about his lover. Without knowing Huang Shunhua's similar struggle against the forced marriage, Pan refuses to drink with the Wang sisters and leaves for home.

Important in this narrative is the seductive role of the Wang sisters in luring astray Pan from being a righteous young man. It shares the same negative association of feminine charms with the legend of the Zhao sisters. In both cases, the female dancer is one of a pair of seducing sisters. And Yang Taizhen, the concubine who led to the decline of the Tang, was also recorded as being talented at music, singing, and dancing.<sup>7</sup>

From handscrolls to woodblock illustrations, from official historiography to popular drama scripts, the dancer motif was selected from many others to reflect the theatricality embedded in these stories, in order to represent critical moments in the storyline, and to guide the visual imagination of the reader to the furthest extent possible. While the fundamental icon of the dancer motif remains relatively the same, body gestures and decorative settings were added or eliminated in order to accommodate respective narratives. On large-scale objects, such as lacquer screens, most of the pictorial motifs in *Spring Morning in the Han Palace* were able to be included. Examples can be found in several pairs of six-fold lacquer screens, functioning primarily as those used as birthday gifts (fig. 2.6).<sup>8</sup> When it came to media of limited size, such as porcelain, the dancer motif again won the favor of designers or patrons with its vivid theatricality. It functioned synoptically on "narrative porcelain."

## Narrative porcelain in the early Qing dynasty

It was during the Shunzhi period (1643-1661) of the Qing dynasty that the dancer motif was used for decoration on porcelain for the first time. Early examples can be found in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. For instance, one *wucui* jar features the dancer performing on a carpet, surrounded by female musicians playing instruments such as bamboo flute, wooden clapping boards, *sheng* 笙 (a wind instrument), *shugu* drum 書鼓 and *yunluo* 雲鑼 (fig. 2.7). The theatricality is enhanced when a female figure is painted as a formal viewer of the scene (fig. 2.8). This is a newly added figure that did not appear in Qiu Ying's two prototypes. The presence of an audience legitimizes the existence of theatre. As a result of this addition, the image has two spectatorships: the owner of the porcelain and the figures depicted on it.

The theatricality of the dancer motif on porcelain increases to new levels on a variation of the image on the Shunzhi-period jar. In the Porzellansammlung (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden) collection, an underglaze blue dish of the Kangxi period (1662-1722) reflects a third spectatorship (fig. 2.9). Painted on the rim are four females gazing at the performance in the centre. The positions of female musicians form an arc, with the main features of the arc in line with the dancer. The carpet under her feet further locates the dancer. This double-foci emphasizes the theatricality of her performance, whereas the gaze

<sup>7</sup> Ouyang and Song, *The New History of the Tang Dynasty*, 3493.

<sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive study on lacquer screens featuring the theme of "Spring Morning in the Han Palace," see: Chou Kung-shin 周功鑫, 清康熙前期款彩漢宮春曉漆屏風與中國漆工藝之西傳 [Early Kangxi Lacquer Screen of Spring Morning in the Han Palace and the Introduction of Chinese Lacquer Craftsmanship in Europe] (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1995). By 1995, Chou Kung-shin gathered information of four sets of screens in the collections of the Freer Gallery of Art (F1906.42a-1), the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (BK-16709), and the Anhui Museum in China. The author of this paper adds three more to the total number, in the collections of Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, The University of Oxford (EAX.5331) and the Kunstgewerbemuseum Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (37333), and one sold by the Christie's in Paris on Dec. 14, 2016 (Sale 13282, lot 85).

from the seated woman (the pictorial audience) and the *sheng*-player augment it. Being the absolute central focus of the gazes from other females, the dancer nevertheless stares at the handrail in front of her. The image of the dancer is a combination of the two modes of pictorial representation brought up by Wu Hung.<sup>9</sup> For the viewer of the porcelain it is an episodic representation, with the dancer's face in profile and body in a dynamic movement. On the other hand, the dancer looks directly at the unpainted, yet suggested, viewer of the performance, who would be situated in the blank area behind the handrail. For this (third) spectatorship, the image of the dancer is frontal.

This combination of viewing modes is only possible with the agency of the image included in the analysis, as described by Hans Belting in his manifesto of an anthropology of images. The image works as much on its own as it is a product of the spectator's viewing.<sup>10</sup> In sum, the theatricality imbedded in the object, constructs three audience groups: the viewer of the porcelain beholds the plate as a physical object; within the pictorial space, women embody roles as viewers; and the theatre sponsor or the owner of the object suggests another layer of viewing performance. In both the second and third spectatorships, the viewer, can be defined as a human agent involved in the process of looking. Within this interaction, theatricality helps us to understand how the dancer motif was selected for its ability to convey the dynamics of expressive performance. So, too, does it direct our attention to the basic elements that constitute the narrative. In its many transformations, the dancer motif highlights the performative power of the tale.

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<sup>9</sup> Wu Hung, *The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art* (Stanford University Press, 1989), 133.

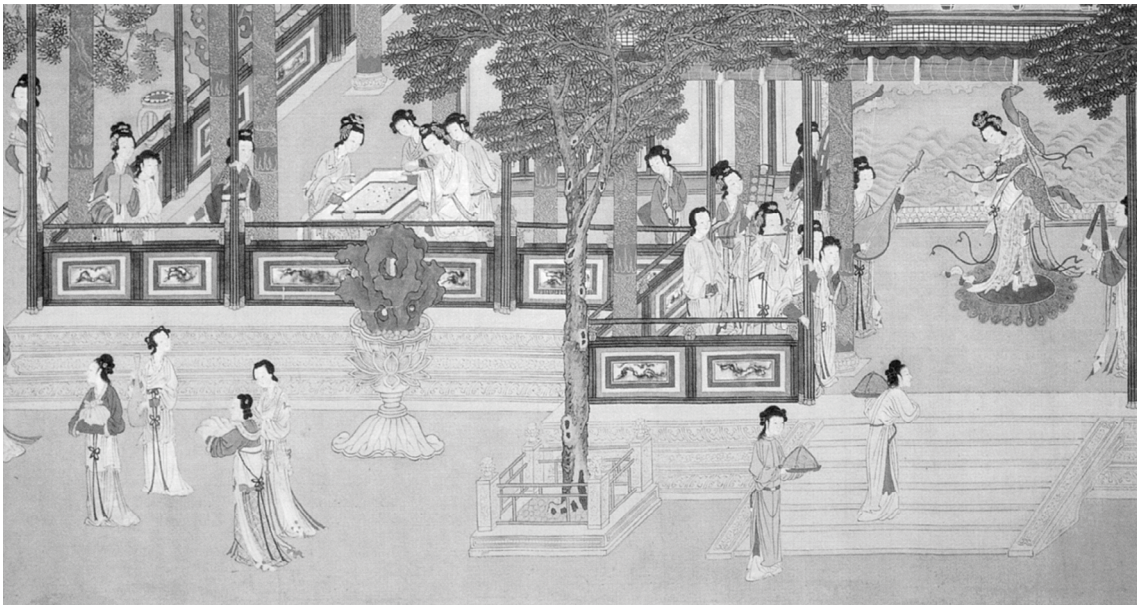
<sup>10</sup> Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 2.

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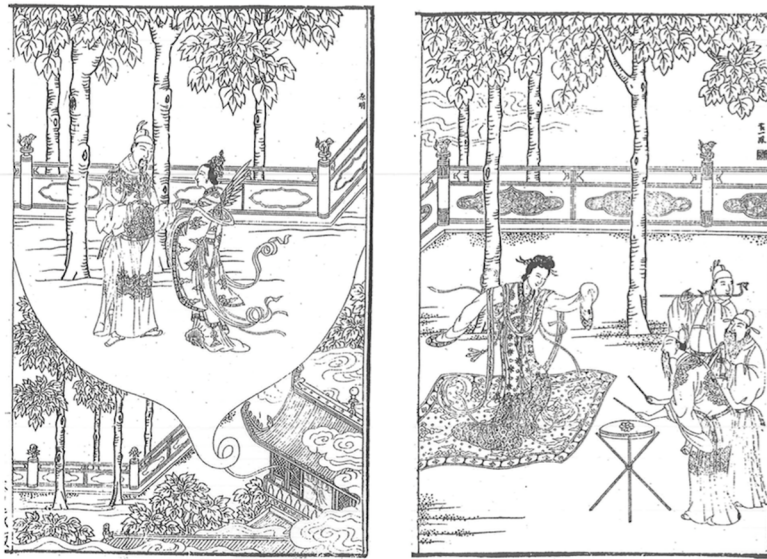
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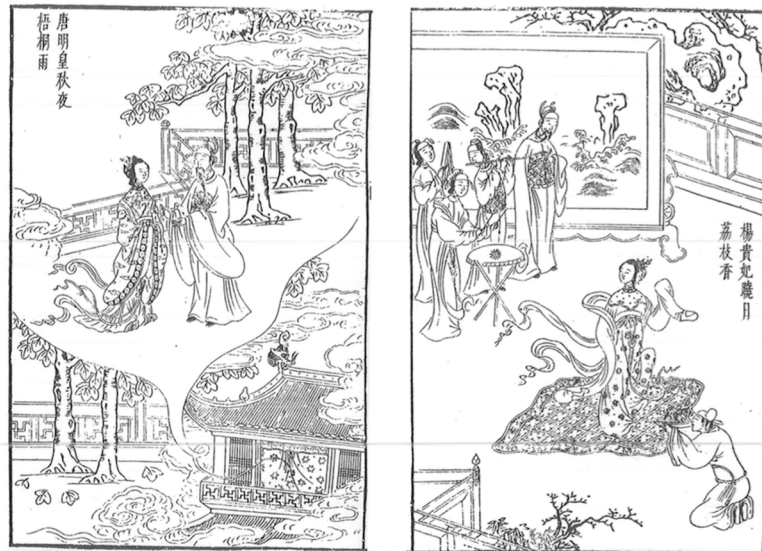
**Fig. 2.1** Qiu Ying 仇英. *Spring Morning in the Han Palace* (漢宮春曉圖), detail. Colour on silk. 30.6 × 574.1 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. Inv. No. 故畫 001038. Reprint from National Palace Museum Editing Committee 國立故宮博物院編輯委員會, ed., *仕女畫之美* [Glimpses into the Hidden Quarters: Paintings of Women from the Middle Kingdom], revised edition (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1996), 37–38.



**Fig. 2.2** Qiu Ying 仇英. *Hundred Beauties* (百美圖), detail. Colour on silk. 36.8 × 483.2 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. Inv. No. 中畫 000025. Reprint from National Palace Museum Editing Committee 國立故宮博物院編輯委員會, ed., *故宮書畫圖錄* [Illustrated Catalog of Painting and Calligraphy in the National Palace Museum], vol. 19, (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 2001), 53.



**Fig. 2.3** Bai Pu 白樸, *Tang Minghuang [Listening to] the Rain Falling on Chinese Parasols on an Autumn Night* (唐明皇秋夜梧桐雨), compiled by Wang Jide (王驥德, ?-1623) in *Ancient Dramas* (古雜劇), woodblock print, dated 1619. After Shane McCausland ed., *Chinese Romance from a Japanese Brush: Kano Sansetsu's Chōgonka Scrolls in the Chester Beatty Library* (London: Scala Publishers, 2009), 156, figs. 93 and 94.



**Fig. 2.4** Bai Pu 白樸. *Tang Minghuang [Listening to] the Rain Falling on Chinese Parasols on an Autumn Night* (唐明皇秋夜梧桐雨). Compiled by Meng Chengshun (孟稱舜, 1594-1684) in *Newly-Carved Ancient and Modern Famous Dramas – Anthology of Libation to the River* (新雋古今名劇酌江集). Woodblock print. Dated 1633. After Shane McCausland ed., *Chinese Romance from a Japanese Brush: Kano Sansetsu's Chōgonka Scrolls in the Chester Beatty Library* (London: Scala Publishers, 2009), 156.





Fig. 2.5 Wang Tingne 汪廷訥, *Huancuitang Newly-Edited the Story of Peach* (環翠堂新編投桃記), Wanli period (1573-1620), woodblock print. Chinese-Japanese Library, Harvard-Yenching Institute, Harvard University, T5687/3110(2).



**Fig. 2.6** Chinese folding screen, c. 1692, detail of eight panel screen, lacquer and enamel on wood. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Inv. No. 37333  
© Kunstgewerbemuseum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Foto: Sarah E. Fraser.



**Fig. 2.7** Jar, *wucui*, porcelain with overglaze enamels, Jingdezhen, China, Shunzhi period (1643-1661), Qing dynasty, h. 46 cm, d. rim 20 cm, d. base 20.5 cm. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, The Netherlands, Inv. No. AK-NM-6462. © Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.



**Fig. 2.8** Jar, *wucai*, porcelain with overglaze enamels, Jingdezhen, China, Shunzhi period (1643-1661), Qing dynasty, h. 46 cm, h. rim 20 cm, h. base 20.5 cm. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, The Netherlands, Inv. No. AK-NM-6462. After Christiaan J. A. Jörg and Jan van Campen, *Chinese Ceramic in the Collection of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam: The Ming and Qing Dynasties* (Amsterdam: Philip Wilson and Rijksmuseum, 1997), 84.



**Fig. 2.9** Dish, porcelain with underglaze cobalt blue, Jingdezhen, China, Kangxi period (1662-1722), Qing dynasty, h. 5 cm, d. rim 34.7 cm, d. footring 19.2 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung, Inv. No. PO 1289 © Porzellansammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Foto: Adrian Sauer.