The "Mother and Child" Motif in Seventeenth-Nineteenth Century Porcelain and Photography

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In this paper on female images in porcelain and photography, I focus on the depiction of figures to examine the relationships embedded within the images and their surroundings. The Porzellansammlung (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden) holds a considerable number of porcelain depicting women together with children; they date from the middle of the Ming (1368-1644) to the early Qing dynasties (1636-1912), offering an excellent insight into an important cross section of the development of this motif. Additionally, several photographs in the Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden) also feature the same composition—a woman and a child as the image's main protagonists. This essay will explore four objects with the same motif, and assess diverging concepts.

The first object under consideration is a blue-and-white covered jar **(fig. 9.1)**. Around its body, four women and sixteen children are depicted. The combination of these figures very likely relates to the popular theme of "four wives and sixteen sons" on porcelain during the early Qing period when the fierce dynastic transition resulted in a great decline in population. According to Chinese historian Ge Jianxiong, the estimated decline reached forty percent; from the first year of the Chongzhen era (1611-1644) on, the amount fell an average of nineteen percent annually until it reached the lowest percentage in the last year of Shunzhi reign (1638-1661).[1] Therefore, it was encouraged by the government and also desired by the people, to have more laborers, which meant the birth of more children. Beyond this historical background, the jar's creamy white porcelain body and the fine, smooth glaze, which indicate technical precision, allow us to assume that this piece might be a product of the early Kangxi period, probably the 1660s. Except for the different objects in their hands, the female figures are rendered almost identically and are evenly placed among the children playing. There are no close relations between a mother and her children to be detected here; the figures were seen as one entity comprised of multiple wives and male descendants, which was a criterion for an ideal family in pre-modern China. The female figures here are therefore closely associated with the concept of fertility, a theme which can also be found in paintings dating back to Tang Dynasty. One example is the Song dynasty painting *Palace Ladies Bathing Children*, made in the style of the Tang dynasty court painter Zhou Fang (active ca. 780 – ca. 810), now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York **(fig. 9.2)**. It depicts a crowded scene of five court ladies bathing and dressing children. The attention of these female figures is directed solely towards the comfort and well-being of the children to ensure they are safe and healthy. According to Ann Wicks, works depicting palace women lavishing care upon young princes reinforced the importance of raising capable heirs to the throne in the imperial court.[2] It is noteworthy

[1] Ge Jianxiong 葛劍雄, 中国人口发展史 [History of the Chinese Population] (Fujian: Fujian People's Publishers, 1991), 248-250.

[2] Ann B. Wicks, Picturing Children, chap. in *The Family Model in Chinese Art and Culture*, eds. Jerome Silbergeld and Dora C. Y. Ching (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 303.

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that girl infants being cared for in such scenes are rarely seen in painting or porcelain, implying that women's fate depended heavily on their ability to bear sons.

In comparison to the blue-and-white jar, the woman and child on a *famille verte* dish in the Dresden collection are coded with markers of "high social status." Greater care is given to describing the details of their appearance **(figs. 9.1 and 9.3)**. In contrast to the awkward facial features, the faces on the enameled dish are fine and elaborate. The little boy joyfully chases butterflies and the woman sits on a bench, leaning toward him with quiet pleasure. Here the mother-son relationship is clear, and they are surrounded with exquisite objects such as a wood *ruyi* scepter carved in the form of a *lingzhi* fungus beside her left hand, as well as a bonsai, fish bowl and stool. Every element is carefully arranged in order to create a harmonious scene of a well-to-do and educated family. This plate was included in Augustus the Strong's Japanese Palace inventory taken in 1721, suggesting its date of manufacture was the early eighteenth century.[3] The rendering of the shadows in the garment folds of the pair reflects the impact of *chiaroscuro* in figure painting, which was disseminated via engravings and other pictorial materials in China by Jesuits during the late Ming-early Qing period.[4] The light brush strokes around and under the objects also indicate an effort to convey shadow. Offset within the decorative border along the rim, auspicious butterflies are elaborately rendered.

Unlike most of the scenes with mothers and children on earlier blue-and-white porcelain, the woman here is seated instead of standing; this seems to indicate respect towards married women, which developed during the late Ming and early Qing period when their role in raising children and contribution to household finances were increasingly recognized. This object features the popular Chinese motif of a lady educating her child; a stack of books is conspicuously placed in a prominent position **(fig. 9.3)**. There are two possible origins of this popular subject. One version is connected to the narrative *The Third Mistress Educates her Son* 三娘教子, written by Ming Dynasty playwright Li Yu 李渔 (1610-1680), which tells the story of the third mistress of a family, who undertakes the responsibilities of supporting the family and raising the child after the husband's death. The child was not her own, but that of the second mistress. As the son grew and was informed of the truth of his birth mother, he blamed the third mistress for being too strict and they quarreled. In the end, the child becomes a successful high-ranking official.[5] The tale was first adapted in print form; later it became a popular motif on porcelain. As the image circulated, however, it transformed and became a harmonious scene of a mother taking care of children replacing the former tale filled with elements of tension. The only recognizable feature of the early "educating scene" is often the *osmanthus* twig held by the mother, which in Chinese is a homophone of "ranking first in the examination." In the case of this dish, the only reference to this tale are the books that symbolize the boy's future's success in the imperial civil examinations.

The type of hair style worn by the mother figure depicted on the dish was typically fixed by pulling the hair back, coiling it into a chignon and securing it with a hairpin; this hair treatment is called *step-sway* (步摇). Such a neat chignon imparts the air of dignity. An exposed forehead is understood to suggest her wisdom and intelligence, which relates to another possible origin of the scene from a later period: the story of a female poet called Shang Jinglan, who raised her children alone after her husband committed suicide out of loyalty to the collapsed Ming regime (1368-1644). She had been raised in an eminent family and was considered a model for intelligent and capable women by later generations. Her story was adapted for the woodblock print format, as well **(fig. 9.4)**.

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[3] Helen Espir, *European Decoration on Oriental Porcelain* (London: Jorge Welsh Books, 2005), 52. 92-104.

[4] Some artisans from the Jiangnan region were even converted to Catholicism. Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens 毕梅雪, "郎世宁与中国十八世纪帝王肖像画的复兴 [Giuseppe Castiglione and the Renaissance in Chinese Portraits of Emperors in the 18th Century]," *Beijing Palace Museum Journal* 3 (2004): 97.

[5] Wei Dongdong, "Study Concerning Motifs on the Education of Children in Ming and Qing Dynasty Jingdezhen Porcelain," M.A. thesis, Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute, 2012.

In sum, the lady on this plate is characterized as a respected caring mother with intelligence and virtue, which distinguishes her from the aforementioned women on the jar. In fact, there was a growth in the number of educated women during the late sixteenth century, who found a voice for themselves through writing and publishing producing significant contributions to Chinese literature.[6] Since the imperial examinations were technically a merit-based system, ordinary people could enter the state bureaucracy (officialdom). Thus, the whole family had high expectations for their children. Before their education was handed over to teachers, it was the mother who conducted formative cultivation for youngsters. As a result, during the late Ming Dynasty and continuing into the Qing Dynasty, there was a growing emphasis on feminine virtues and intelligence.

Two Chinese photographs in the Dresden State Art Collections also reflect a relationship between a mother and child. One depicts a woman sitting on a chair; the boy standing beside her is rather tall **(fig. 9.5)**. Neither exhibit any joyfulness in their countenances. The boy wears a hat and holds an umbrella. The lady is dressed quite neatly, yet her bound feet, which are exposed for the camera, suggest her limited mobility. It is the boy who has more freedom and access to the outer world. This kind of juxtaposition illuminates a sharp contrast in the socio-cultural status of the two, which remains unvoiced on the porcelain.

Another photographic image depicts a standing woman with her baby swaddled on her back. This manner of securing the child implies that she has to work, and has no one to look after (or educate) her offspring during work **(fig. 9.6)**. The baby, in a sense, becomes a burden for her. In addition, the reproduction and circulation of this image in postcard form in Europe could account for a stereotype of hard-working Chinese women with miserable a family life among audiences abroad **(figs. 9.7 and 9.8)**. A comparison between the display of idealized females on porcelain and the critical representations of Chinese women under the photographic lens of foreigners exemplifies how different mediums, eras and more importantly, perspectives, contribute to distinct messages deploying the same motif.

[6] Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 219-250.

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"Historical Chinese Postcard Project: 1896 – 1920." Regine Thiriez, accessed December 15, 2016, http://postcard.vcea.net/.

Fig. 9.1 Baluster Jar with cover, porcelain with underglaze cobalt blue and wood, Jingdezhen, China, Wanli period (1573-1619), Ming dynasty, h. 49.4 cm, h. with cover 61.8 cm, d. 36.8 cm, d. footring 23.8 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung, Inv. No. PO 1035.

Fig. 9.2 Unidentified Artist, *Palace Ladies Bathing Children* 戲嬰圖卷, 11th century, ink and color on silk, 30.5 × 48.6 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Accession Number 40.418. http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39935 (Accessed August 20, 2016).

Fig. 9.3 Dish, porcelain with overglaze enamels and gold (*famille verte*), Jingdezhen, China, ca. 1700, Kangxi period (1662-1722), Qing dynasty, h. 6.0 cm, d. rim 36.8 cm, d. footring 20.6 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung, Inv. No. PO 6917. © Porzellansammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Foto: Adrian Sauer.

Fig. 9.4 Ren Xiong 任熊, *Lady Shang with the surname Jinglan, wife of the circut inspector Qi Zhonghui* (明巡抚忠惠祁公妻商夫人景兰), 1856, woodblock print, printed in *Yu Yue xian xian xiang zhuan zan* 於越先贤像传赞. After Fu Xihua 傅惜华 ed., Zhong guo gu dian wenxue banhua xuan ji 中古古典文学版画选集 [Woodblock Printings of Chinese Classical Novels], Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1981, no. 795.

Fig. 9.5 Unknown photographer, [Portrait of a Chinese woman and a boy], 1870-1929, photographic lantern slide, 8,5 x 8,5 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Inv. No. F 2016-3/2649. © Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden.

Fig. 9.6 Unknown photographer, [Portrait of a Chinese woman carrying a baby], 1880-1900, photographic lantern slide, 8,5 x 8,5 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Inv. No. F 2016-3/2389. © Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden.

Fig. 9.7 [Studio scene of a woman carrying a baby on her back], 1902 (certain), early Japanese postcard of China, phototype. 14 x 9.1 cm, front side. ID: cn00033. From Régina Thiriez Collection, Historical Chinese Postcard Project: 1896 – 1920. © Régina Thiriez.

Fig. 9.8 recto of the fig. 7, 1902 (certain), early Japanese postcard of China, phototype. 14 x 9.1 cm, back side. ID: cn00033. From Régina Thiriez Collection, Historical Chinese Postcard Project: 1896 – 1920. © Régina Thiriez.