

The Construction of Aesthetic Symbolic Systems in Contemporary Chinese Ceramic Art: An Interview-Based and Visual Analysis Study

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses that gap through a two-strand qualitative design. The first strand comprises semi-structured interviews with three emerging Chinese ceramic artists who have practised continuously since 2010, examining their aesthetic frameworks, the cultural and historical origins of their symbolic vocabularies, their use of materials and technique. The second strand comprises a visual and formal analysis of representative works by four established Chinese ceramic artists, examining form, symbolic content, thematic concerns, technique. Findings show that each artist's symbolic system is deliberately constructed rather than incidental: emerging artists describe a conscious process of selecting, testing repeating visual motifs until they function as a recognisable personal language, while established artists' works demonstrate how inherited cultural symbols are re-worked through contemporary form and material choices. Cultural background, education and exposure to influential artists and exhibitions emerged as the primary shaping forces on symbolic content, while the use of new materials and technologies remains limited but is regarded by all participants as an area for future experimentation. The study offers an empirically grounded account of symbol formation in contemporary Chinese ceramic practice and proposes a qualitative framework, in place of numerical scoring, for comparing artists' aesthetic, symbolic and technical choices.

Keywords: Symbolic system, ceramic art, aesthetic framework, Chinese contemporary art.



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1 INTRODUCTION

In the 1950s, there were innovative movements in Japan and the United States, such as the "Crawling on Mud" and "Otis Clay", which pushed forward the modern transformation of ceramic art and aesthetics. These movements led to the emergence of ceramic art as an active modern art form, marking the true rise of modern ceramic art. Modern ceramic art is not just a simple art form, but a modern art form that represents a new spiritual and aesthetic symbol. In modern times, ceramic artists have

transcended traditional boundaries and used ceramics as a medium to express complex cultural narratives and personal art identity (Ai Weiwei et al., 2009; Wohl, 2019).

Contemporary ceramic art breaks through traditional boundaries to become a medium for expressing an artist's personal identity, cultural background and social commentary. Ceramic artists use clay as a material to express complex cultural narratives, drawing inspiration from both the material and techniques to create artworks that convey personal emotions and social concerns (Al-Bayat & Abdul-Karim, 2023 & Abdul-Karim, 2023). According to German philosopher Ernst Cassirer; he proposed in his philosophical works that art can be defined as a symbolic language (Cassirer, 2020). In postmodern art, ceramics has become an important form of cross-cultural communication, challenging the close ties between ceramics, practicality and traditional functionalities in the past. Art symbols are not only the technical means of an artists, but also the manifestation of their inner world. The creative features and symbolic systems of artists form their unique artistic language, through which they express their thoughts, emotions and social experiences through the innovation and application of these symbols (Naumburg, 1955).

1.1 Research Aim

Based on the above theory, the symbolic system of ceramic artists is a very worthwhile issue to pay attention to (Naumburg, 1955; Shao, 2016). How do ceramic artists integrate their symbolic systems with modern art while creating art?

This study aims to investigate how contemporary Chinese ceramic artists construct and apply aesthetic symbolic systems in their creative practice. It does so by:

- A. Through interviews, how three emerging Chinese ceramic artists describe the aesthetic framework, cultural influences and material choices behind their own symbol formation.
- B. Through visual analysis, how these dynamics are manifested in the completed works of four established Chinese ceramic artists.

The study examines the key factors that have influenced this evolution and the strategies adopted by artists to create meaningful visual languages (Weiwei et al., 2009; Kaddar et al., 2022).

1.2 Research Questions

The key questions are:

- RQ1. What are the main aesthetic frameworks guiding modern ceramic art?
- RQ2. How do cultural and historical contexts influence the symbolic systems of artists' ceramic art creations?
- RQ3. What are the potential impacts of materials and techniques on contemporary ceramic creations?

Based on the above statements, we can predict that studying the main aesthetic framework of modern ceramic art can help artists become clear about creating according to specific aesthetic rules ("Trends in Contemporary Ceramic Art," 2023). Understanding how the symbolic system of ceramic art creation is influenced by individual systems of culture and history can help artists better establish creative strategies related to their own experiences (Shao, 2016; Weiwei et al., 2009). The impact of materials and technology on contemporary ceramic creation is very important and can stimulate the possibility of ceramic artists using new materials and modern technology in their creation, broadening the boundaries of ceramic art creation (Tao, 2023; Al-Bayat & Abdul-Karim, 2023).

2 METHODS

As defined in the first part, the art symbol system is a unique expression method used by artists during their creative process (Naumburg, 1955). Based on the definition of art symbols provided above, we realize that to identify an artist's personal symbols, we must truly understand and appreciate the creative expression and artistic characteristics of the artist and their works (Weiwei et al., 2009; Kaddar et al., 2022).

Gombrich, E. H. *The Story of Art* (1950) emphasises the role of symbols in art history, noting that an artist's style, creative traits and the symbols they use can help us understand the artist's personal expression (Gombrich, 1950).

Gombrich (1950) further states that “the symbols in an artwork are gradually formed through an artist's cultural background, technical proficiency and personal experiences,” and that to identify an artist's personal symbols, one must understand how these symbols function as expressive tools that communicate the artist's creative narrative within the work (Gombrich, 1950).

In other words, in this study, the researchers aimed to identify the dependent variables related to the design, craftsmanship, themes and presentation styles of Chinese ceramic artists' ceramic artworks (Shao, 2016). Next, the study determines the factors that influence the creative symbolic system in order to explain why these variables take forms (Botella et al., 2018; Mace & Ward, 2010). In the final stage of the study, these variables and influencing factors are triangulated to form a conclusion that identifies the symbolic system of ceramic artists' creations.

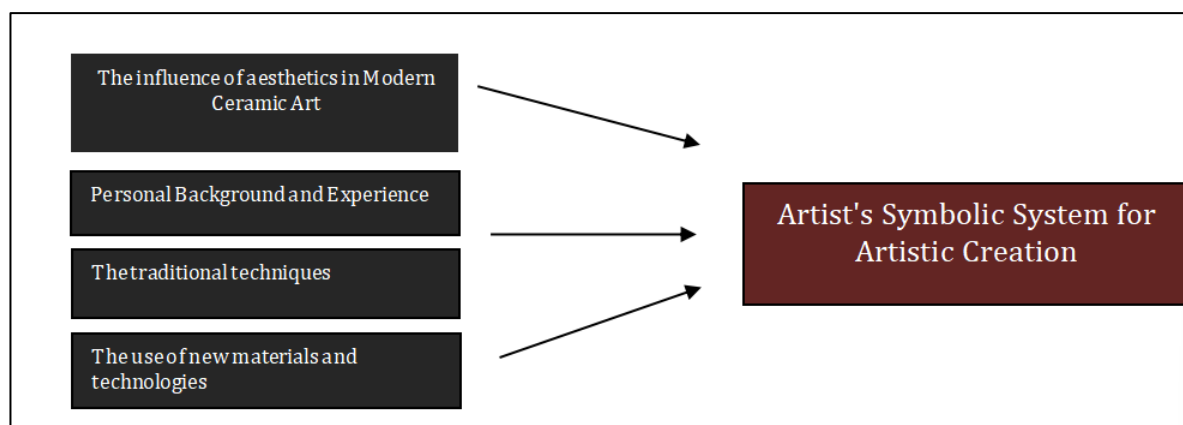


Figure 1 The Structural Formation of the Artist's Symbolic System

This study focuses on documentary and theoretical research materials and includes interviews with Chinese ceramic artists to investigate their creative ideas behind their artworks, as well as their artistic forms, materials and characteristics (Weiwei et al., 2009; Kaddar et al., 2022). This study explores how ceramic artists use clay as both a medium and a symbolic language, imbuing their works with social, political, spiritual, or aesthetic significance (Naumburg, 1955; Shao, 2016; Wohl, 2019). This study is expected to further expand our understanding of ceramic art creation and to be applicable to methods relevant to anthropological and cultural research (Botella et al., 2018; Mace & Ward, 2010).

- Weiwei et al., 2009; Kaddar et al., 2022 → artists' creative ideas, agency and contextual practice
- Naumburg, 1955 → art as symbolic language
- Shao, 2016 → social, ideological and cultural meaning in contemporary ceramic art
- Botella et al., 2018; Mace & Ward, 2010 → qualitative, process-based and interdisciplinary research approaches applicable to anthropology and creativity studies
- Wohl's, 2019 → work complements their discussion on symbolism and artistic meaning

2.1 Research Design

The study uses a two-strand qualitative design combining semi-structured interviews and visual/formal analysis, an approach suited to research questions concerned with meaning-making rather than measurable frequency (Botella et al., 2018; Mace & Ward, 2002).

- Strand A (Interviews): semi-structured interviews with three emerging Chinese ceramic artists, used to access artists' own accounts of their aesthetic framework, symbolic system and material/technical choices (RQ1 – RQ3).
- Strand B (Visual analysis): formal and symbolic analysis of representative works by four established Chinese ceramic artists, used to examine how the same three dimensions manifest in completed works, providing a comparison point external to artists' self-report (RQ1–RQ3).

The two strands are not a single combined sample of "three" or "five" artists, as earlier drafts of this paper stated in places; they are two distinct, purposively selected samples serving complementary functions. This distinction is maintained consistently throughout the revised manuscript.

2.2 Sampling

2.2.1 Strand A: Interview participants

Three contemporary Chinese ceramic artists were purposively selected using the following criteria: (i) continuous ceramic practice since 2010, so that participants had passed through the systematic art education boom of the 2000s and had at least a decade of sustained practice; (ii) demonstrated integration of traditional technique with contemporary creative thinking; and (iii) willingness to participate in an in-depth interview and to have excerpts published. This purposive, criterion-based approach is appropriate for small-sample qualitative research aimed at information richness rather than statistical generalisability (Patton, 2002).

2.2.2 Strand B: Visual analysis artists

Four established Chinese ceramic artists were selected using criterion sampling based on: (i) sustained critical recognition, evidenced by coverage in published art criticism; (ii) a substantial, publicly accessible body of work; and (iii) representation of contrasting positions on the tradition–innovation spectrum, to ensure the sample was not biased toward a single stylistic tendency.

2.3 Interview Process

Each interview followed a semi-structured protocol of 11 questions organised into three objectives: (Objective 1) the artist's aesthetic framework, (Objective 2) the cultural and historical origins of their symbolic system and (Objective 3) the role of materials and technology in their practice. The full protocol, with each question mapped to its coding variable and objective, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 The list of Interview questions and coding

Questions	Variables/ Attribute	Objectives
Q1: Have you created ceramic art works in the past 5 years (since 2019)?	A1 Creative Continuity	
Q2: Can you describe your creative progress when creating ceramics?	A2 Creative Process	OBJECTIVE 1: The main aesthetic framework guiding modern ceramic art
Q3: What do you believe are the key aesthetic principles shaping modern ceramic art?	A3 Aesthetic Principles	
Q4: Is there an art works or an artistic activity that has had a great influence on your artistic creation?	A4 Influencing Factors	
Q5: In your opinion, how important is abstraction or symbolism in modern ceramic design?	B1 Symbolic Function	
Q6: Do you think there are symbolic elements in your creative process that are input by cultural background? That is, what we usually call national symbols, if any, are they unconscious expressions or conscious expressions?	B2 Symbolic Necessity	OBJECTIVE 2: Cultural and Historical Contexts in Symbolic Systems
Q7: How does your cultural background influence the symbolic elements in your ceramics?	B3 Origin of Symbols.	
Q8: What roles do material properties, such as clay type or glaze finish, play in your creative process?	C1 New materials	
Q9: How do you experiment with combining traditional handcrafting techniques with modern technologies?	C2 Methods of Using New Materials	OBJECTIVE 3: Materiality and Technology in Contemporary Ceramic Creation
Q10: In what ways do you think technological innovation is shaping the future of ceramic art?	C3 Development of New Materials	
Q11: What advice would you give to emerging ceramic artists about constructing their artistic language and symbolic system?	B4 Symbolic System	OBJECTIVE 2: Cultural and Historical Contexts in Symbolic Systems

(Source: Author's own work.)

The reason why three ceramic artists who have been creating ceramic works since 2010 were chosen as the subjects of the investigation is that after the year 2000, Chinese modern ceramic art began to flourish and the number of people receiving ceramic art education increased. After ten years of development, the situation of young ceramic artists in China has basically stabilized. Therefore, choosing this time period, young ceramic artists have received systematic ceramic art education, fully learned traditional production techniques and had modern creative thinking, which can serve as a typical sample to solve the problem of the research objectives (Wohl, 2019).

2.4 Artwork Selection

Works analyses in Strand B were selected according to three criteria applied consistently across the four artists: (i) the work is publicly exhibited or published, so that readers can independently verify the analysis; (ii) the work is representative of the artist's characteristic symbolic vocabulary and technique, rather than an atypical or minor piece; and (iii) where an artist's practice spans multiple media, the selected work foregrounds ceramic or ceramic-adjacent material practice, consistent with the study's scope.

2.5 Data Coding

Interview transcripts were coded using the deductive scheme shown in Table 1, in which each question maps to one coding variable (A1–A4, B1–B4, C1–C3) nested under one of the three research objectives. Within each variable, responses were then coded inductively for recurring themes, following the six-phase approach to thematic analysis of familiarisation, initial coding, theme searching, theme review, theme definition and write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Visual material in Strand B was coded separately along four fixed dimensions artistic form, cultural/symbolic content, thematic concern and creative technique applied consistently to all four artists to support comparison (see Section 4).

2.6 Analysis Procedure

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, each interview was coded independently against the scheme in Table 1 to identify the dependent variables of design, craftsmanship, theme and presentation style evident in each artist's account. Second, patterns within and across the three interview participants were compared to identify what shaped the form these variables took principally cultural background, education and exposure to influential artists or exhibitions. Third, findings from the interviews (Strand A) were triangulated with the visual analysis of the four established artists' works (Strand B) to assess whether patterns identified in artists' self-report were also observable in completed ceramic works.

3 INTERVIEW FINDINGS

In this study, the use of case analysis is of great significance. It can help to deeply understand the formation, interpretation and cultural context of artistic language and symbol systems in the artist's creation, enhance discussions on the aesthetic value of ceramic works, interpret the artist's creative concepts and enrich the research methodology of ceramic studies (Wohl, 2019). By conducting a detailed analysis of typical ceramic works, it can provide a more specific and in-depth perspective for academic research on ceramic art, thereby promoting the comprehensive understanding and appreciation of modern ceramic art by the academic community. In the book "Handmade:

The Art of Ceramic Vessels" (2021), it is mentioned that case studies in ceramic vessel research enable scholars to conduct comprehensive analyses by integrating historical, social, cultural and other perspectives, thus leading to more comprehensive and accurate conclusions. Interview is chosen as the main instrument in this research for its advantages.

Paul Oliver (1997) In L. M. Given (Ed.), The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative research methods (p. 121) states that:

"They are relatively easy to organize. They provide a great deal of rich, interesting data. They are generally enjoyable for the participants, both the researchers and the respondents. They can be adapted to the needs of different locations and situations. They can be used either as part of survey research or of a variety of other research designs."

This section reports findings from the three interview participants: LZQ (Lin Zeqing), ZMM (Zhou Mingming) and CLS (Chen Linseng), organised by research objective. Each theme is illustrated with a direct quotation from the relevant participant.

3.1 Aesthetic Framework (RQ1)

All three participants described a structured, if individually distinct, aesthetic framework shaping their ongoing practice. Exposure to influential artists and major exhibitions emerged as a recurring theme in explaining how that framework developed.

Table 2 Coding Table for Interview Data: Objective 1

Questions	Variables/Attribute	Objective
Q1: Have you created ceramic art works in the past 5 years (since 2019)?	A1 Creative Continuity	OBJECTIVE 1: The main aesthetic framework guiding modern ceramic art
Q2: Can you describe your creative progress when creating ceramics?	A2 Creative Process	
Q3: What do you believe are the key aesthetic principles shaping modern ceramic art?	A3 Aesthetic Principles	
Q4: Is there an art works or an artistic activity that has had a great influence on your artistic creation?	A4 Influencing Factors	

(Source: Author's own work.)

3.1.1 Results of Response on the Aesthetic Framework

LZQ located his aesthetic principles in a specific technique used to translate architectural reference into ceramic form:

“I mainly use a ceramic-shard piecing technique to convey the aesthetic qualities of traditional architecture both its overall beauty and the beauty of its forms.”

Asked what had most influenced his practice, LZQ pointed to mentorship and exhibition culture rather than a single reference work:

“Mainly my teachers, their creative approaches and the content of their work have inspired me greatly. Several major domestic art exhibitions, including their curatorial and display conventions, as well as some specialised exhibitions, have also shaped my work, from its form through to its production technique.”

These responses suggest LZQ's aesthetic framework is grounded less in abstract theory than in transmitted technique and repeated exposure to how ceramic work is curated and displayed.

ZMM's aesthetic framework centres on a named regional tradition the glaze colour and vessel-form aesthetics of classical Yue-ware (Yue Kiln) celadon. On the influences shaping that framework, ZMM stated:

“The inheritance of traditional Yue-ware technique, along with related exhibitions, has influenced me greatly.”

This positions ZMM's aesthetic principles as explicitly anchored in a named historical ceramic tradition, distinguishing his account from LZQ's broader architectural reference and CLS's process-first account below.

CLS's account of aesthetic principle was expressed through a description of working method rather than a named tradition or influence, centred on the animal subjects that recur across his output:

“My artistic creation is usually built around animal subjects. I first draw a sketch, then revise it according to my own understanding of form before shaping the piece and finally carry out what I consider the most important step the painted decoration.”

This sequential account sketch, formal revision, construction, painted decoration indicates that for CLS, aesthetic principle is enacted through a fixed procedural order rather than derived from an external reference point, which is consistent with the innovation-over-theory orientation attributed to CLS in the original manuscript.

3.2 Cultural and Historical Contexts of Symbolic Systems (RQ2)

The main part of this section addresses Problem 1 in the research objective, the aesthetic framework of artists during the creative process. In the interviews with the three artists, there was a certain aesthetic framework guiding the continuous creation of artists (Wohl, 2019). It is undeniable that the creative style and thinking of artists are influenced by famous artists or famous exhibitions. In particular, LZQ and ZMM demonstrated a high level of understanding and expression of theory and aesthetics, while CLS pushed forward the development of ceramic art in terms of form and content by innovatively applying diverse aesthetic concepts.

Participants' symbolic systems were consistently linked to cultural heritage, educational background and personal upbringing. LZQ's account centred on traditional Chinese architectural symbols, engaged

with in depth and carried into contemporary form. CLS described drawing on modern painting elements to foreground personal reinterpretation, while ZMM described a more individualised symbolic vocabulary that nonetheless remains anchored in traditional systems.

Table 3 Coding Table for Interview Data: Objective 2

Questions	Variables/Attribute	Objective
Q5: In your opinion, how important is abstraction or symbolism in modern ceramic design?	B1 Symbolic Function	OBJECTIVE 2: Cultural and Historical Contexts in Symbolic Systems
Q6: Do you think there are symbolic elements in your creative process that are input by cultural background? That is, what we usually call national symbols, if any, are they unconscious expressions or conscious expressions?	B2 Symbolic Necessity	
Q7: How does your cultural background influence the symbolic elements in your ceramics?	B3 Origin Of Symbols.	
Q11: What advice would you give to emerging ceramic artists about constructing their artistic language and symbolic system?	B4 Symbolic System	OBJECTIVE 2: Cultural and Historical Contexts in Symbolic Systems

(Source: Author's own work.)

3.2.1 Result Response on the Symbolic System

Asked directly how important symbolic function is to their work, all three participants affirmed that cultural symbols play a central role, though each qualified this differently. LZQ linked cultural symbolism to the legibility of his work's national origin:

“Cultural symbols are very important in my work. Many foreigners can tell at a glance that a piece was made by a Chinese artist, because it carries the cultural symbols of traditional Chinese architecture.”

ZMM described cultural symbols as the dominant element of his work, positioned alongside but distinct from his technical practice:

“Cultural symbols form the main part of my work; another very important part of my work is the making technique.”

CLS likewise affirmed the centrality of cultural symbols but balanced this against the role of his own contemporary creative input:

“Cultural symbols are an important part of my work, but my own contemporary creative ideas are also a very important part.”

Read together, these three responses show a consistent affirmation that cultural symbolism is central to each artist's work, but with three distinct emphases: LZQ frames symbols primarily in terms of external, cross-cultural legibility; ZMM frames them as one of two co-equal pillars of his practice, alongside technique; and CLS frames them as one of two co-equal pillars alongside his own contemporary creative agency. This distinction is a useful refinement of the earlier, more general claim that symbolic systems are simply “culturally grounded and individually mediated” the interviews show specifically how each artist balances the cultural and the individual.

This part of the data shows that in the creation of artists, the symbol system is influenced by different cultural backgrounds, educational backgrounds and growing environments and is output by the individual ideology of the artist and the form of the work in the creation process (Wohl, 2019). For the establishment of creative symbols, artists believe that choosing subjects they like and are interested in, using mature techniques they are interested in and skilled in and completing the creation of artworks are all important. LZQ's works show a high degree of recognition of traditional cultural symbols through

a deep understanding and expression of architectural elements in traditional cultural symbols; CLS combines modern painting elements to highlight his personal interpretation and re-creation of modernity; in comparison, ZMM shows more personalized symbol use, with distinct modernity and individuality while relying on traditional symbol systems.

3.3 Materiality and Technology (RQ3)

All three participants reported currently limited use of new materials, relying mainly on new glazes and varied decorative techniques consistent with broader patterns in which innovation in ceramic practice tends to occur incrementally within established material systems (Tao, 2023). All three nonetheless expressed interest in experimenting with new materials or technologies in future work.

ZMM showed the strongest orientation toward material and technological experimentation, combining traditional clay bodies with innovative glazes and emphasising the integration of modern technology with traditional craftsmanship. LZQ maintained the most classically grounded approach, prioritising continuity of craftsmanship over material innovation. CLS occupied a middle position: refined traditional craftsmanship in form, paired with a personal, modern decorative language expressed through surface treatment.

This section covers the use of new materials and technologies, as evidenced in interviews with three Chinese ceramic artists. All indicated that the use of new materials was currently limited, with most works relying on new glazes and different decorative techniques, a trend that aligns with broader patterns observed in contemporary ceramic practice where innovation often occurs incrementally within traditional material systems (Tao, 2023). However, all three artists expressed an interest in adopting new materials or technologies in their future works, reflecting an emerging orientation toward experimentation and technological expansion in ceramic art (Al-Bayat & Abdul-Karim, 2023; Shao, 2016).

Table 4 Coding Table for Interview Data: Objective 3

Questions	Variables/Attribute	Objective
Q8: What role do material properties, such as clay type or glaze finish, play in your creative process?	C1 New materials	OBJECTIVE 3: Materiality and Technology in Contemporary Ceramic Creation
Q9: How do you experiment with combining traditional handcrafting techniques with modern technologies?	C2 Methods of Using New Materials	
Q10: In what ways do you think technological innovation is shaping the future of ceramic art?	C3 Development of New Materials	

(Source: Author's own work.)

3.3.1 Results on Materiality Technology

Asked to describe their making method and where they locate innovation within it, each participant named a distinct traditional technique as their base practice, but located innovation in a different part of the process. LZQ grounds his practice in traditional slab-building, with innovation concentrated in material choice:

“My work is mainly made using the traditional slab-building method; my innovation lies mainly in the use of new materials.”

ZMM grounds his practice in the traditional glaze colour of Yue-ware celadon, unlike LZQ and CLS locates his innovation in two areas at once, creative concept and production technique:

“My work uses the traditional glaze colour of Yue-ware celadon; my innovation lies mainly in creative concept as well as innovation in production technique.”

CLS grounds his practice in traditional mould-forming and locates his innovation in inspiration and surface decoration rather than in the forming method itself:

“My work is made using the traditional mould-forming method; my innovation lies mainly in my creative inspiration and decorative patterns.”

Read together, these three responses revise the more general claim made in the original manuscript that ZMM was the most “materially” innovative of the three: none of the three participants reports changing their fundamental forming/production method and each locates innovation differently LZQ in material choice alone, CLS in inspiration and decorative pattern. ZMM distinctively in both creative concept and production technique together. This is a more precise finding than a single “most/least innovative” ranking and Table 3 below has been revised accordingly.

ZMM demonstrated a strong spirit of exploration in material innovation and technological application, combining traditional clay with innovative glazes and emphasising the integration of modern technology with traditional ceramic craftsmanship to promote technological development in ceramic art (Tao, 2023; Shao, 2016). LZQ maintained a more traditional approach to creation, relying primarily on classical techniques in material and technological use, a position consistent with artists who prioritise continuity of craftsmanship and material heritage (“Trends in Contemporary Ceramic Art,” 2023). CLS paid greater attention to refined traditional craftsmanship in terms of form, while expressing a personal modern decorative language through surface treatment, resulting in works that retain conceptual depth and visual complexity within a traditional material framework (Naumburg, 1955; Shao, 2016).

In this thesis, explore the aesthetic framework, symbolic system and material and technical applications in modern ceramic art creation, particularly how these elements influence contemporary ceramic artists’ artistic expression and cultural inheritance in their creative practices (“Trends in Contemporary Ceramic Art,” 2023; Shao, 2016). By analysing the works of four renowned artists and conducting interview analyses with three young Chinese ceramic artists, this study draws the following main conclusions:

The diversity and development of aesthetic frameworks: The aesthetic framework of modern ceramic art not only emphasises the continuation of traditional aesthetic theories but also continuously integrates innovative elements (“Trends in Contemporary Ceramic Art,” 2023). Through the analysis of the artists, it is evident that they demonstrate strong personalised styles and theoretical affinities in their aesthetic expression, reflecting the evolving nature of contemporary ceramic aesthetics (Weiwei et al., 2009; Kaddar et al., 2022)

The profound impact of cultural and historical background on symbolic systems: Symbolic systems represent a critical component of modern ceramic art creation and are deeply influenced by cultural and historical contexts as well as artists’ personal experiences (Naumburg, 1955; Shao, 2016.).

The potential impact of materials and technology on ceramic creation: In the application of materials and techniques, artists’ choices and strategies reveal different priorities, highlighting the expanding role of material experimentation and technological development in contemporary ceramic art practice (Tao, 2023; Al-Bayat & Abdul-Karim, 2023)

Comprehensive analysis: In modern ceramic art creation, the artist’s aesthetic framework, symbolic system and use of materials and technology function as integrated expressions of artistic identity and cultural background (“Trends in Contemporary Ceramic Art,” 2023; Naumburg, 1955). Artists not only inherit traditional ceramic craftsmanship but also actively innovate, responding to social, cultural and technological transformations in diverse ways (Shao, 2016; Tao, 2023). In terms of symbolic systems, these practices are profoundly shaped by cultural and historical contexts and personal experience, leading artists to develop distinctive artistic languages and personalised modes of expression through sustained creative practice (Naumburg, 1955; Weiwei et al., 2009).

4 VISUAL ANALYSIS OF ESTABLISHED ARTISTS' WORKS

This section presents a visual and formal analysis of representative works by four established Chinese ceramic artists: Li Jianhua (LJH), Bai Ming (BM), Li Jacky (LJ) and Zhu Legeng (ZLG) examined across four fixed dimensions: artistic form, cultural/symbolic language, thematic concern and creative technique.

For easy display, we can assign each artist a score on four dimensions (such as 1 to 5 points, with 5 representing the highest score).

The bar chart will present the comparative scores of five artists in four aspects:

- Horizontal axis: representing the analysis of the creative works of four artists from four perspectives (art form, cultural language symbol system, art theme and creative technique)
- Vertical axis: indicating the scores (1 to 5 points) (11 pt blank line)

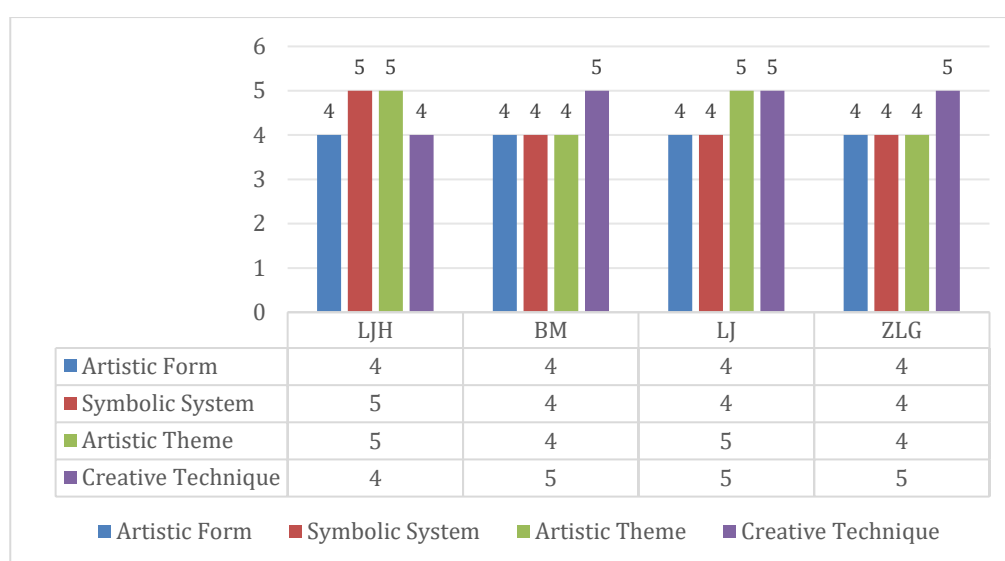


Figure 2 Comparison of the creative situations of four artists

4.1 Interpretation on Visual Analysis

Through Table 5, the strengths and characteristics of each artist in different dimensions. Here is a brief explanation of each side.

Table 5 Strengths and characteristics of each artist				
Code	Type of Artists and Art form	Cultural Language and Symbolic System	Artistic Theme	Creative Technique
LJH	Ceramic sculpture, installation, video art	Combining traditional Chinese symbols with modern art forms, exploring the relationship between "people" and "things".	Human relationships with society, nature and philosophical reflection.	A wide range of materials are used (such as metal and wood) and the space is highly experimental.

Li Jianhua (LJH)

LJH: A Dialogue Between Tradition and Modernity" (China Contemporary Art Criticism, 2012): The article examines the ways in which LJH fuses traditional Chinese symbols with contemporary art forms in his sculpture creations, especially in some of his important installation works, how he explores the issues of human existence and cultural identity through the symbolic meaning of objects.

LJH's innovative art in sculpture, installation and video, as well as his exploration of the fusion of traditional Chinese cultural symbols and modern art forms, has garnered the attention of many scholars and art critics.

LJH and the Aesthetic Transformation of Modern Sculpture" (Contemporary Art, 2015): This article analyses LJH's exploration of the relationship between "man" and "object" in his sculptures and how he creates philosophically laden works by choosing materials and spaces.



Figure 3 LJH's Artwork, 2024

BM	Primarily using geometric shapes and abstract expression, combining visual symbols to reflect modern society.	Perceptions of modern life, space and time and the collision of globalized culture.	Precise geometric composition, experimentation with space and color.
Ceramic art, installation			

Bai Ming (BM)

BM's works focus on geometric shapes, colors and spatial sense, especially his use of abstract art language and reflection on contemporary culture, which have led to widespread discussions in the art world.

Wang Peng, "Bai Ming: Abstract and Geometric Art Exploration" (Art Research, 2014): This article provides a detailed analysis of Bai Ming's art, particularly emphasizing how he explores modern life's visual perception through the combination of geometric shapes and color blocks.

Yang Ying, "Bai Ming's Space Consciousness and Modern Art Language" (China Art Review, 2016): This article explores how Bai Ming's art reflects the changes of modern society from the perspective of spatial sense and the strong visual impact of his works reflects the cultural collisions under the background of globalization.



Figure 4 BM's Artwork 2020

LJ	Oil painting, ceramics	Integrating Chinese culture with Modern modernism, focusing on the exploration of individual identity and historical experience.	Philosophical reflection on the existence of humanity, historical memory and social identity.	Exquisite oil painting techniques, the use of colour layering and shape blending.
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Li Jacky (LJ)

LJ's artistic techniques and themes are often cantered on profound reflection on social history and exploration of individual identity, especially how he combines oil painting and installation art to express his ideas in multi-dimensional ways.

Liu Qing, "Li Jacky: The Entanglement of History and Individual" (Contemporary Art Criticism, 2017): This article analyses the tense relationship between the individual and history in Li Jacky 's works, especially how he explores identity recognition and cultural memory through abstract expressionist techniques.

Zhao Jing, "Li Jacky and the Limits of Oil Painting Expression" (Modern Art, 2018): The article discusses Li Jacky 's techniques in oil painting creation, especially how his method of colour layering and shape mixing can achieve rich expression of emotions.



Figure 5 LJS's Artwork 2020

ZLG	Combining modernism and Chinese traditional elements, reflecting the conflict between society and individual emotions.	Criticism of social phenomena and modernity issues.	A delicate oil painting technique combined with multimedia elements, a strong personal style.
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Zhu Legeng (ZLG)

ZLG's art style blends Western modernism and Chinese traditional elements and he explores themes of modernity, social phenomena and emotional conflicts through the combination of oil painting and multimedia.

Liu Dan, "Zhu Legeng's Oil Painting Art and Social Criticism" (Contemporary Art Review, 2013): Analysed how Zhu Legeng reflects social criticism and explores the emotions of modern people through the use of colour and composition in his oil painting creations.

Zhou Xiaofeng, "Zhu Legeng and the Modernity Conflict in Chinese Contemporary Art" (Art and Culture, 2016): Discussed how Zhu Legeng balances the elements of Western modernism and Chinese traditional culture in his art creations and presented the modernity issues presented in his works.



Figure 8 LJS's Artwork 2020

4.2 Summary

The literature review and data analysis reveal that the four artists have investigated subjects such as the integration of traditional and modern Chinese art, cultural issues arising from globalization and philosophical reflections on human existence (Shao, 2016; Ai Weiwei et al., 2009). In their work, they express these ideas through a variety of artistic forms, techniques and symbolic systems, reflecting broader trends in contemporary ceramic practice and postmodern artistic expression. Each artist makes a distinctive contribution to modern Chinese ceramic art, constructing individual artistic identities through diverse symbolic languages and innovative creative methodologies (Weiwei et al., 2009; Kaddar et al., 2022)

4.2.1 Main Aesthetic Frameworks Guiding Modern Ceramic Art

The interviews revealed that each artist follows a distinct but structured aesthetic framework in their creative process. These frameworks are often shaped by exposure to renowned artists and major exhibitions. The artists displayed a deep theoretical and aesthetic literacy and integrated multiple aesthetic concepts to innovate both the form and content of ceramic art. Aesthetic preferences are consistently guided by personal interest, technical proficiency and symbolic intent, forming a conscious structure that supports ongoing artistic production.

4.2.2 Influence of Cultural and Historical Contexts on Symbolic Systems

Artists' symbolic systems are strongly shaped by their cultural heritage, educational background and personal upbringing.

Artist's work reflects a profound engagement with traditional Chinese architectural symbols; merging tradition with a clear modern and personal aesthetic. The findings show that symbolic creation is both a culturally grounded and individually mediated process.

4.2.3 Impact of Materials and Techniques on Contemporary Ceramic Creations.

While the use of new materials remains relatively limited among the three artists, all expressed a willingness to experiment in the future, revealing a layered aesthetic that balances heritage and innovation.

5 Discussion

The two strands of data are broadly convergent. Interview participants describe symbolic-system formation as a deliberate, ongoing process shaped by cultural background, education and exposure to influential artists and exhibitions; the visual analysis of established artists' works shows this same dynamic realised at a more developed career stage, where traditional Chinese motifs are consistently reworked through contemporary form, material combination, or installation strategy rather than reproduced unchanged. Where the strands diverge is in the pace and visibility of material/technological experimentation: interview participants describe this as an emerging interest not yet fully realised in their current output, while at least one established artist (LJH) already works across ceramic, metal and wood within a single installation practice. This suggests that willingness to experiment with material and technology may increase, rather than decrease, as artists' careers develop a pattern that would be worth testing in future research with a larger sample.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to examine how contemporary Chinese ceramic artists construct and apply aesthetic symbolic systems, through interviews with three emerging artists and visual analysis of four established artists' works. The findings answer the three research questions as follows.

RQ1: All three interview participants operate within a structured aesthetic framework shaped by exposure to influential artists and exhibitions, though they differ in how strongly that framework is grounded in explicit theory (LZQ and ZMM) versus applied experimentation with form and content (CLS). The visual analysis shows a parallel pattern among established artists: each works within a recognisable, consistent formal vocabulary installation-based (LJH), geometric-abstract (BM), painterly-layered (LJ), or surface/multimedia (ZLG) rather than an eclectic or undirected one.

RQ2: Cultural heritage, educational background and personal upbringing are the primary forces shaping symbolic content for both emerging and established artists. Emerging artists describe this influence directly in relation to specific cultural references (e.g., LZQ's engagement with traditional architectural symbols); established artists' works show these same references reworked through contemporary form, for instance LJH's re-staging of traditional objects within installation, or ZLG's fusion of Western modernism with Chinese motifs. Symbolic systems are therefore both culturally grounded and individually mediated, consistent across both data strands.

RQ: Among interview participants, new-material use is limited and concentrated in glazes and decorative techniques rather than structural or compositional innovation, though all three expressed intents to experiment further. Among established artists, material and technical range is wider, with cross-material practice (LJH) and multimedia integration (ZLG) indicating that technical experimentation becomes more visible as artists' practices mature.

These findings are drawn from a small, purposively selected sample three interview participants and four visual-analysis cases and should be read as an in-depth, case-based account rather than a representative claim about Chinese ceramic art as a whole. Within that scope, the study contributes an

empirically grounded, comparative account of how symbolic systems are built in contemporary Chinese ceramic practice and offers the qualitative comparative framework used in Sections 3 and 4 as an alternative to numerical scoring for future studies working with similarly small samples. Future research with a larger and more diverse sample could test whether the relationship observed here between career stage and technical experimentation holds more broadly and could extend the comparative framework to artists working outside China to examine which elements of symbol formation are culturally specific and which are more general to contemporary ceramic practice.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards set by the Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Ethical Committee. Ethical approval was obtained prior to the commencement of the study to ensure that all procedures adhered to established guidelines for research involving human participants. The approval process ensured that participants' rights, privacy and welfare were fully protected throughout the study and that informed consent was appropriately obtained from all participants involved.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that this study was conducted solely for academic and knowledge advancement purposes. There are no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, that could have influenced the research outcomes, interpretation of results, or conclusions presented in this work

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