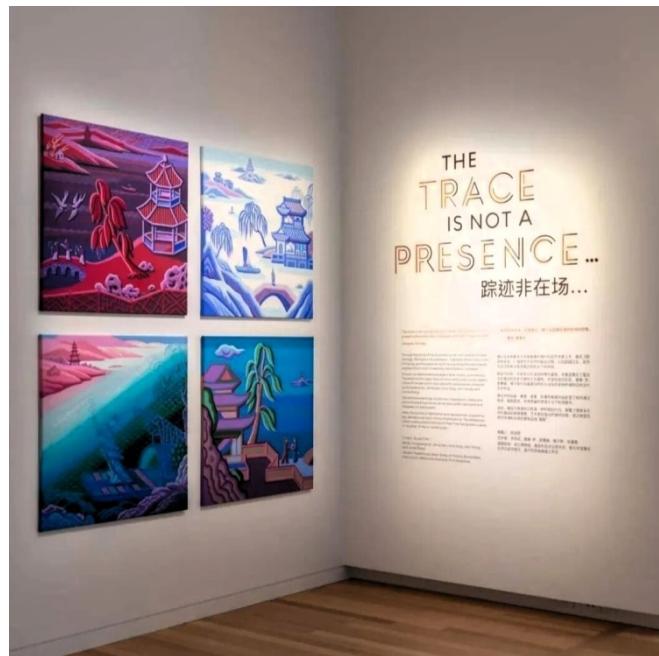


A Guide to the Blue-and-White Code

— With the Artist Fan Dongwang Present

By Chun Zi 淳子



The Traces is Not Present, Chau Chak Wing Museum, Sydney University.

I. Blue-and-White Porcelain Laces London with a Trim of Lace

2018, London was no longer the city of fog.

Before a glass vitrine at the British Museum, Fan Dongwang gazed at a blue-and-white bowl from the Wanli 万历 reign. The label read: "17th-century Chinese export porcelain."

Four hundred years ago, Chinese porcelain was loaded onto merchant ships and sent across the seas.

Sailors wrapped it layer upon layer in cork and straw—these fragile Eastern treasures, seen by Western eyes as "blue dreams on

white ground," each line holding the sunken warmth of the kiln worker's palms.

Blue-and-white shipwrecks and fantasies of wealth.

In 1603, the Portuguese merchant ship *Santa Catarina* sank near the Strait of Malacca. This massive, pitch-black vessel—shaped like a pirate ship—carried vast quantities of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain, silk, musk, and other precious cargo. Seized by the Dutch, the goods flowed into Europe and directly propelled the boom of the porcelain trade there.

Legends of Chinese porcelain shipwrecks became mirages of fortune, spurring prospectors onward.

Power is an aphrodisiac; so is wealth.

Warriors dug through silt. A blue-and-white bowl surfaced from the deep; on its base, unmistakably, the mark: "*Made in the Jiajing* 嘉靖 *reign of the Great Ming.*"

The fish-and-algae motif along the rim unfurled like a delicate lace edging—this was the West's first close, intimate gaze upon the "Orient."

They called these wares "Kraak porcelain," naming them after the Dutch captain who first discovered them.

A shipwreck became an allegory of East-West trade.

The imitation of Delft Blue.

Potters in Delft, Holland, tried to replicate the glaze of blue-and-white porcelain, yet never succeeded in firing that "translucent white."

—Much like the West's imagination of the East, forever veiled by the haze of underglaze blue.

Records of the East India Company state: "The value of Chinese porcelain lies in its irreproducibility."

Porcelain became a status symbol among Europe's elite; the East remained a mirage; the East on the label was forever marked as East.

Fan Dongwang could not move on.

With a pencil, he sketched the bowl in his notebook—along with four centuries of time.

Traces, Not Present.

Backstage at Xia'er's 夏儿 book launch.

Chun Zi went looking for a drink. Turning her head, she spotted the artist Fan Dongwang.

Alcohol, for Chun Zi, as for Hemingway—either intoxication, or inspiration rushing straight through.

Learning that Fan Dongwang's exhibition *Traces, Not Present* was still on view, Chun Zi said, "Winter isn't made for parties—why don't we do a livestream at the gallery?"

Zhao Rong 赵戎, host of *Australian Impressions*, eagerly chimed in.

Afterward, the three of them, having said "darling" countless times in the group chat, finally settled every detail of the livestream.

Zhao Rong promptly released the preview.

Proust's Soul Dessert.

Women, after all, need not worry about logic.

On the morning of July 25, 2025—the day of the livestream—Zhao Rong met Chun Zi at Newtown Station.

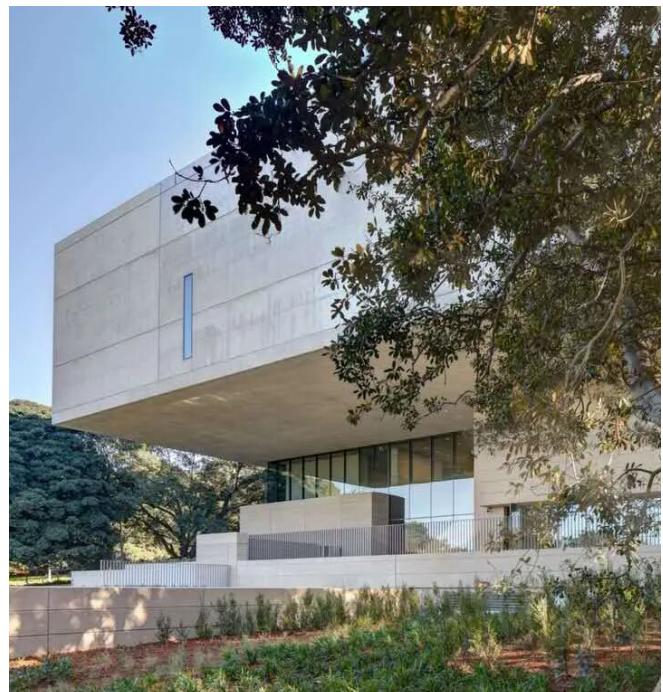
Passing a second-hand bookstore, they found the trendy watermelon-cake shop beneath a graffiti wall.

They ate cake carefully, sipped coffee gingerly, afraid of staining the clothes they'd soon wear on camera.

Dessert was a little fairy.

The two women happily decided to walk to the University of Sydney.

Ascending the steps of the Chau Chak Wing Museum, they saw, through the glass doors, Dr. Fan already waiting—upright as a pencil.



The museum lighting felt unreal.

Between illusion and solidity, they moved into the galleries.

They passed through, then doubled back.

Behind them, in a display case, three small sketches—unassuming, yet familiar. A closer look brought a jolt of surprise: Picasso!

One could not help but sigh—by 1907 in Paris, Picasso had already begun Cubism; *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* shattered the rules of perspective, reconstructing space with geometric shards.

At a stairway corner stood a Renaissance marble sculpture.

The chisel had turned stone into silk—
unthinkable.

"Is it an original?" Chun Zi asked.

"Of course," said Dr. Fan.

With quick, light steps, they arrived at the museum's China Gallery of Dr. Fan's works: *Traces, Not Present*.

Delft potters once frantically tried to imitate this blue.

Within this field of blue, the "willow pattern" made me shiver—drooping willows, small bridges, ancient pagodas like stage sets; three tiny figures enact a "Chinese love story" woven by British merchants: a woman named "Kong Xi" falls in love with a young man surnamed "Zhang," opposed by a forbidding father. This story never existed in China, yet circulated on Western dining tables for two centuries.



"A miniature *Romeo and Juliet*, or *Cinderella*," Chun Zi asked. "Why did you choose this story?"

Because perhaps all cultural identity is built upon some form of fiction.

In Love (*Oaths of Sea and Mountains*), I painted peach branches into heart shapes; falling petals spell the English word "love." When depicting Zhang's small boat, I referenced Ming dynasty woodblock prints, yet used thick acrylic to mimic the reflective sheen of glaze—I wanted viewers to see the process of "translation," to see how beauty deforms in transmission, and how it takes root in new soil.

The first question: inspiration.

Memory rewinds.

I stand at the centre of the Chinese Gallery at the British Museum. Cold light falls from above like a thin frost.

In the vitrine, a Wanli blue-and-white bowl rests quietly on velvet. The fish-and-algae motif along the rim glows a deep blue; the lines ripple like water, expanding in rings.

The "Made in the Jiajing reign of the Great Ming" mark has blurred; the fish-and-algae pattern remains as clear as yesterday. The shipwreck becomes a metaphor.



Fan Dongwang Love (*Oaths of Sea and Mountains*)

I often enter the materials lab.

Using X-ray spectroscopy, I analyse the glaze of a Qianlong 乾隆 export porcelain shard.

Curves flicker on the screen—the ratios of cobalt, iron, manganese.

I record the data.

Back in the studio, I add trace graphite and silicon powder to cobalt blue. The blue on canvas begins to breathe, revealing the characteristic “rust spots” of blue-and-white—those kisses left by iron as cobalt diffuses in kiln fire.

The wildest are the yellow stains.

I dye the canvas with aged pu'er tea, then fumigate it with sulfur for seven days and nights. Gradually, mold-like marks emerge in the corners, like wounds bitten by time. Friends say it's destruction; I say no—it's an invitation: an invitation for time to become my accomplice.

The livestream camera focuses on the palette.



Twelve shades of “blue-and-white blue,” from moon-white to deep indigo, are arrayed beside shards of historical porcelain.

Before painting, I often touch them—the edges sharp, the glaze icy.

Four hundred years ago, another hand touched them the same way.

“Living between cultural seams, how do you situate yourself?” Chun Zi’s voice pulls me back.

I recall Wu Guanzhong’s 吴冠中 idea of “standing crosswise.” Not choosing one bank or the other, but standing in the middle of the river, feeling currents from both directions. In my studio, the Cantonese folk song *Liu Qingniang* 柳青娘 plays on loop. I print out its soundwave graph; those undulating lines become the lines running through *Fire (Beating the Mandarin Ducks Apart 棒打鸳鸯)*—the rhythm of heartbeats, the fluctuation of memory.



Fan Dongwang *Fire (Beating the Mandarin Ducks Apart)*

An AR team is testing a new program.

Scan the canvas with a phone, and blue-and-white patterns rise from the surface, unfolding different versions of the story. The idea comes from 18th-century export porcelain's "hidden images"—designs that appear only when water is poured.

Isn't cultural memory the same? Always on the verge of appearing, waiting for a proper gaze, a timely rainfall.

I suddenly understand: what I seek has never been a fixed origin, but how patterns come into being and are passed on—like the blue on an imperial kiln master's thumb, never washed away. On my canvas, it blossoms into another willow shore.

The river flows on, carrying away shipwrecks and bringing new riverbeds. Everyone who "stands crosswise" in the cultural current is a ferryman, ferrying those fragile, beautiful patterns—endlessly misread yet endlessly reborn—from this shore to the other, from yesterday to tomorrow.

Fan Dongwang - Painting Between Worlds

13 November – 4 December 2025



Fan Dongwang, *Hope*, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 80 cm

Exhibition Opening: Thursday 13 November 2025, 6 - 8 pm

Art Atrium 48, Level 1/48 Alfred St South, Milsons Point, NSW 2061

Explore how perspective transforms vision, Fan Dongwang bridges Eastern and Western traditions, reinterpreting landscapes through Chinese calligraphic brushwork and Pop Art's vivid flatness. His work is a meditation on belonging and memory, inviting you to see the world through shifting horizons.

E. gallery@artatrium48.com Ph. +61 2 9661 5669

W. <https://artatrium.com.au/48-current-exhibition-2/fan-dongwang-painting-between-worlds>

III. Wandering: Painting Without Borders

On Christmas Eve, ART ATRIUM 48 Gallery held Dr. Fan Dongwang's solo exhibition, *Painting Between Worlds*.

Before the opening, Chun Zi arrived early—to look in silence.

She stood before the painting *Wahroonga Station*.



Fan Dongwang *Wahroonga Train Station*

A train station is neither origin nor destination, but a space of transition, waiting, transformation.

Time here is suspended—having bid farewell to the homeland of the past, yet not arrived at the future.

This sense of being “on the road,” of floating “in between,” with its ritual gravity, metaphorizes the immigrant condition—an eternal present tense, where return and departure, memory and expectation, pull at each other in search of balance.

On the opposite wall stood eucalyptus trees. Stripped of bark, naked, revealing an utter blue-white—like the knife marks left when Jingdezhen 景德镇 potters scrape a porcelain body, carrying a rough, ancient, untamed allure.



Fan Dongwang *Eucalyptus*

Dr. Fan said beside her, “Australian eucalyptus trees are born with memories of fire—their seeds need flames to crack open; ashes are the wings of their rebirth.”

Chun Zi nodded. Yes—this is Fan Dongwang’s unique eucalyptus grammar.

Within the linen shirt of the refined scholar Dr. Fan Dongwang lurks an artist’s madness.

“Art is, after all, a dangerous love affair.”



Outside the window, a pink cockatoo suddenly burst into manic laughter.

Fan Dongwang tipped back his cup and drained the tea.

Eucalyptus leaves swayed in light and shadow, like a love letter never spoken.

The crowd lingered until closing time.

Night was still young.

From the gallery ceiling, umbrellas hovered—one by one, porcelain-body white, like

drifting moons, waiting for a Jiangnan 江南
misty rain.



Perhaps tomorrow, he thought, it would be worth trying to immerse a charred eucalyptus branch in blue-and-white glaze. After firing, could the texture of charcoal and the sheen of porcelain redeem each other in destruction?

That night, Chun Zi drank a little too much.

Late dreams arrived—

In the gallery, a crescent moon, like Daiyu's 睞玉 arched brows; beneath umbrellas, Kong Xi and Zhang, like fireflies, fluttering butterfly wings, dancing lightly—blue-and-white porcelain shattered across the floor—

If Fang Wenshan 方文山 were here to see the exhibition, might he write Jay Chou 周杰伦 a sequel to *Blue-and-White Porcelain*?



Chun Zi 淳子 is a registered member of the China Writers Association, a National First-Class Literary and Arts Editor, and a former host with Shanghai Radio and Television. She is a Visiting Research Fellow at Fudan University, a speaker for the China Workshop at the Harvard-Yenching Library (Harvard University), Honorary Chair of Elite Culture Australia, and Honorary President of the Australian Women Entrepreneurs Association.

She has published 33 books totalling over five million words, including *Blossoms and Witherings of Eileen Chang*, *Qipao*, *Lipstick*, *Republican-Era Elegance*, *Her City: A Map of Eileen Chang*, *The Woman Who Sleeps by Day*, *Shanghai Idle Women*, *Rouge Traces in Old Shanghai Houses*, *Trifles of the Republican Era*, *The Day Before Yesterday*, and *Shanghai's Jazz Age*, among others.

Her honours include the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television Outstanding Editor Award, the Golden Pen Award from the China Radio and Television Association, the Shanghai Writers Association Outstanding Work Award, and more than twenty other distinctions.



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