

Crafting Modern China: the Revival of Yixing Pottery

by

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Submitted to OCAD University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Contemporary Art, Design, and New media Art Histories Program

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, May, 2013

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Abstract

The revival of Chinese pottery tradition from Yixing (I-hsing) after the Chinese Cultural Revolution raises a series of questions on cultural production, history, and cultural identity in post-Mao China. The study of Yixing pottery reveals China's transformation from a mode of production dominated by communist ideology and planned economy to a new era marked by a type of hybrid ideological and economic system. This essay argues that Yixing pottery is a politicized artifact, in which the politics of value and the politics of identity arise from the commodification and ideological appropriation of revitalized traditions. Yixing pottery is culturally informed; socially practiced; politically charged; and commercially contaminated. The contemporary cultural significance of Yixing pottery reveals an irony: the destruction of traditional culture in Mao's red China is redefined by the reconstruction of socialist culture in China's rise as a new world power.

Acknowledgements

I own a debt of gratitude to my primary advisor, Dr. Michael Prokopow, for his invaluable expertise and unwavering support throughout every stage of this paper.

I am also greatly indebted to my second reader, Dr. Dot Tuer, for her dedicated guidance and being my best source of inspiration.

My thanks also go to Dr. Lynne Milgram for her advices and her distinctive knowledge and expertise.

I am especially grateful to Yixing pottery artists: Ms. Wang Yinxian, Mr. He Daohong, Mr. Pan Chiping, Mr. Chen Guoliang, Mr. Shi Xiaoma, Mr. Wu Jieming, Ms. Yao Zhiquan, and Mr. Bao Tingbo, for sharing their artistic ideas of pottery making during the interviews in July 2012.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Ms. Myrna Lo in sharing the fascinating stories of Dr. K. S. Lo. I am also deeply grateful for Ms. Ilze Wright for her infallible support in the entire process of this paper.

I certainly own Mr. Leung and Mr. Tong a big thank you for their incredible knowledge of Yixing pottery and infinite reserves of encouragement for this paper.

Finally, special thanks to all my wonderful friends for their great support during this MRP project.

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Introduction

The Yixing ceramics exhibition opens today in the Forbidden City, Beijing. This exhibition is the largest Yixing ceramics exhibition since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Organized by the Yixing Ceramics Company, the exhibition shows more than 2,000 types of pottery, 4,600 ceramics works, including the well-known purple clay pottery, the colorful Jun wares, the elegant celadon, the novel fine ceramics, as well as the functional industrial ceramics. Most of the works in the exhibition are new products after the smashing of the 'Gang of Four', which reflect the recovery, new technical development and innovations of Yixing ceramics in the past few years.¹

On September 2nd 1979, China's official newspaper *The People's Daily* ran a news article titled "Yixing Ceramics Exhibition Opens in the Forbidden City," in which it identified the rehabilitation of the makers and the recovery of traditional Yixing (I-hsing) ceramics production. The exhibition was mounted during the wake of China's new market reforms (1978). These reforms were initiated by the rehabilitated leader Deng Xiaoping following Mao Zedong's death and the fall of the 'Gang of Four' in 1976 which brought the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Representing the view of the state, the news report acknowledged the government's re-recognition of traditional cultural production and the elevation of its status as a new economic strategy whereby constructing and regenerating traditional culture served as a vehicle for commodity production.

The exhibition was organized by the Yixing Ceramics Company, a state-owned enterprise in charge of all the production and trade of pottery from the 1950s to the 1980s

¹ Based on the author's own translation, People's Daily, <http://rmrbw.net/search.php?> (1979), accessed Dec. 20, 2012.

in Yixing city.² Although the press did not disclose who attended the exhibition nor disclose how many Chinese could actually afford the luxurious cultural works shown in the exhibition at that time, there was certainly a focus on foreign trade. For example, a Japanese visitor bought several purple clay teapots and described his experience of this exhibition as “truly amazing”.³ There was also a Chinese American who bought a purple clay coffee set for 1,200 yuan - a relatively high price for the economic conditions within China during 1979.⁴

The 1979 exhibition reflects the shifted focus of political control from the communist class struggle to the commodification and appropriation of cultural artifacts by the state. As Mao’s successor Deng Xiaoping stated, “Our approach is to define new policies according to new circumstances, while retaining our best traditions.”⁵ Traditional cultural productions that were once purged as ‘old’ culture and beliefs during the Cultural Revolution were restored and regenerated in post-Mao China. Accordingly, the study of Yixing pottery reveals China’s transformation from a mode of production dominated by communist ideology and planned economy to a new era marked by a type of hybrid

² Shi, Juntang. 2007, *Yixing: the capital of pottery (Chinese: yong yuan de tao du)*, (Shanghai: Guji publishing house), p.16.

³ Erliang Fu, *Yixing Purple Clay*, http://www.jstaoxie.com/show_content.asp?id=723 (2008), accessed March 29, 2013.

⁴ Mfcun. “The biography of Yixing Purple Clay Factory,” <http://www.dyee.org/bbs/thread-306054-1-1.html> , accessed March 29, 2013.

⁵ Xiaoping Deng, “Carry out the policy of opening to the outside world and learn advanced science and technology from other countries,” <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/dengxp/vol2/text/b1240.html> (October 10, 1978), accessed March 30, 2013.

ideological and economic system. This transformation is akin to the reclamation of a romanticized past.

The strategy of deploying cultural artifacts for new political and economic purposes raises questions about the relationship between politics and artifacts in post-Mao China. The embodiment of artistry, commodity, and history in Yixing pottery reflects how Chinese cultural production was intertwined with the paradoxical discourses about China's socialist ideology and modern self-identity, and with totalitarianism and individualism, tradition and modernity. This essay argues that Yixing pottery is a politicized artifact, in which the politics of value and the politics of identity arise from the commodification and ideological appropriation of revitalized traditions. Yixing pottery is culturally informed; socially practiced; politically charged; and commercially contaminated. The contemporary cultural significance of Yixing pottery reveals an irony: the destruction of traditional culture in Mao's red China is redefined by the reconstruction of socialist culture in China's rise as a new world power. In the process of commercialization and the adoption of capitalist market principles of ownership and production in post-Mao China, Yixing pottery was transformed from the symbol of the "exploiting classes" during the Cultural Revolution to become the cultural embodiment of a "socialism with Chinese characteristic," as coined by the Chinese government.⁶ The practice of the pottery makers shifted from collective production under state-owned

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "The 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China Attracts Global Attention," <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zwjg/zwbd/t992461.htm> (November 25, 2012), accessed on March 5, 2013.

enterprise to independent studio production in the rise of privatization in which the state enterprises were converted into the private sector. In the tides of China's modernization and market reforms, the state and individual collectors were both the patrons and appropriators of the precarious traditional handicraft industry, whose interventions were the driving forces to the development of Yixing pottery.

Additionally, the post-Cultural Revolution production of Yixing pottery raises questions about contemporary Chinese citizens' redefinition of China since 1979, particularly with respect to the country's cultural identity. A homogeneous global culture has increasing influence over local cultural sovereignty through accelerated commodity flows and cultural consumption. At the same time, in the domestic context, the effect of commodity fetishism and alienation in China's emerging materialistic society holds the potential risk of corruption, ideological crisis, and new forms of social instability in which cultural beliefs may be altered and twisted in the process of modernization and commodity exchange. To counterbalance these threats, the reinvention of what have long been seen as traditional cultural values, as well as the reconstruction of a socialist cultural ideology, demonstrates the intertwined socio-political struggles of the state's consolidation of national power and social order. Hence, the profound social influences of traditional culture were employed as strategies of ideological appropriation. Simultaneously, the longing for the past in ancient China before its decline in the 19th century has become the contemporary Chinese dream. Xi Jinping, the new president of China said in February 2013, "to realise the renaissance of the Chinese nation is the

greatest dream for the Chinese nation in modern history.”⁷ However, as Arjun Appadurai, a contemporary social-cultural anthropologist and theorist, insightfully points out in his essay on global flows, “the past is now not a land to return to in a simple politics of memory. It has become a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios, a kind of temporal central casting, to which recourse can be had as appropriate and the imagination as a social practice.”⁸ By examining Yixing pottery in the context of a society inseparable from the contradictions of a socialist system and capitalist mode of production, state monopolies and private enterprises, old traditions and new cultures, the haunting historical consciousness and Western influences, means that these paradoxical pairings reveal the social and economic condition I would like to call ‘Integrated Chinese Modernity.’

Ultimately, the ‘social life’ of Yixing pottery embodies changing meanings and how “commoditization lies at the complex intersection of temporal, cultural, and social factors,”⁹ in which the spirit of tradition cannot be destroyed and forgotten, but rather continuously is transformed with new meanings and integrated into contemporary cultures. By exploring the ‘social life’ of Yixing pottery, this essay demonstrates how the

⁷ Cary Huang, “Just What is Xi Jinping’s Chinese dream and Chinese renaissance,” *South China Morning Post*, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1143954/just-what-xi-jinpings-chinese-dream-and-chinese-renaissance> (February 6, 2013), accessed March 8, 2013.

⁸ Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” *Public Culture* (2, 2, Spring 1990), p. 1-11, 15-24.

⁹ Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: commodities and the politics of value,” *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.15.

sources of value that are attached to the object, and how these values are linked with cultural beliefs and social practices. By tracing back the legacy of tradition, I explore how the artistic conception of two major styles in Yixing pottery reveal the pre-modern Chinese cultural attitudes towards human relationships and the human relationships with nature, which laid the aesthetic foundation for contemporary Chinese cultural production. By analyzing the modern innovations in Yixing pottery, I argue that Yixing pottery in post-Mao China not only informs the pre-Mao Chinese aesthetics that rooted in traditions, but also reflects the new sensibilities that have been shaped by industrialization, modern technology, and changing mode of ownership since the economic reforms. Finally, by examining the play of culture, identity, and power, the paper demonstrates that the state and individuals constitute the driving forces for the revival of traditions by serving their own needs.

Values in Yixing Pottery

Functional ceramics have long been important forms of Chinese cultural artifacts. However, many scholars and collectors tend to focus on the history of painted porcelain made in the imperial period of China during the Ming (1368 - 1644 CE) and Qing (1644 - 1911 CE) dynasties, while Yixing pottery, also called Yixing stoneware or purple clay pottery ('Zisha' in Chinese), which was developed during the Song Dynasty (960 - 1279 CE), is rarely discussed in scholarly literature.¹⁰ Unlike the widely studied and colorfully

¹⁰ Xiutang Xu, *Five Hundreds Years of Yixing Purple Clay Art*, (Shanghai: Shanghai lexicographical Publishing House, 2009), p.80.

Painted porcelain made throughout China, Yixing pottery pieces are usually produced without glaze or paint, and are made only from local varieties of clay found exclusively in Dingshu Town in Yixing (named Yangxian in ancient China), which is about 200 kilometers from metropolitan Shanghai.

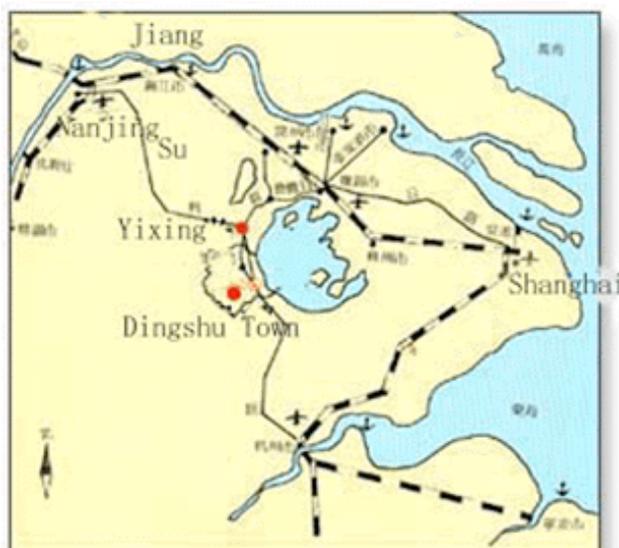


Figure 1. Location of Yixing, China

In the study of material culture, historian Jules David Prown suggests that material objects have inherent and attached values, such as material values, utilitarian values, aesthetic values, and spiritual values, and argues that “the most obvious cultural belief associated with material object has to do with value.”¹¹ When considering the trajectories of artifacts and their changing value and status in the society, the question arises: What makes an object powerful or powerless under different conditions? Indeed,

¹¹ Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol.17, No.1 (Spring, 1982), p. 3.

the object serves a metaphoric function between subject and object, mind and body. Prown suggests that, “human-made objects reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which these individual belonged.”¹² According to the methodology proposed by Prown, “artifacts are primary data for the study of material culture, and therefore, they can be used actively as evidence rather than passively as illustrations.”¹³ In the case study of Yixing pottery --mostly tea and utilitarian wares--, an understanding of embodied values is crucial to the interpretation of contemporary expressions and beliefs of China.

First, Yixing purple clay teapots, in particular, have an important utilitarian value in Chinese social life, and their birth was the product of the development of tea and tea drinking customs. In the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), “Yangxian tea” from Yixing was used as tribute. A poem by Lu Tong (795-835 CE) states that, “No plant dares to bloom before the emperor has tasted Yangxian tea.”¹⁴ As the popularity of tea culture grew among the privileged classes in the Southern Song period (1127-1279 CE), the custom of drinking tea shifted from tea powder to tea leaves.¹⁵ Consequently, a new method of

¹² Jules David Prown, “The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction,” *Art As Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001). pp.220-233.

¹³ Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol.17, No.1 (Spring, 1982), p.1-19.

¹⁴ According to the author’s own research in the Hangzhou Tea Museum China, July 2012.

¹⁵ Laurence C.S. Tam, “Preface,” *K.S.Lo’s Collection in the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware: part 1* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1984), p. 8.

preparing tea was adopted in which dried tea leaves were brewed in hot water inside a teapot for better color, aroma and flavour.¹⁶ The development of tea drinking customs led to new design and aesthetic requirements within tea wares production. The creation of the purple clay teapot by the Yixing potters was not accidental. Soon after, Yixing purple clay teapots became desirable objects, especially among the privileged scholar-gentry class to show their taste and social status during tea drinking gatherings.¹⁷

Secondly, Yixing pottery holds a distinctive material value. The purple clay teapot is made of a special kind of sandy clay found solely in Yellow Dragon Mountain in Dingshu town west of Lake Tai, south of Yixing city. This special ore material is different from materials found in other parts of China, Japan, or Europe because it contains high level of iron oxide and silicon.¹⁸ Additionally, the high iron composition allows this type of clay to be fired at a temperature of 1200 Celsius with minimum shrinkage. Many other stonewares or earthenwares would harden and vitrify at this temperature, making them susceptible to cracking and less porous. In contrast, after firing Yixing purple clay maintains its stone-like structure, and also remains highly porous. Hot water and moisture touching the surface of a Yixing clay pot seem to spread around the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Xiutang Xu and Gu Shan, *500 Years of Yixing Purple Clay Art* (Shanghai: Shanghai lexicographical Publishing House, 2009), p.100.

¹⁸ According to the author's interview with a primary Yixing pottery dealer and tea connoisseur from Hong Kong, under a magnifying lens the iron oxide appears as dark spots across an old purple clay teapot. Experienced collectors frequently seek out these tiny rusty dots as a visual clue when judging the natural quality of the clay material and the age of a teapot.

whole body of the pot giving Yixing purple clay teapots their unique “absorbing” and heat retention properties. Because of these characteristics, all utensils made with this source of clay command a higher premium than normal clay. Beside the permeability of the material, this particular clay found in Yixing also comes in a variety of rustic colors in purple, red, white, yellow and green. The most commonly found ore is a light purple or brownish red color, which is why all clays with this property are referred to as ‘purple clay.’ The unique material qualities have made purple clay a special commodity.



Figure 2. Yellow Dragon Mountain
The protected mining site of purple clay material in Dingshu Town, Yixing
(Image courtesy of the author)

In the third place, and especially for a discussion of the central role of traditions and their revival in liberalized China, the aesthetic and spiritual values of purple clay teapot in imperial China were associated with the scholar-gentry class and their Confucian philosophy. The earliest historical document about Yixing purple clay teapots is the book *Yang Xian Ming Hu Xi* (Chinese: 阳羨茗壺系) by Chinese scholar Zhou

Gaoqi (1596-1654) in Ming Dynasty.¹⁹ In this book, Zhou Gaoqi documented that the first well-known Yixing potter named Gong-Chun created the “Gong-Chun” teapot, which was seen as a decorative art style.²⁰ As Laurence C.S. Tam, the curator of Hong Kong Museum of Art suggests, “it was in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) when potters from Yixing were first recorded as masters in the making of high quality teapots with artistic appeal winning the favour of many art lovers and collectors.”²¹ Indeed, the collector K.S. Lo suggested that although the stoneware of Yixing does not constitute a mainstream Chinese ceramic arts, Yixing stoneware teapots have, through history, played important roles in Chinese social and cultural life, and particularly among the Chinese scholar and intellectual classes.²²

Finally, as a class of objects, Yixing purple clay teapots are valued for their exceptionally fine craftsmanship. The production of handmade purple clay teapots involves a painstaking process. Historically, the potter worked with their customized set of tools made of bamboo, wood, metal, and horn, and applied their skills of paddling, betting, flattening, and luting in the process of forming, shaping, and creating a fully functional and decorative teapot. In addition, unlike the imperial production of ceramic

¹⁹ Xiutang Xu and Gu Shan, *500 Years of Yixing Purple Clay Art* (Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 2009), p.90.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Laurence C.S. Tam, “Preface,” *K.S.Lo’s Collection in the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware: part* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1984), p.7.

²² K.S. Lo, *The Stoneware of Yixing: From the Ming Period to the Present Day* (New York: Sotheby’s Publication, 1986), p.9.

art which carried the official court seal, purple clay pottery has always bore a stamp of the maker's name. This individuated identification differs from other genres of Chinese ceramics where artisans went unknown because they worked for the imperial kilns. The Yixing potters not only worked autonomously, but also integrated other Chinese art forms such as painting and calligraphy into their work. Despite waves of enormous historical changes throughout Chinese history, the independent mode of production and autonomy of Yixing pottery have allowed this art form to survive into contemporary times.

Accordingly, because of the “inherent and attached value” of Yixing pottery, more and more people are embracing traditional culture and customs as the general economy improves in China.²³ In the contemporary Chinese art market, the auction value of fine ceramics has been rising rapidly since 2009 when China emerged as the world's second largest economy. The contemporary rediscovery of Yixing pottery in recent years demonstrates the enduring persistence and innovation of traditional Chinese arts and crafts in modern Chinese society. This emerging cultural phenomenon raises questions within both history and material culture: Why do traditional motifs and objects have continuing power and impact on contemporary lives? What does the revival and innovation of Yixing pottery mean in the contemporary Chinese society? How do the complex historical and political conditions inform and mobilize the making of Yixing pottery and the aesthetic tastes of people in China? On the other hand, how do the

²³ Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol.17, No.1 (Spring, 1982), p.1-19.

different stakeholders, such as the potters, state, and Chinese citizens, reinterpret and mobilize history and tradition for their own needs during the present?

The Legacy of Tradition and History

The social role of Yixing pottery was transformed from a symbol of the privileged class and imperial tastes in the Ming and Qing dynasties to a symbol of the exploiting class and an enemy of communist ideals during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. After the Revolution's end, it was transformed again into a symbol of cultural heritage and fetishized commodities circulating in the market, social life, and the dynamics of global capitalism. As tradition became redefined as a means of addressing economic urgency during the post-Mao era, what was understood as traditional culture was consciously re-embraced. For the primary purpose of earning state revenue, cultural artifacts were regenerated as exported commodities soon after the Cultural Revolution.

The rehabilitation of cultural artifacts and their makers marks an important chapter in the history of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and its aftermath. As Paul Clark notes, China's Proletarian Cultural Revolution "called on Chinese, particularly the young, to renew Mao's revolution in order that China might avoid the perils of revisionism and complacency he observed in the Soviet Union."²⁴ Maoist education led the masses to experience the ideological class struggle between the proletariat and the exploiting classes. In particular, Mao called upon students to abandon the culture of their ancestors in order to build a new socialist culture. As Chinese scholar Guo Jian argues, "according

²⁴ Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.1.

to Mao Zedong himself, the major goal of the Cultural Revolution was to purge the capitalist-roaders within the party.”²⁵ In the early stages of this socialist campaign executed by the Red Guard, “the principal targets were declared to remove the ‘old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits’ of the exploiting classes.”²⁶ Students became Red Guard. These soldiers traveled to cities and towns in search of traditional artifacts and cultural relics that were to be removed and destroyed, and as Melissa Chiu and Shengtian Zheng wrote, they “attacked the usual suspects, the ‘bourgeois,’ who had been victims of countless previous class struggles.”²⁷ The Chinese Cultural Revolution resulted in great losses of cultural and intellectual traditions and an entire generation of experts and makers were imprisoned, assigned to hard labour, and exiled. Additionally, a massive collection of precious and ancient artworks, artifacts, and cultural products were blindly destroyed and burned in both private homes and public institutions. Nien Cheng, whose family was targeted by the forces of Cultural Revolution, recounted her memory of the Red Guards’ horrifying “revolutionary activities” at her house in Shanghai, “I was astonished,” she explained, “to see several Red Guards taking pieces of my porcelain collection out of their padded boxes.” Then she recounted:

One young man had arranged a set of four K’ang Hsi winecup in a row on the floor and was stepping on them. I was just in time to hear the crunch of delicate porcelain under the sole of his shoe. The sound pierced my heart.²⁸

²⁵ Jian Guo, “Resisting Modernity in Contemporary China: The Cultural Revolution and Postmodernism,” *Modern China* (July 1999), 25 (3), p.343-372.

²⁶ Melissa Chiu and Shengtian Zheng, ed., *Art and China’s Revolution* (New York: Asia Society, 2008), p.44.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Nien Cheng, *Life And Death In Shanghai* (London: Grafton Books, 1986), p.67.

Beyond destroying ancient treasures, the Red Guards also took “revolutionary action” against the masters who inherited traditional skills. In the state-owned Yixing Purple Clay Factory, Yixing potter Jiang Rong (1919-2008) was accused of working in the “Youth Corps” led by the Kuomintang (KMT) government during the Republic of China (1912-1949).²⁹ As a consequence, Jiang Rong was no longer allowed to make pottery as the communist party viewed as the “four olds” (old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits) as representative of the ideologies of the exploiting classes.³⁰ Jiang Rong was humiliatingly punished to hard labors, such as cleaning washrooms and clearing roadside weeds in the Yixing Purple Clay Factory for ten years from 1966 to 1975.³¹ But Jiang Rong was not the only persecuted potter. Among the senior master potters, Gu Jinagzhou (1915-1996) was charged with the historical title of “pseudo security chief” in the Chinese civil wars; Zhu Kexin (1904-1986) was placed under house arrest; and Wu Yungen (1892-1969) committed suicide after being public disgraced.³²

The Yixing Purple Clay Factory itself became an instrument of political propaganda during the Cultural Revolution. While the traditional pottery was purged and the famous master potters were disgraced as counter-revolutionary, the factory began producing objects for the “revolutionary masses,” such as the “Cultural Revolution Teapot,” which inscribed the quotation from Mao and revolutionary songs on the body

²⁹ Xu Feng, *Hua Fei Hua: the Biography of Purple Clay Artist Jiang Rong* (Beijing: People’s Literature Press, 2006), p.113.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, p.114.

³² Ibid.

of teapots.³³ Beyond the propagandist products, the production process was also taken over by Maoist thinking and all people within the factory were referred to as comrades. Consequently, the potter's personal signature was prohibited and only the official signature of 'Yixing China' could appear on the works. Potters of all skill levels absurdly became "equal" in making standardized works through the act of ignoring personal creativity and individuality.³⁴

During the late stage of the Cultural Revolution, following the rehabilitation of Deng Xiaoping in 1975, the factory resumed the production of traditional styles and the master potters were restored to their former jobs within the factory.³⁵ During the communist regime before 1978, Yixing did not open up to foreign countries outside mainland China, and the local government did not allow any foreign company or individual to visit Yixing or place an order. The Yixing Purple Clay Factory and the potters were isolated from the outside world, but the factory handled limited indirect foreign trade through the Arts & Crafts Import & Export Company of Jiangsu Province in the 1960s and 1970s.³⁶ After China inaugurated its economic reforms in 1979, the Yixing Purple Clay Factory initiated its first direct export to Hong Kong collector Dr. K.S. Lo.

³³ Xiutang Xu and Gu Shan, *500 Years of Yixing Purple Clay Art* (Shanghai: Shanghai lexicographical Publishing House, 2009), p.196.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Xu Feng, *Hua Fei Hua: the Biography of Purple Clay Artist Jiang Rong* (Beijing: People's Literature Press, 2006), p.122.

³⁶ Ibid, p.197.

Eventually, the potters were allowed to mark their signatures on their works.³⁷ By 2002, most of the potters had become independent producers, and the Yixing Purple Clay Factory was converted to a private trading company.³⁸

The personal and professional narratives of Yixing potters provide useful, illustrative evidence of the profound changes in the cultural production in post Cultural Revolution China. The rehabilitated potters Gu Jingzhou (1915-1996) and Jiang Rong (1919-2008), the senior masters and teachers from the Yixing Purple Clay Factory, were celebrated in the 1979 exhibition for their traditional pottery.³⁹ Gu Jingzhou and Jiang Rong both began their early careers in 1930s Shanghai during the Republic of China era (1912-1949), where both Chinese tradition and fashionable Western lifestyle were pursued by the enthusiastic emerging Chinese bourgeois and petty bourgeoisie.⁴⁰ They joined the Yixing Purple Clay Co-op founded by master potters in 1955, which was transformed to the state-owned enterprise Yixing Purple Clay Factory in 1957. Gu Jingzhou, Jiang Rong, and five other masters, who previously worked independently and kept their knowledge secret, were named the “Seven Masters Potters.” They were hired as technology counselors to teach young apprentices and artisans in the Yixing Purple

³⁷ K. S. Lo, “Introduction,” *K.S.Lo Collection in the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware : part 2* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1990), p. 9.

³⁸ Xiutang Xu and Gu Shan, *500 Years of Yixing Purple Clay Art* (Shanghai: Shanghai lexicographical Publishing House, 2009), p.196.

³⁹ People’s Daily, “Yixing Ceramics Exhibition Opens in the Forbidden City in Beijing,” <http://rnrbw.net/search.php?> (Newspaper archive, Sep 1, 1979), accessed December 20th, 2012.

⁴⁰ Feng Xu, *Hua Fei Hua: the biography of purple clay artist Jiang Rong* (Beijing: People’s Literature Publishing House, 2006), p. 23.

Clay Factory, where privately owned knowledge and skills were transformed to “shared technology” through socialist reconstruction.⁴¹

The personal histories of Gu Jingzhou and Jiang Rong, for example, represent both the continuity of traditions and their striking, but explicable transformation in the period after 1975. Working continuously between the mid 1930s to the mid 1970s in China - arguably the most turbulent periods in the country’s modern history - the studio practices of these masters not only represented the complicated negotiation of traditional practices and the models of production, but also the ways that the material and stylistics precedents of the past can inform the aesthetics of a changed economic and ideological landscape.

Indeed, two major categories of form can be seen to characterize contemporary Yixing pottery: the minimally geometric, the decoratively naturalistic. The geometric form represents the most dominant style found in Yixing pottery. A work made by Gu Jingzhou shown in the 1979 exhibition was a cylindrical purple clay teapot with a overhead loop handle. At first glance, this work seems very plain and simplistic. However, it is an unusual piece because it simulates an ancient Chinese wheel jade carving effect, referencing the admired nobility and ancient aesthetics of both the Warring States period (403 BC - 221 BC) and the Han Dynasty (202 BC - 220 AD). Historically, wheel jade was a round shaped piece with a small hole in the centre, and was often used as a major ritual artifact in ancient Chinese ceremonies.

⁴¹ Chunlin Qiu, “Shared Technology and the Development of Artisans,” *The Transformation of Chinese Arts and Crafts* (Shanghai: Shanghai literature and art publishing group, 2011), p. 67.



Figure 3. Wheel Jade Teapot, Gu Jingzhou, 1979
(Image courtesy of a private collector)

Inspired by the design of ancient wheel jade, the body, lid, and knob of the teapot compose the circles on the flat surface of a wheel jade but in functional three-dimensional form. The design of an overhead handle reinforces the effectiveness of the wheel jade from the viewer's perspective while holding and examining the work from above. At the same time, the loop handle creates a negative space with rounded corner framing the most elegant part of the design: the lid and the empty hole as the knob popping up from the body. This humble object evokes a feeling of balance and tranquility, a Chinese pastoral aesthetics that is rooted in the pre-modern agricultural and handicraft society. Intellectuals and scholars influenced by ancient Chinese philosophies believed that the ideal personality of human should be akin to the admired natural qualities of jade: gentle

and soft on the outside, yet with an internal tenacity and an unbending soul.⁴² In Chinese material culture, Yixing pottery embodied the beholder's quest for an attitude towards the world that contained both modest and firm human characteristics. To express fully these aesthetics and spiritual values, each piece of pottery must demonstrate sophisticated handicraft techniques combined with material knowledge. In the making process, it requires painstaking craftsmanship to realize both the gentle curve and tough edges. Only after being properly fired in the kiln, can the purple clay achieve its subtle luster and splendid jade-like color. For this reason, the purple clay of Yixing is often called "purple jade."

To achieve these functional and aesthetic requirements, a Yixing teapot has to be made with traditional design principles to determine size, centre of gravity, and balance. For example, the spout must point forward and fall in a straight line with the knob and the handle; the opening of the spout must not be higher than the top of handle; the knob must be in the centre of the teapot. Understanding the importance of both functionality and aesthetics in Yixing teapots, Gu Jingzhou remarked, "In designing a good teapot, the functional values are always in conflict with the aesthetic value. It is in this contradiction that potters need to choose and find a harmonious equilibrium in creating their work of art."⁴³

While Gu Jingzhou's pottery aims for an artistic manifestation of the ideal of human relations through minimalism, the work of female master potter Jiang Rong (1919

⁴² Chinese Text Project, ed., "Shui Di," *Guan Zi* <http://ctext.org/guanzi/shui-di/ens>, accessed March 26, 2013.

⁴³ Jin Zhao, ed., "Preface" *The Collection of Teapots* (Hong Kong: Kam Fung Company, 1985), p.1.

- 2008) aims to encapsulate relationships between humanity and nature by employing imagery from the natural world. Yixing purple clay pottery has been dominated by the geometric style (favoured by the scholarly elite class since the Ming dynasty), and minimalistic pottery was often considered high art, while naturalistic pottery was deemed low art filtered through common taste.⁴⁴ Jiang Rong spent a lifetime challenging these stereotypes with her works. As the only female master potter in Yixing during the 1950s and the 1960s, Jiang Rong unflinchingly and enthusiastically created her naturalistic works and theatrical narratives inspired by the environment around her: the lotus flowers, frogs, cattle, pumpkin, water chestnut, fruits, butterflies, and toads.



Figure 4. Lotus Wine Vessel, Jiang Rong, 1965
(Image courtesy of a private collector)

⁴⁴ Feng Xu, *Hua Fei Hua: the Biography of Purple Clay Artist Jiang Rong* (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2006), p.71.

The *Lotus Wine Vessel* by Jiang Rong shown in the 1979 exhibition constitutes a rare early example of innovation in Yixing pottery. It took fourteen years before the piece was seen in public - long after it was made in 1965 and just prior to the start of the Cultural Revolution. Inspired by a summertime lotus pond near Lake Tai in Yixing, the yellow lotus root forms the main body, and the green lotus stem and leaves rest as the spout and handle. The vivid colors of the work were created from natural clay materials without applying any paints or chemicals on the work, thus showing Jiang Rong's material expertise in mixing different natural clay colors.

Upon closer inspection, this unusual wine vessel becomes puzzling since its decorative unibody has no lid to pour wine into the vessel. What is the secret behind this object and how could it function? As explained by Jiang Rong's dealer in Hong Kong, the pot is actually quite a simple structure that performs a very practical function; the secret is inside its internal construction.⁴⁵ In the bottom of this vessel, there is a hole which acts like the opening of an upside down funnel tube. This internal funnel tube almost reaches to the top of the wine vessel, so the wine is filled into the vessel from this opening when it is turned upside down. The liquid will then travel downward inside the funnel tube to the top of the vessel. After filling the wine, the vessel is then rested back onto a table, and the wine is kept around the surrounding hollow between the inner wall of the vessel and the empty funnel tube, thus preventing the wine from spilling out from the opening in the bottom. According to the dealer, scholars in the Ming and Qing periods used this kind of liquid container. Similarly designed pots were created for

⁴⁵ According to the author's interview with Jiang Rong's dealer Mr. Tong in Hong Kong, July 2012.

adding water onto Chinese ink stones during calligraphy and painting. Jiang Rong borrowed an old idea to create a newly designed wine vessel, which provides an elegant and playful experience for its beholders.



Figure 5. Mango Teapot, Jiang Rong, 1991
(Image courtesy of the author)

Another work of Jiang Rong is the *Mango Teapot*, which takes the natural shape of a bright golden mango fruit. The branch, as the handle, links its two leaves onto the mango fruit. The larger leaf is naturally folded up, as if the wind just blew through the mango orchard, and the smaller leaf is just starting to unfold. These verdant mango tree leaves highlight the freshness and liveliness of the mango itself. Besides the depiction of natural fruit, Jiang Rong also portrayed her memories of the Cultural Revolution through the mango teapot. Chinese people who lived through the 1970s would know the story

about Mao showing his symbolic support to the workers by gifting them mangoes to end the factional fighting among the Red Guards in 1968.⁴⁶ In demonstration of Mao's power and favor, worshiping the mangoes given by Mao became the strangest mass rallies and parades during the Cultural Revolution. The mango propaganda posters and badges of Chairman Mao and the workers' fanatical worship and responses transformed the mango into a strangely powerful symbol during this time.⁴⁷ Despite using the mango's image, Jiang Rong's *Mango Teapot* is more parody than promotion. The pot comments on the shifting social beliefs from the ideological fetishism of Mao's era to the commodity fetishism of post-Mao China. Jiang Rong's *Mango Teapot* quietly but subversively forces viewers to critically reflect on Chinese history and Mao's revolutions.



Figure 6. Chairman Mao's Mangoes poster, 1968
(Image courtesy of chinese posters.net)

⁴⁶ Melissa Schrift, *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2001), p.95.

⁴⁷ Chinese posters.net, "Chairman Mao's mangoes," <http://chinese posters.net/themes/mao-mangoes.php> , accessed March 27, 2013.

These close readings of selected works by Gu Jingzhou and Jiang Rong demonstrate the ways in which different societal attitudes of the society reflect the “spiritual value” of material culture as discussed by Jules David Prown.⁴⁸ Prown suggests that, “in addition to material and utilitarian values, certain objects have aesthetics value (art), some possess spiritual value (icons, cult objects), and some express attitudes towards other human beings or towards the world.”⁴⁹ Therefore, re-embracing traditional cultural artifacts offers a method to reconnect with the spirit and attitudes embodied within the object.

Modern Innovations

After several decades of development, many of the apprentices recruited by the Purple Clay Factory in the 1950s have become well-known potters themselves. One such potter is Wang Yinxian (b.1943), who was bestowed with the highest honor as being one of the great contemporary master potters of the state in 2000.⁵⁰ Wang’s works are known for blending the traditional and the contemporary. As Terese Tse Bartholomew, a curator of Asian Art Museum in San Francisco notes, “in the works of Wang Yinxian, we see the ancient tradition brought to fruition. She is versatile in all styles of Yixing ware, ancient

⁴⁸ Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol.17, No.1 (Spring, 1982), p. 3.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ According to the author’s interview with Wang Yinxian in Yixing, China, July 2012.

as well as contemporary. Her work is refined and elegant, and show a fine articulation of lines and proportion.”⁵¹

In establishing her own style of purple clay art, Wang believes there were two major breakthroughs in her career: firstly her apprenticeship, where she gained practical knowledge and traditional techniques from master potters, and secondly her theoretical study of ceramics art under faculty at the Central Academy of Arts & Design of China in 1975. Wang joined the Yixing Purple Clay Factory as a paid apprentice in 1957 when she was only fourteen years old.⁵² Here, master potters Jiang Rong and Zhu Kexin taught her. After three years apprenticeship, Wang became a promising young potter with a firm footing in traditional techniques learned from great Yixing masters.⁵³ The defining moment for Wang was during Wang’s apprenticeship with master potter Zhu Kexin in 1959, when she learned the principles and techniques of traditional naturalist style by in-depth examination of ancient masterpieces borrowed from museums. One such masterpiece was a treasured historical work of purple clay art: the *Peach Cup* made by Ming master Xiang Shensi. Wang’s later interpretation of this ancient masterpiece stands as one of the finest examples of contemporary purple clay pottery.

⁵¹ Yijia Huang and Jianliang Hang, ed., *A Collection of Purple Clay Pottery by Wang Yinxian* (Taiwan: Chinese Art and Craft Publication, 1997), p.8.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ According to the author’s interview with Wang Yinxian in Yixing, China, July 2012.



Figure 7. Peach Cup, Wang Yinxian, 1974
(Image courtesy of the artist)



Figure 8. Peach Teapot, Wang Yinxian, 1990
(Image courtesy of the artist)

In her career thus far, Wang Yinxian has made many naturalistic Yixing teapots in the forms of plants, fruits, animals inspired by the natural environment in Yixing. The *Peach Teapot*, made by Wang in 1990 reflects both her refined artistry and personal style. A comparison of the Ming dynasty *Peach Cup* and Wang's *Peach Teapot* demonstrates that these two contain some similarities, yet hold distinctive differences. First, these two works both utilize striking hand-building techniques. By using monochromatic clay material, these two works gently radiate a sense of modesty and natural simplicity rather than luxurious vanity. Through sophisticated and elegant decorations, a please aesthetic is quietly achieved without sacrificing function. In addition, they both have remarkable compositions. Within the *Peach Cup*, a peach tree branch with leaves, blossoms, and buds delicately form the integrated handle and a stable base. However, the complexity of the decoration does not overwhelm the plain cup, which is shaped as a half peach at the centre. This balance is visually pleasing and yet the object is functional for the drinking of tea or wine. Similarly, within the *Peach Teapot*, a plump peach serves as the body, while a pair of small peaches with leaves provides a lid, and exaggerated tree branches form an overhead handle. Strikingly, the overhead handle is bold and vigorous, balancing the weight of the chubby peach body. Consequently, both works embody the principle that the balanced form should be harmonious with function. In the works of Yixing pottery, form and function begin to meld as form supports the function and function supports the form.

Indeed, besides shared aesthetic principles, the *Peach Cup* and the *Peach Teapot* do exhibit significant differences. In Chinese mythology and legend, the heavenly peach

is a symbol for longevity, always a desirable blessing. However, the *Peach Teapot*, by contrast, depicts the maker's emotional connection to the spirit of nature. In July 2012, Wang explained her understanding of the relation between tradition and innovation:

It is not surprising that my generation achieved a new level in the art of Yixing pottery, because our goal is to carry forward and innovate on a good foundation already laid by our ancestors. In my works, I created many new designs based on ancient ideas but with my personal expressions. I like the ultimate beauty of the natural environment, which I feel is so close and intimate to our lives. Therefore, the naturalist teapot design is one of the most favoured styles for Chinese people, as they evokes an emotion of affections or fondness between human and nature. Through the medium of clay, I like to express the kindness, beauty and truth in the natural world.⁵⁴

Wang's artistic style lies in her pursuit of "the ultimate beauty" in nature and human spirit as well as the emotional response evoked by her works which are beyond the material dimension.⁵⁵ For the *Peach Teapot*, the focal point of the work is the robust overhead handle rather than the legendary heavenly peach. The overhand handle is composed of three sinuous and old tree branches with striking cracks and traces of their long years. Wang called her expression in the *Peach Teapot* "imperfect beauty," wherein the artist has dematerialized the purple clay and crafted it a soul for it. As Wang explained, "I use the medium of clay to portray the image of my spirit, at the same time,

⁵⁴ According to author's interview with Wang Yinxian in Yixing, China, July 2012.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

the material of purple clay gives me great possibility and freedom to pursue a variety of creative themes and a tool to express my feelings.”⁵⁶



Figure 9. Curve Teapot, Wang Yinxian and Zhang Shouzhi, 1988
(Image courtesy of the artist)

For Wang Yinxian, mastering traditional techniques and skills constituted a vital foundation for her individual creativity, which gave her confidence to create innovative works. One example is the *Curve Teapot*, which she co-designed with Zhang Shouzhi, a professor of industrial design from Central Academy of Arts & Design. At the time when Wang and Zhang collaborated, the Yixing Purple Clay Factory was aiming to elevate the

⁵⁶ Ibid.

market value and stimulate the artistic quality of production by sponsoring the potters' further education in arts and design schools. Unlike the traditionally influenced *Peach Teapot*, the *Curve Teapot* is an singularly contemporary design. In fact, the organic layering of snail shells inspired the design concept. A vortex line runs smoothly across the entire teapot from the spout to the handle, which creates dynamically varying lines and surfaces. The contrast of stillness and movement in combination with the negative and positive spaces fill this sculptural piece with rhythm and motion, which reflects the modern industrial technology in China's rapid industrialization of the 1980s. The clean, undulating lines also transforms the traditional Yixing pottery and reflects more modern industrial design, such as the circular tablewares designed by Hungarian-born, American industrial designer Eva Zeisel.⁵⁷ Paradoxically, modern industrial design seeks to emulate the visual power of organic forms in mass produced objects, while this handmade pottery attempts to capture the streamlined form associated with perfect machine-made objects. Besides showing the maker's craftsmanship, the object conveys the aesthetic sensibility of rationality and progress that mark the industrial age. Therefore, Wang's *Curver Teapot* not only demonstrates her stylistic shift from the traditional to the modern, but also reveals a dialogue between the power of nature and the prevailing aesthetics of industrialization, mechanism, and technology.

Another Yixing pottery artist, He Daohong (b. 1943), has also been tirelessly searching for his own style. He spent more than fifty years creating approximately two hundred unique designs including teapots, flower pots, wine vessels, as well as numerous

⁵⁷ Eva Zeisel Originals, <http://www.evazeisel.com>, accessed March 18, 2013.

other decorative objects. He Daohong joined the Yixing Purple Clay Factory in 1958 as an apprentice at sixteen years old, He was taught the traditional naturalistic style by famous masters Wang Yinchun and Pei Shimin. Soon, he learned how to make refined and elegant pieces that resembled works by Ming Dynasty masters. Particularly, his pottery references the ancient Chinese scholarly traditions, such as the symbolic “three friends of winter”: bamboo, pine, and plum trees.



Figure 10. Three Friends of Winter Teapots, He Daohong, 1988
(Image courtesy of the artist)

Although He’s traditionally styled teapots were highly chased by international private collectors, after receiving further professional training from the Central Academy of Arts and Design, by the middle of the 1980s, he began to change his artistic style in order to break away from the traditional forms of ancient masters.⁵⁸ He felt compelled to represent something different. His new work represented boldness and unconstrained emotion that never before seen in Yixing teapots. Eventually, he found inspiration and emotional resonance in the Song dynasty (960–1279) poetry, such as the “Entirely Red River” poem written by Song dynasty General Yue Fei (1103~1142):

⁵⁸ Yijia Huang and Jianliang Hang, ed., *A Collection of Purple Clay Pottery by Wang Yinxian* (Taiwan:Chinese Art and Craft Publication, 1997), p.188.

My wrath bristles through my helmet, the rain stops as I stand by the rail;
 I look up towards the sky and let loose a passionate roar.
 Thirty years now my deeds are nothing but dust, my journey has taken me over eight
 thousand li;
 So do not sit by idly, for young men will grow old in regret.
 ...⁵⁹

Yue Fei's passionate inspirational poem inspired He Daohong when he faced China's transformation after the turmoil of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and in the new economic liberalization and development.

During the 1980s, the massive transformation from collective ownership to privatization opened many new opportunities for Yixing potters. Firstly, potters were allowed to sell their own work after they completed the production quota set by the factory. Secondly, makers were no longer required to work everyday at fixed hours to work in the open floor workshop within the factory. Instead, because of privatization, potters became more and more independent from the state-owned factory, and even started to work in their own studios started during the 1990s.⁶⁰ Today, Yixing potters have gained the full control over their works in the market.

With this new role as independent potter, He Daohong transformed the classic language of Chinese pottery to capture the essence and mood of contemporary times. In the early 1990s, he established his own style with an unconstrained character. By presenting a vigorous modern sensibility, He Daohong's work expressed boldness and

⁵⁹ Yue Fei, English translation by Yiren Ren, *Entirely Red River*, <http://www.pureinsight.org/node/3821>, accessed March 1, 2013

⁶⁰ According to the author's interview with He Daohong in Yixing, China, July 2012.

eagerness in forms full of energy and accelerated motion. Unlike the traditional works that represent a delicate balance or a feeling of tranquility rooted in imperial taste, this work represents a break with the past and symbolizes a sense of openness, ambitiousness, and masculinity reflective of contemporary China.



Figure 11. Di-li Teapot, He Daohong, 1990
(Image courtesy of the artist)

Unlike the elegant and delicate works from the Ming and Qing dynasties, He Daohong's new style is immediately apparent in his exaggerated spouts and handles. In the work of *Di-li Teapot* ('di-li' in Chinese means 'whetstone'), for example, the top part of the handle is enlarged and then curls dynamically back to the body. Visually, this sudden change in curvature of the handle provides the effect of motion, while the relaxed

spout and knob contrast the aerodynamic handle. The entire form is composed with the contradictions between open and closed, tension and relaxation, centralization and decentralization. Cute and subversive, the teapot beckons users with wit, irony, and visual charm.



Figure 12. Tripod Teapot, He Daohong, 2004
(Image courtesy of a private collector)

In a similar fashion, He Daohong's *Tripod Teapot* simultaneously acknowledges and deviates from the historic practices. Inspired by ancient bronze tripod forms, the teapot's handle bulges exaggeratedly at the top, but decreases rapidly in volume as it returns to the body. His signature handle guides the viewer's eyes by adding a quick turns of motion to the viewer's mind. This expression of curvature and movement provokes a visual sense of power and unconstrained energy, which appeals to an ambitious and

aggressive contemporary audience.⁶¹ He Daohong's emerging style taps into the dynamism of the new consciousness in contemporary China, and materially embodies the progress of economic development. Indeed, He Daohong's work offers evidence of the transformation in social and cultural life, and the rising sense of modern self-identity.⁶²

The popularity of He Daohong's pottery rests his acknowledging of new sensitiveness, which maintaining the traditional principles of Chinese tea connoisseurship. He Daohong's contemporary style has caused a sensation and gained widespread recognition among Chinese collectors. Despite the temptations of a strong consumer market and increasing auction prices of his works, the artist still produce only a few pots per year, and each work is a unique new design. Many collectors have asked He Daohong why he makes a limited amount of works, and He Daohong explains that: "in creating my teapots, I allow only a few replicas to be done or even singular, especially in the case of works which I might call the fruits of passion." He goes on, "if I force myself to make replicas of my own works, they will not hold the same passion and just become a copy of myself, not a work of art anymore."⁶³ For He Daohong, the work is a representation of both the head and the heart. He believes that, like many other forms of art, purple clay

⁶¹ This is similar to the science of ergonomics where smooth lines are incorporated into the design. As with a sleek automobile, the vigor of this work evokes the desire of speed, elegance, eroticism and comfort.

⁶² Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (California:Stanford University Press, 1991), p.109.

⁶³ Yijia Huang and Jianliang Hang, ed., *A Collection of Purple Clay Pottery by Wang Yinxian* (Taiwan:Chinese Art and Craft Publication, 1997), p. 189.

teapots require their maker to infuse their deep emotions and intellectual forces into the process, and only then will the work become alive.

Discussing how the market-oriented production may influence the development of Yixing pottery, He Daohong suggests that, on one hand, the market reform encourages the Yixing potters to pursue their own artistic expression independently. This allows potters to focus more on their own interests and designs while affording a decent lifestyle. On the other hand, the economy of China is developing at a rapid rate driven by the forces of the art market and collectors, and it is difficult for young potters resist the temptation of making quick monetary gains by copying others or themselves. Discussing future developments of Yixing pottery, He states:

The core value of Yixing Purple Clay teapot art is the amalgamation of artistic and functional value. Yixing purple clay teapots are works of art and functional objects. It is also a combination of the culture of “tea”, and the making of “pot”. These two values will co-exist and encompass each other. I believe true art is the experience of life, which means moving forward. To maintain the status quo is to go backward, and works without a distinctive and new style mean without advancement. The creation of art ought not to imitate other people’s style, and especially not to repeat one’s own style. There is a big financial temptation from the art market and from the collectors in asking the artist to copy others or their own past famous design. But to be a true creative person, one must resist such a temptation and steadfastly fasten to his or her own creative spirit.

The artistic journeys of Wang Yinxian and He Daohong among others, demonstrate how Yixing purple clay pottery evolved from ancient forms to modern styles, and how the process of modernization affects the practices of Yixing potters, who struggled to reconcile the traditional Chinese aesthetic system with new modes of perception in the industrial age. First, Yixing purple clay pottery was transformed from a

pre-modern individual handicraft to the communist mode of collective production inscribed with the traces of the past in the object. In the communist regime, both Wang Yinxian and He Daohong learned the exclusive skills of Yixing pottery from famous pottery masters who had previously worked independently. For the development of Yixing pottery the pre-modern knowledge and skills were preserved and transferred from few masters to thousands of young and energetic masses, thereby laying the foundation for a revival of Yixing pottery and allowing this younger group of talents transcend their masters. During the Cultural Revolution, unlike the master potters who were attacked and humiliated, the young artisans like Wang Yinxian and He Daohong were able to practice their craft and further their skills without serious interruptions.

Secondly, the notion of tradition serves as the historical counterpart of innovation and the self-assurance of continuity. Wang Yinxian and He Daohong both gradually developed their modern styles from a solid traditional foundation. Their innovative designs not only incorporate traditional principles of Chinese tea drinking rituals, but also infused the pottery with self-expressions of modern consciousness. Consequently, the idea of modern innovation and creativity within Chinese cultural production is a relative progress that mixes modern consciousness with traditional techniques.

In questions about tradition and innovation within Yixing pottery, the majority of Chinese collectors tend to focus on contemporary Yixing pottery with both long established and newly developed elements, rather than antiques or out-of-range works. For Yixing artists, most believe that Yixing teapot should fulfill functional, aesthetic, and spiritual values that represent shared cultural codes rather than mere self-expression.

Yixing artist Zhou Guizhen states, “the tradition of purple clay art has its own root, which is alive and grows from generation to generation.”⁶⁴ Also as anthropologist Igor Kopytoff suggests, “culture serves the mind by imposing a collectively shared cognitive order upon the world which, objectively, is totally heterogeneous and presents an endless array of singular things.”⁶⁵ By this account, the art form of Yixing pottery embodies a “cultural biography” or a life history.⁶⁶ These objects evolve through times and mean different things to different people in different contexts.

The Play of Culture, Identity and Power

The phenomenon of rediscovering and reinventing cultural identity through traditional artifacts is a cultural narrative strategy, since cultural narratives derived from distinctive Chinese civilizations help produce a powerful and superior identity for the present. Making traditional objects is a way to insert memory and traditional values into the present production of identity after the loss of traditional culture in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Cultural theorist and sociologist, Stuart Hall notes that the searching for cultural roots in history is an “act of imaginative rediscovery,” which is a powerful

⁶⁴ Guizhen Zhou, “The Path of Tradition,” *The Appreciation of Cultured and Elegant Purple Clay Wares* (Taiwan: Sky Earth Square Round Magazine, 2008), p.12.

⁶⁵ Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization As Process,” *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* by Arjun Appadurai (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.70.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

and creative process.⁶⁷ Hall further suggests that, “cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything, which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.”⁶⁸ Thus, instead of simply retelling and restoring the past, the production of cultural identity is a conscious process of appropriation of the past. Based on the framework of cultural identity issues suggested by Hall, we must ask how Yixing purple clay pottery reveals the ‘play’ of history, culture, and power in the Chinese context? Furthermore, what are the possible implications of the revival of Yixing pottery in contemporary Chinese society?⁶⁹

The contemporary play of traditional cultural values, social, and political spheres in the Chinese text is evident through the changing status of Yixing pottery and Yixing master potters. After the opening up of China in the late 1970s, the works of fine Yixing pottery were sought by collectors from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia in the 1980s to 1990s, and then commodified through Mainland China’s art market boom started in the late 1990s. In the rediscoveries of Chinese cultural roots and the frenzied collecting of traditional Chinese arts by the Chinese diaspora, Yixing master potters became celebrities and profitable artists who could sell their works directly to dealers and

⁶⁷ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1990), p. 222-237.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ These questions will be further explored through the story of the renowned Hong Kong collector Dr. K.S. Lo (1910-1995) who played a salient role in revitalizing the art of Yixing purple clay teapot in the 1980s and 1990s.

collectors after the privatization. The potters were often invited to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and other South Asian countries for exhibitions and artistic demonstrations.⁷⁰

In the rather small but powerful cohort of collectors, the name of Dr. K. S. Lo (1910-1995) is often acknowledged referentially by contemporary Yixing potters. As an influential collector and supporter of the Yixing potters and their works in the late 20th Century, Lo's contributions are important. Indeed, if the lives of Yixing potters serve as the illustration of the changes in the cultural production of post-Mao China, then the life of Dr. K.S. Lo (a recognized expert on the pottery of Yixing and its histories, and as a discerning collector and connoisseur), says much about the status and circulation of artifacts in the global marketplace after China's market reforms and liberalization. Dr. Lo's personal history represents the production of cultural identity through the collection of artifacts and the ways in which artifacts can be honored as cultural treasures and fetishized as commodities.

Lo's parents were Chinese immigrants who relocated in Malaysia. Lo was born in Malaysia but at a young age he left Malaysia to study in the Hong Kong University, and later became a successful industrialist in Hong Kong. Lo's collection of Yixing teapots began in the 1950s, and, before he got access to China in 1979, his procurements of the fine pieces made in the Ming and Qing periods were procured in Hong Kong and Europe.⁷¹ Lo's collection also led him to a scholarly interest in the field of pottery. Lo's

⁷⁰ According to the author's interview with Yixing potters in Yixing, China, July 2012.

⁷¹ K. S. Lo, "Foreword," *K.S.Lo's Collection in the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware: part 1* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1984), p.12.

book *The Stonewares of Yixing: From the Ming Period to the Present Day (1986)* is the first thorough historical study of Yixing Pottery published in English.

Lo first visited Yixing and placed an order with the Purple Clay Factory soon after the factory was allowed to export directly in November 1979. In talking about his journey, Lo stated:

My first visit to Yixing Purple Clay Factory took place in the autumn of 1979. It was the end of the Maoist era of Cultural Revolution when the state exercised a complete control over everything including arts and crafts. The walls were still full of slogans demanding literature and art to serve the people and the cause of socialism. When I was shown around the Factory, I noticed that the wares produced were of extreme poor qualities. They were poorly made and bore the same mark “Yixing, China”, instead of the potter’s name or seal as was the case during the Ming and the Qing periods.⁷²

By noticing how the potter’s production was created by a communist mode of production, Lo encouraged the managers of Yixing factory and government officials to appreciate the individual value and ownership of the makers.⁷³ Significantly, Lo not only offered different prices based on the differing quality of works, but he also negotiated with the factory to enable the makers to sign their own works again. Signing the potter’s name on Yixing pottery was a long tradition dating back to the Ming dynasty. Proclaimed authorship gave the potter a great sense of pride and achievement. But, the communist system of collective ownership in the Yixing Purple Clay factory denied the maker’s individual creativity, which had paradoxical effects. On the one hand, collective

⁷² K. S. Lo, “Introduction,” *K.S.Lo’s Collection in the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware: part 2* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1984), p.9.

⁷³ According to the author’s interview with the daughter of Dr. K. S. Lo in March 2013.

ownership popularized the knowledge and techniques of traditional craft previously controlled by few master potters. In the Yixing Purple Clay factory, the master potters were unreservedly committed to teaching the young artisans. On the other hand, the standardized production and the emphasis on quantity rather than quality became obstacles that prevented creativity and innovation. In the collective mode of production, ignoring of each individual's skills and creativity created an ironic situation that the low and high quality works that made by different potters were priced "equally" by the factory.

Dr. Lo's observation and reaction reflects the interruption of Mao's revolution on Chinese people's own culture, and "the innocence of the whole discourse of difference" in the power struggle of different social classes. From a position outside the political struggles of Mainland China, liberated from political constraints, Lo located his cultural discovery on the ground of shared cultural "origin" of the Ming and Qing periods within the metaphor of Yixing pottery.⁷⁴

As a passionate collector and a Chinese diaspora, Dr. Lo was motivated to restore the art of Yixing pottery from the shamefully poor quality produced during the Maoist period to the artistic level of the Ming and Qing periods. It was the anxiety of identity

⁷⁴ In the 1980s, Dr. Lo generously donated most of his lifelong collection of fine Yixing pottery, including teapots from his opening order of 1979 and his subsequent purchases at the Yixing factory, to the Hong Kong Urban Council. This collection is currently stored in the Flagstaff House Museum of Teaware in Hong Kong (a building originally serving as the office and residence of the Commander of the British Forces in Hong Kong).

crisis in the context of Hong Kong that drove the collection of Dr. Lo, which reflects the struggle of “positioning” one’s cultural identity, a discourse raised by Stuart Hall.⁷⁵

The revitalization of pottery traditions by collectors like Dr. Lo in the period after the Cultural Revolution, reveals that the traditional values in cultural artifacts were never eradicated during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Contemporary makers from Yixing interpret the cultural implications of Yixing pottery and incorporate their own ideas to create modern works with traditional elements. Thus, the symbolic material form of Yixing pottery embodies a “cultural biography” in the traces of Chinese history.⁷⁶ The pottery serves a source for the imaginative search for cultural origin and the construction of different cultural identity narratives. However, as Brian Spooner notes, “our interpretation and reinterpretation of these sources available to us may become ever more sophisticated and ingenious, but only in the service of our own needs.”⁷⁷ In serving different needs, the reinvention of Yixing pottery continuously creates new meanings and narratives in different contexts.

Traditional artifacts and ideological Chinese cultural forms are increasingly employed to serve political needs. The politics of cultural identity can be illustrated in the interplay of power and history through the manipulation of material cultural forms by the

⁷⁵ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1990), p.222-237.

⁷⁶ Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization As Process,” *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* by Arjun Appadurai (UK:Cambridge University Press,1986), p.64-90.

⁷⁷ Brian Spooner, “Weavers and Dealers: the Authenticity of an Oriental Carpet,” *The Social Life of Things:Commodities in Cultural Perspective* by Arjun Appadurai (UK: Cambridge University Press,1986), p.200.

contemporary Chinese government. In the contemporary cultural collisions of local culture and global influences that dissolve the internal conflicts of socialist ideology and capitalist practices, the dialogue of power and resistance has compelled the local Chinese authority to reclaim the cultural power from the past in order to against the threats from the outside world. The symbolic Chinese cultural past serves as an exotic and powerful ingredients in the fabrication of cultural identity in a 'new' socialist China, which is distinctive to the cultural 'otherness.'

The construction of cultural identity by playing up or revealing differences is the constant interpretation of the idea of the self. In this sense, the material form provides tangible evidence of the manifestation of Chinese characteristics. Yet, what has been constructed is not an essence but a position in claiming China's cultural "soft power" to the cultural others, which further points to the politics of cultural identity and its play. The politics of cultural identity as Hall notes, is "a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee of an unproblematic, transcendental law of origin."⁷⁸ Facing the increasing pressure from the economic and cultural effects of globalization as well as the increasing demands of cultural needs in social lives, the Chinese government orchestrated a notion of "great development and prosperity of socialist culture" for "cultural awareness", and "national cultural soft power" in the 17th National Congress Report in 2007. This was followed by the introduction of the law of the Intangible Cultural Heritage to protect traditional cultural forms in 2011, and the continuous consolidation of

⁷⁸ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1990), p. 222-237.

“an advancing socialist culture with Chinese characteristics” stated in the 18th National Congress in 2012.⁷⁹ These policies reflect the government’s appropriation of traditional culture for the construction of a contemporary socialist cultural identity and the consolidation of power. This political framework positions contemporary China with a dual identity of being socialist and Chinese at the same time, which formulates what Benedict Anderson has coined “an imagined political community.”⁸⁰

After China’s economic boom, traditional cultural forms have become increasingly valued among the emerging Chinese upper class, who look to demonstrate their newfound wealth, social status and educated taste in everyday life. Unlike the complete removal of tradition in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, traditional cultural symbols and customs are revisited and reinvented in order to serve the contemporary taste. Anxieties about selfhood and cultural distinction have increased in the midst of a homogenized global culture and mass consumption. The wide-ranging traditional Chinese handicrafts are in a unique position to benefit from this re-energized wave of material cultural consumption by more and more well-off Chinese consumers. In addition, the revitalized cultural luxury objects help to mark these consumers as distinctive from others. Indeed, the revival of Yixing pottery reveals that the Chinese government and its citizens reconstructed and renegotiated contemporary Chinese cultural identity by exerting power and energy from the once advanced past into the present. The revival of tradition is

⁷⁹ China Daily, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012cpc/2012-11/18/content_15939493.htm , accessed March 31, 2013.

⁸⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London:VERSO, 1991), p.6.

further a reaction to the fear of threats to cultural sovereignty, and a response to the “central problem of today’s global interactions, which is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization.”⁸¹

However, embracing past traditions does not necessarily help to solve the fundamental problem of the uncertain nature of modernity. The self-renewing culture of the modern world reflects the impossibility of a stable identity. The incredible task to maintain a solid “being” in the accelerated process of modernization, together with the continuous fabrication of identities, generate a dialectic process of transformation by referencing both past and present at the same time. The production of modern cultural identity is a result of “the reflexive making of history.”⁸² The phenomenon of “reflexive modernity” explains how the contemporary cultural production of Yixing pottery showcases the key elements of culture.⁸³ Through the differentiating material and historical effects, Yixing pottery is continuously reinvented in the process of rapid social change and transformation.

Conclusion:

Embodying shifts in status and identity, Yixing pottery as cultural artifact reflects “the politics of identity.” At the same time, Yixing pottery as commodity reflects “the politics of value.” Therefore, the work of Yixing pottery does not represent a pure form

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (California: Stanford University Press, 1991), p.109.

⁸³ Ibid.

of art, but rather it becomes the material evidence that showcases changing relationships between society and humans in different political conditions. In contemporary China, Yixing pottery is inevitably commercially contaminated. To dissolve the contradictory relationships of present-day China and its own past, as well as the local culture and global influences, the introduction of market reform functions as the agent to reconcile these internal and external differences through the dynamics of capitalism. The marketplace is the arena for the play of culture, identity, and power, and the individual consumption power and the Chinese government as well as collectors are the major forces and appropriators who formulate the politics of identity and the politics of value.

In crafting China's own mode of modernity, should China follow the Western model or learn from the West in keeping China's own traditional values and characteristics? In addition to the process of Chinese modernization, the power of tradition is undiminished and is continuously revived and re-energized. From Yixing to Hong Kong, from Hong Kong to Taiwan, from Taiwan to Beijing, more and more Chinese people are revisiting and restoring Chinese traditions and customs dating back to the Song dynasty within in their modern lifestyles. The staying power of Yixing purple clay pottery says much about the continuing vitality and evolvement of tradition in a modern world saturated with the endless production of new commodities. Yet, Yixing purple clay pottery also has a power of its own: its symbolism of the shared cultural values of Chinese society from the past to the present. In the eyes of a Chinese audience, a great piece of Yixing pottery needs to have at least three components: it must be handmade with refined traditional techniques and modern innovation; it should represent

good taste and a sense of identity; and it should evoke a sense of longing and nostalgia, which resonates with the shared values and feelings in the collective Chinese consciousness. So with these significant qualities, even though priceless works were destroyed and traditional cultural production were halted temporarily during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Yixing potters soon revitalized this art form with its associated values. Thus, the shifting position of Yixing purple clay pottery in society reflects the negotiation of producing a modern Chinese cultural identity underpinned by a new form of nationalism featuring a mix of past and present and a blending of old China with new China. All of these characteristics mark a Chinese modernity of continued adherence to its pre-modern traditions.

Thus, the reinvention of tradition is the state's cultural and ideological appropriation of an artifact that speaks to the past but also serves present-day needs. Moreover, such reinvention and a narrative strategy that imagined by the individual to produce a sense of self and cultural identity from a rootless state in contemporary life. The art form of Yixing purple clay pottery has become a part of their own romance of Chinese identity and a part of their power. The search for strength in a shared past also aids in the political unification of a diverse society riddled with conflicting ideologies, races, and classes.

During a visit to an exhibition in Beijing on 29 November 2013, Xi Jinping, China's new president, first revealed his vision of rule in the coming decades by saying: "To realize the renaissance of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream for the Chinese

nation in modern history."⁸⁴ This neo-traditional approach anchored the present anxiety and uncertainty of the future to historical milestones, through which China can search for its own path to modernity. The reinvention of tradition reveals the fluidity and expediency of contemporary Chinese reality. Ever in a state of flux, displacement, transformation and metamorphosis, national identity constituted from a broad "cultural matrix" provides "innumerable points of interconnection through which different players can fix meanings to a variety of cultural forms."⁸⁵ The expropriation and reinterpretation of tradition from a shared past functions as the cultural counterbalance to consolidate cultural power and cultural difference for the present. The longing for the imagined past in order to envision a rationalized future informs a utopian impulse embedded in contemporary Chinese cultural production and political ideology. As art historian Richard Noble suggests:

All utopian art is political. It proceeds from an awareness of the imperfections of our social and political conditions towards some sort of understanding of, and possible solution to, what the artist perceive these to be. It is art oriented beyond existing conditions, sometimes to the future, sometimes to the past; it is art that asks us difficult questions about the conditions we live with and the potential we have to change them.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Cary Huang, "Just What is Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream and Chinese Renaissance," *South China Morning Post*, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1143954/just-what-xi-jinpings-chinese-dream-and-chinese-renaissance> (Feb 6, 2012), accessed March 18, 2013.

⁸⁵ Lynne Milgram, "Pina Cloth, Identity and the Project of Philippine Nationalism," *Asian Studies Review* Vol.29 (September 2005), p.233-246.

⁸⁶ Richard Noble, "Introduction: the Utopian Impulse in Contemporary Art," *UTOPIAS* (London: Whitechapel Gallery and the MIT Press, 2009), p.14.

The far-reaching legacy of history continuously haunts the self-consciousness of the present in contemporary cultural productions and politics. Through the persistence of material culture, the past is continuously reinvented as seductive and nostalgic ingredients in order to ensure the continued development of modernity. The modernity of China, therefore, is increasingly marked as a “Middle Kingdom,” not in geographical sense, but rather in terms of China’s self-identified difference in which a socialist system is reconciling its internal conflicts for balance and harmony. However, this unique position is highly self-constraining and paradoxical. Beyond gaining power and strength, these attempts are not enough to boost contemporary Chinese art and design with an international outlook in the future. The history of art and design is often concerned with national and cultural identities especially for the classification of East and West and communist versus capitalist. For the development of Yixing pottery, its future rests in breaking free from the myths and constraints of the past and entering the universal arena of creativity and material culture.

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