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# ZASTÚPENIE A ANALÝZA MODERNÝCH CHARAKTERISTÍK TRADIČNÉHO RUČNÉHO REMESLA ZALOŽENÉHO NA JINGDEZHENOVOM PORCELÁNSKOM VÝROBNOM PODNIKANÍ

REPRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF MODERN CHARACTERISTICS OF  
TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFT BASED ON JINGDEZHEN PORCELAIN  
MANUFACTURING ENTERPRISES

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Author of this article is working as an internal PhD student at the Department of General Anthropology of the Faculty of Humanities of the Charles University in Prague. In her research work she explores the practice and activities of urban art zones particularly in the field of traditional handicraft and cultural heritage. Author has worked with this issue already during her anthropological studies for the demands of her dissertation thesis.

Autorka tohto článku pôsobí ako interná doktorantka na Katedre všeobecnej antropológie Fakulty humanitných vied UK v Prahe. Vo svojej výskumnej práci sa zameriava na prax a aktivity mestských umeleckých stredísk, najmä v oblasti tradičných remesiel a kultúrneho dedičstva. Autorka s touto problematikou pracovala už počas antropológického štúdia pre potreby dizertačnej práce.

## **Abstract**

Using materials gathered from participant systematical observation and content analysis of a great deal of literature, this article studies the interpretation and representation of traditional porcelain making handicraft within the present-day context. It showcases that what endows the traditional porcelain industry in Jingdezhen with numerous modern characteristics are the compatibility of individualized and humanized creation of traditional handicraft to modern advanced technology and information society, the demand of ethnicity-rooted cultural display on mass tourism and the social re-creation and reconstruction for heritage protection and

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inheritance. This research broadly reflects the variegated terrain of cultural activities in Jingdezhen at the time.

Key words: traditional porcelain handicraft, modern representation, cultural display, mass tourism, heritage protection and inheritance

### **Abstrakt**

Tento článok na základe materiálov zhromaždených počas systematického pozorovania účastníkov a obsahovej analýzy dostupnej literatúry skúma výklad a poňatie tradičnej výroby porcelánu v súčasnom čínskom kontexte. Ukazuje, že to, čo dáva tradičnému porcelánovému priemyslu v Jingdezhen aktuálne a moderné rysy, je kompatibilita individualizovanej ľudskej tvorby vo sfére tradičných remesiel s modernou vyspelou technológiou a informačnou spoločnosťou, ďalej dopyt zo strany masového cestovného ruchu po autentickom kultúrnom prejave založenom na etnickom pôvode a v neposlednom rade spoločenská túžba po znovuvytváraní a rekonštrukcii za účelom ochrany a zachovania kultúrneho dedičstva. Tento výskum tak odráža pestrý terén kultúrnych aktivít v Jingdezhen v súčasnej dobe.

Kľúčové slová: tradičné porcelánové remeselné výrobky, moderné zastúpenie, kultúrne vystavenie, masový turizmus, ochrana dedičstva a odkaz

### **Introduction**

It has been widely recognized that traditional handicraft is technical labor of the sort that uses one's own hands to transform natural material resources. From the point of view of cultural anthropology, any work and its technology have a historical interaction and mutual construction rapport with the progress of human civilization. In a nutshell, handicraft as a unique cultural phenomenon of human beings, its cultural connotation is expressed in multi-facets between human beings and nature, human beings and society, and human beings and their spiritual worlds. Traditional porcelain making handicraft in Jingdezhen is the case in point. On the one hand, the unique natural and ecological conditions provided the excellent material basis for the formation of handicraft; on the other hand, the social organization of the porcelain manufacturing gradually shaped and its influence spread to the whole society within the development of handicraft technology.

As illustrated earlier, the traditional porcelain handicraft in Jingdezhen porcelain enterprise is indispensably related to and interacts with the local people's social activities since agricultural civilization. The entry of Jingdezhen's hand-made porcelain skills in the national representative list of intangible cultural heritage in 2006 put the traditional porcelain making skills into the spectrum of political rights. The protection and support of the state's policies, the survival of porcelain culture, the inheritance of beliefs, and ceremonies have all given the traditional porcelain handicraft a long-term vitality, and thus finally, become the special and far-reaching technical skill of the local ethnic groups in Jingdezhen. For the moment, in the context of socialization and modernization, especially the rise of the heritage movement, Jingdezhen's traditional porcelain handicraft has also been given new implications.

### **The Compatibility of Individualized Creation of Traditional Handicraft to Technology and Information Society**

With the maturity of social organizations, the meticulousness of social division of labor, the emergence of technological innovation, the development and alteration of traditional handicraft culture in a large measure is an irresistible social and cultural process. The staple principle that efficiency is the first and foremost in mass production mechanical reproduction, the principle of simplicity in the information society, and the very notion of market supremacy in a consumer society, which all has exerted an unprecedented impact on the handicraft culture. In the modern society to which technology and information are strikingly central, the relationship between human beings and nature is no longer an intimate contact between hands and objects, instead, it uses machine, symbols as an intermediary and means to weave a dense and complex network of multi-dimensional meanings. In any case, the cultural development of humankind is not a linear evolution but is constantly accumulating. In consequence, the rich and splendid handicraft, with its once fresh vitality, also absorbs nourishing nutrients in the constantly enriching modern culture and further proceeds to explore the viable living space accommodated to it.

Contrary to traditional porcelain handicraft, machine production is typically characterized by high efficiency, standardization, socialization, and de-contextualization. In the modern context of reflection, people will inevitably call for the revival of traditional handicraft to recall the lost personality and warmth in mechanization. De-contextualization and standardization are both the prerequisites and requirements of high efficiency in the era of modern advanced technology and information society; however, standardization erases individuality, de-contextualization erases the local knowledge of craftsmanship and turns places with abundant textual significance into empty spaces. In the process of globalization, there are always similarities in the development of different societies whether it is theoretical predictions, summaries, or practical trials and experiences, countries can, to some degree, refer to each other. Thus, from a historical point of view, the handicraft revival movement that has occurred around the world is to meet the needs of personalization, richness, and diversity, and it is also a method and demand to alleviate the contradiction between standardization and personalization in modern society

Jingdezhen's traditional porcelain handicraft in the porcelain manufacturing enterprises as a sort of cultural thing and artistic performance, including creative concepts, personal style, uniqueness, hand-made technique, and originality, are all individualized characteristics that cannot be manifested by machine production, which has come to establish a unique living shelter for porcelain-making manufacturing in modern times. In this space, handicraft is increasingly placing more emphasis on the characteristics of craft such as whether the style of porcelain handicraft is novel and whether there are many patterns of porcelain products, which has progressively become an important criterion for evaluating their popularity, and the like. The vast majority of phenomena in the market of porcelain handicraft products can almost entirely account for such a trend. For instance, in the modern Jingdezhen porcelain market, so-called artistic porcelain entered the market in 2006, progressively occupying the sales space of

master and antique-imitation porcelain (Fig. 1). A lot of consumers have little special requirements on the fame and age of porcelain, in fact they, to a large extent, value elaborate patterns and ornaments full of local ethnic art styles.



Fig. 1 – Photos of artistic porcelain and antique-imitation porcelain produced in Jingdezhen.

Left: A piece of modern artistic porcelain made by Jingdezhen craftsmen.

Right: A set of antique-imitation porcelain produced in Jingdezhen.

Source: Photos by author, 19 July 2018.

In this regard, a lot of porcelain craftsmen also retained the "immaterial" cultural factors in handicraft, and simultaneously turned to produce personalized artistic porcelain because of market-oriented. As we all know, necessity is the mother of invention and production, need is a cultural thing. The reputation, sales volume, and social influence of innovative porcelain handmade products are gradually expanding, and there is a likely tendency to replace ancient imitations. In addition, the modern porcelain production competition organized by relevant departments in local has an increasing proportion of award-winning innovative works is getting higher and higher, which also shows that the government's guidance is to encourage the innovation of traditional handicraft in design, but the requirements for the exquisiteness and the practicality of production work are not overwhelming. Some researchers are inclined to point out that in the atmosphere of the gradual fading of agricultural civilization, modern porcelain production more embodies the atmosphere of modern life and move towards a more diverse level such as it replaced the obvious monotonicity of production of traditional folk kilns with strong originality to gain a unique aesthetic value, and gradually replaced the past utilitarian tendency with increasingly purified aesthetic artistry, by extension, the boundary between modern porcelain craftsmanship and so-called pure art seems to be gradually narrowing due to its strong sense of form and visual language and symbol make it a great development as a side of appreciation. When did the fieldwork in Jingdezhen, the author often encounters students majored in art design and artists to perceive the local porcelain culture and draw inspiration from the local area, which might be enough to explain that the artistic idiosyncrasies of



Jingdezhen's porcelain handicraft are also being paid more and more attention by contemporary art practitioner as the spring of their individualized artistic creation.

### **The Demand of Ethnicity-rooted Cultural Display on Mass Tourism**

It has been widely admitted that the advent of the mass tourism era has made traditional handicraft a cultural exhibition and symbol of the local community, and on the other hand, it has also entered the tourism market involuntarily. Tourism does not merely stand still at the level of sightseeing and shopping, but also the needs of tourists encompass the feeling of experiencing life elsewhere is of importance and to be taken into consideration. Traditional craftsmanship and products made by handicraft are also contextually recruited to such a stage to showcase local ethnic customs and cultural representation. Judging from the tourism development of Jingdezhen in recent years, following the natural scenery, architectural dwellings, and souvenirs display, the fervent pursuit of local customs has made traditional porcelain handicraft enter into the vision of tourist attractions. Such cultural displays can be seen in many local tourist scenic spots in Jingdezhen. For example, in the Exposition Area of Ancient Kiln & Folk Cultures in Jingdezhen, the sophisticated craftsmen (Fig. 2) vividly reproduce the traditional hand-made porcelain skills through the processes of shaping the pot on a wheel, perfecting the shape, glazing, painting, and so on. Also, in the exhibition area of porcelain kilns of the past dynasties, visitors can see the ancient porcelain workshops, the oldest porcelain production line in the world, and the like; porcelain folk custom exhibition area with twelve Ming and Qing ancient buildings as the core, including Tian Hou Palace, Zu Shi Temple, water pavilion and other landscapes; art recreation area has multiple cultural and creative leisure landscapes. Here, visitors can even personally experience clay-making, glaze configuration, and other relevant porcelain making processes in the billet house (ie traditional porcelain workshops), and at the same time, personalized porcelain can also be customized according to their preferences.



Fig. 2 - One of experienced craftsmen reproduce the traditional hand-made porcelain skills in the Exposition Area of Ancient Kiln & Folk Cultures in Jingdezhen.

Source: <http://www.chinanews.com/tp/hd2011/2013/04-18/195017.shtml> accessed on 18 Nov 2020.

So far, we can say that the exhibition of traditional porcelain craftsmanship is a living mark attached to the souvenirs in the scenic area. As a special cultural symbol, it conveys purely handmade information to tourists around the world and it is undeniable that it strengthens people's awareness of the rareness and value of craftsmanship, and also enhances the traditional cultural image of the locality whilst the exhibition of this kind meets the needs of experiencing the authenticity for tourists. In other words, the demand for an ethnicity-rooted cultural display of tourist attractions also objectively has the function of maintaining ethnic identity among peoples.

This part of the research, to till now, can be demonstrated that the modern exhibition of Jingdezhen's traditional porcelain handicraft culture has successfully shaped a group's image of handicraft through cultural change, alteration and integration. When it is accepted as a local cultural exhibit and product, it also becomes a group's local image. Like other images, the image of handicraft bears the characteristics of cultural integration, and it is not a certain kind of handicraft that is exclusively owned by a certain group, nor is it that a group has never changed after mastering a skill, it's just that in the vicissitude of historical development and change, craftsmanship has gained a local cultural personality and enduring vitality. The cultural connotations of Jingdezhen traditional porcelain handicraft in the porcelain manufacturing enterprises is the case in point that can comprehensively explain it. Jingdezhen porcelain craftsmen made full use of traditional porcelain handicraft technique that have in common to create different kinds of porcelain patterns, styles and types based on the aesthetic habits of the ethnic group, the way of life and the world view, thus producing porcelain artworks enriched in modern and alienated cultural features. Its porcelain handicraft has been consolidated and developed in light of the needs of local people's daily life and social everyday activities, and gradually formed its own set of technical experience, technical taste, and technical tradition. In other words, it has also become a cultural symbol over time recognized by the people of Jingdezhen and been extracted from the original needs of life and transformed into a sort of valuable cultural capital. All in all, the cultural display of the traditional porcelain handicraft in the mass tourism terms highlights the value and significance of Jingdezhen's traditional porcelain craftsmanship as an important local cultural capital and a symbol of ethnic identity.

### **The Social Re-creation for Heritage Protection and Inheritance**

The combination of handicraft and contemporary museums has increasingly become an outstanding landscape phenomenon for heritage tourism. For instance, there is an episode of description in the existing scholarship that "In local and national museums, one of the most popular exhibitions is the display of everyday objects, complete sets of craftsman's tools, reconstruction models of kitchens or workshops, so that visitors can not only witness the process of making a piece of cheese, a car or a piece of porcelain but to imagine a world. " In other words, it might be reasonable to reckon that the museum is becoming another dwelling place for traditional ethnic handicraft. At the same time, ethnic handicraft also brings a charming reputation to modern museums. The concept of the modern museum comes from the Occidental world. It has developed from "the museum as a place of curiosity and collection of



antiques" to the "public arena for social education and cultural activities" in the second half of the 20th century. China's museum practice has not formed its model but has closely followed the Western paradigm to figure out its suitable development direction. Traditional museums always fall various sorts of exhibits into different kinds of categories, exhibits are limited to actual items in the form of tangible ones, but their "nobility, coloniality, urbanism, nationality, and monopoly" have always been criticized by scholars. However, "museums themselves have changed, and museums have gradually transformed into informative and cultural resources, more specifically, educational, so as to provide visitors with an unforgettable visit and insightful learning experience. At the same time, as the society pays more and more attention to cultural diversity, museum exhibitions have also been paid more attention to the connection with social culture and the feelings and needs of diverse audiences. "The transformation and improvement of museum functions objectively provide a platform for the exhibition of handicrafts. People come to realize that the furnishing of handicrafts is indeed important, but the process of making handicrafts is more valuable for visiting. As a result, the handicraft process became an exhibit.

As a kind of skill, the traditional porcelain handicraft entered the museum, and there is also an era background, one likely explanation, that is, is the fact that the appropriate collaboration of the mass tourism industry and the museum. In particular, after the museum achieves the changes from the collection, collection to display, and education, its value of existence is closely related to mass tourism. In the museum's exhibits, traditional handicraft culture as an important component of local cultural system, its unique charm is that it allows tourists to imagine boldly and experience craftsmen's lifestyle at the moment in that world, rather than just staying on the surface of the perception of superficial phenomena. In the case of China's first large-scale ceramics-themed art museum that was officially opened in Jingdezhen on October 18, 2005, which was precisely the very cooperation of traditional porcelain handicraft culture, tourism culture, and museum culture to carry out industrial operations. This museum displays and introduces the origin, environment, history, raw materials, technological processes, tools, inheritance methods, inheritors and other information of porcelain production utilizing text, paper pictures, slides, short films, and so forth, and strives to present the related knowledge of porcelain making to the visitors more comprehensively and broadly.

Generally speaking, there are three main ways for museums to participate in the social reproduction and re-creation in the heritage protection and inheritance of Jingdezhen traditional porcelain handicraft. The first (Fig. 3) is the static window display of finished porcelain handicrafts and manufacturing tools, which can arouse visitors' imagination of the handicraft production methods. For example, the Jingdezhen Folk Kiln Museum. The second way is practiced by Jingdezhen Chinese Ceramics Museum, that is, the introduction of multimedia technology and the addition of process displays to help all visitors to more fully understand the complete porcelain making process. The third way is a live demonstration. For example, Exposition Area of Ancient Kiln & Folk Cultures in Jingdezhen (Fig. 4) invited the inheritors of folk porcelain arts to demonstrate each process of the porcelain making process to the tourists, and finally invited the tourists to participate in the production, which allows the protection and

inheritance of porcelain handicraft skills to enter the mass tourism market together with the construction of a new museum, its sense of presence and experience greatly enhance the authenticity of the porcelain handicraft culture, but in fact, the handicraft technology and even the craftsmen in the exhibition are all packaged into commodities. However, it should be seen that no matter it is still-life exhibition, multimedia information display, or real-life display, it cannot represent the handicraft culture itself, but a kind of "landscape culture".



Fig. 3 - The static window display in the Jingdezhen Folk Kiln Museum.

Source: Photo by author, 19 July 2018.



Fig. 4 – One craftsman demonstrated procedures of the porcelain making to foreign tourists in the Exposition Area of Ancient Kiln & Folk Cultures in Jingdezhen.

Source: <http://travel.people.com.cn/n/2014/0627/c386313-25210342-10.html> accessed on 18 Nov 2020.

In the context of contemporary society, the heritagization of handicraft is not only social and cultural events but more integrated with politics and economy. At present, the establishment of the Chinese heritage system is guided by national policies and the declaration of heritage is a nationwide campaign from top to bottom. This is where government agencies from top to bottom set up specialized institutions to carry out a census of heritage. The cultural projects involved in the heritage list are again valued and funded by the local government, and the cultural heritage then becomes the management object of the administrative department and eventually represents the local cultural symbolic capital. Robert Redfield put forward the concepts of "big tradition" and "little tradition" in "Farmers' Society and Culture", believing that big tradition is the mainstream cultural system of the country and a dominant cultural model in society. The small tradition is in a passive position and is a cultural tradition that is expressed. Therefore, People have reason to reckon that the idea of a significant reason why handicraft becomes a heritage is that the living environment of small traditions is getting worse and worse, and the living space is getting smaller and smaller, which has attracted more attention of political and cultural elites, and thus through conscious protection and solidarity of the culture represented by small traditions to maintain the richness and diversity of the world's culture. In summary, within the discourse system of world heritage, the protection and inheritance of heritage can also be understood as a supportive action of various organizational forces to the small tradition under the dominant position of the big tradition.

In Jingdezhen, due to the power of all parties, the protection of folk kiln and its traditional porcelain handicraft has come to become essentially a nationalization of local culture. As mentioned earlier, traditional porcelain handicraft has gradually become a landscape culture that can be witnessed in cultural mass tourism, following the so-called "from heritage to resources" process of the local census to heritage declaration to tourism development. More importantly, it can be seen that the census and development of heritage based on political and economic purposes are also beneficial to the cultural and ecological construction of traditional porcelain craftsmanship in Jingdezhen: for nostalgia, traditional porcelain handicraft can continue to be growing in the emotion of them in the process of the heritagization; for visitors, the heritage title is a sacred aura, giving craftsmanship a noble identity; for doubters of industrialization and modernization, traditional porcelain handicraft as heritage is the embodiment of a harmonious relationship between nature and human beings.

## Conclusion

Heritagization of handicraft, albeit celebrated by various scholars, has attracted some criticisms, and the unbalanced relationship between theoretical implications and practical operations resulting from the protection of the non-standardized diversified culture by means of a sort of unified standardized criteria, is one of them. In so far as traditional handmade skills, the legitimate and legal inheritor needs to be designated. Properly speaking, the inheritors of traditional handmade skills are often chosen groups of individuals, not only confined to individual considered singly. Again, it is agreed that each skill has its own merits, among them, and if an individual is designated, which may put some other people in relatively subordinated positions. Subsequently, a reasonable and appropriate approach can be put forward here is: on



the one hand, pay more attention to the protection, preservation and inheritance of specific handicraft technology; on the other hand, it is very necessary to exercise integrative preservation of the social history of the ethnic group, family and even the individual who mastered the specific handicraft technology.

Let me briefly recapitulate the argument so far. By studying the modern representation of traditional handicraft in the contemporary settings, this article reveals what endows traditional handicraft with lots of up-to-date features within the porcelain manufacturing enterprises in China. In the case of contemporary Jingdezhen, the very theory is that what endows the traditional porcelain industry in Jingdezhen with numerous modern characteristics are the compatibility of individualized and humanized creation of traditional handicraft to modern advanced technology and information society, the demand of ethnicity-rooted cultural display on mass tourism, and the social re-creation and reconstruction for heritage protection and inheritance.

My argument not only extends our understanding of the possible negative consequence of heritagization of handicrafts but reveals a new microstructural analysis clearly illustrating the convergence of traditional handicraft with modern culture within the present-day context. It further enriches our knowledge of the diversity of handicraft culture and research in porcelain culture in particular. Traditional culture with many new characteristics may indeed be everywhere, but if we want to know what is the deep driving force beneath this phenomenon, we need to look closely at local social configurations, cultural ideologies, and specific historical trajectories.

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