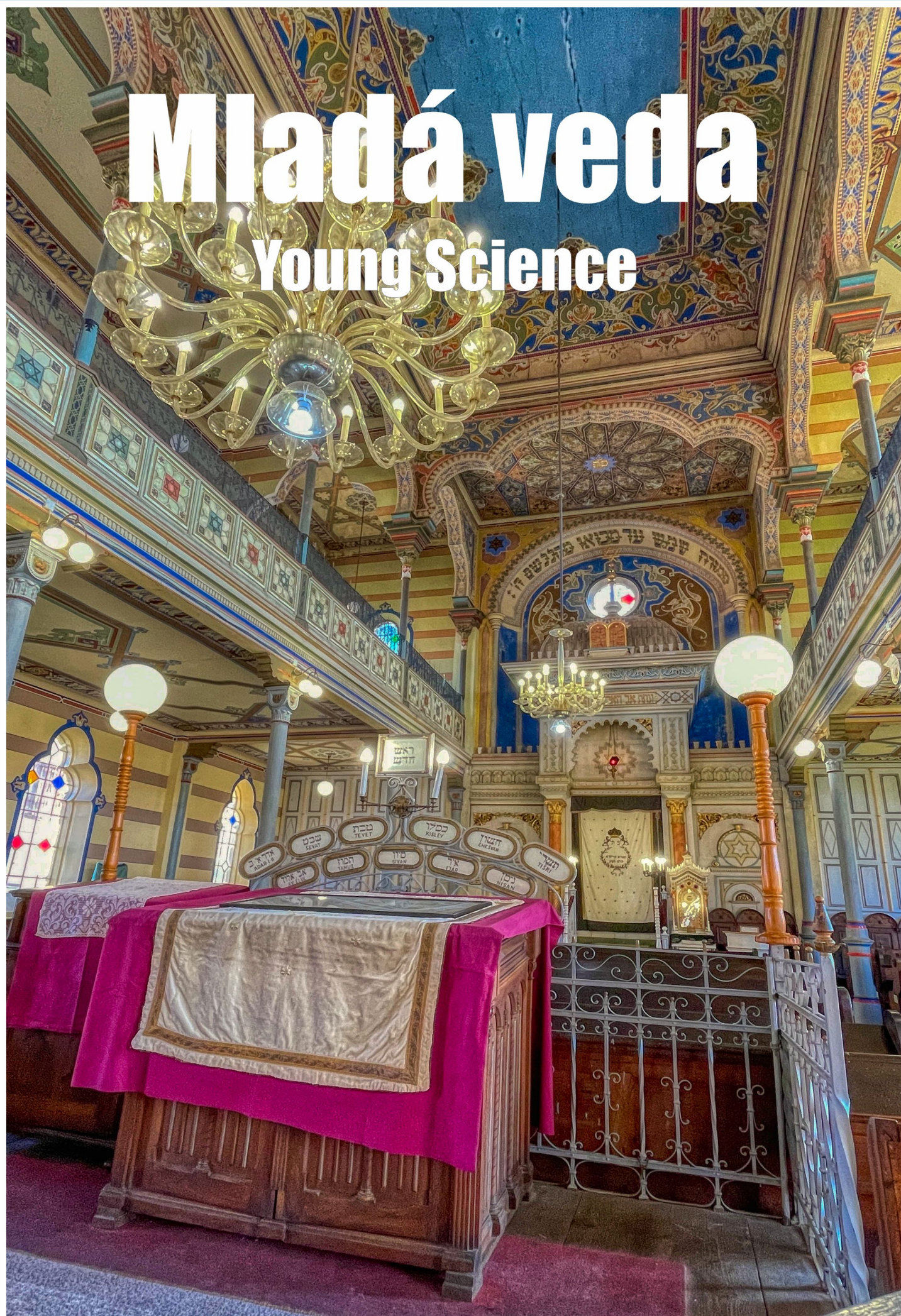


# Mladá veda

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# ZASTÚPENIE A ANALÝZA MODERNÝCH CHARAKTERISTÍK TRADIČNÉHO RUČNÉHO ZARIADENIA - ZALOŽENÉ 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 doktorandka na Katedre všeobecnej antropológie Fakulty humanitných vied Karlovej univerzity 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 antropológických štúdií pre potreby dizertačnej práce.

## **Abstract**

The article is an anthropological research of how traditional porcelain handicraft cultures practice in contemporary society. Using materials gathered from participant observation and content analysis of a great deal of literature, this article analyzes what kind of the interpretation of traditional porcelain handicraft within the present-day context can be documented ethnographically, and what can we draw upon from local people's stories about the context in

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which their lives unfold. I discuss three different kinds of modern practices of the traditional porcelain handicraft culture in Jingdezhen, that is, the adaptation of individualized traditional handicraft to technology society, a happy marriage of humanizing traditional handicraft with mass tourism, and a successful crossover between exquisite traditional handicraft and cultural and creative industry. This research broadly reflects the variegated terrain of cultural activities shaped both by global processes and local specificities.

Key words: traditional porcelain handicraft, interpretation and analysis, mass tourism, creative industry

### **Abstrakt**

Tento článok je antropologickým výskumom toho, ako sa tradičné porcelánové remeselné kultúry praktizujú v súčasnej spoločnosti. Tento článok pomocou materiálov zozbieraných z pozorovania účastníkov a obsahovej analýzy veľkého množstva literatúry analyzuje, aký druh interpretácie tradičných porcelánových remesiel v súčasnom kontexte je možné etnograficky dokumentovať, z čoho môžeme vychádzať, z príbehov miestnych ľudí o kontext, v ktorom sa odohráva ich život. Diskutujem o troch rôznych druhoch moderných postupov tradičnej porcelánovej remeselnej kultúry v Jingdezhene, to znamená, prispôbenie individualizovaného tradičného remesla technologickej spoločnosti, šťastné spojenie humanizácie tradičných remesiel s masovým turizmom a úspešné prepojenie vynikajúceho tradičného remesla s kultúrnym a kreatívnym priemyslom. Tento výskum v širokej miere odráža pestrý terén kultúrnych aktivít formovaný globálnymi procesmi a miestnymi špecifikami.

Kľúčové slová: tradičné porcelánové ručné práce, interpretácia a analýza, masový turizmus, kreatívny priemysel

### **Introduction**

It has been widely recognized that traditional handicraft is a peculiar kind of making in which products are created by hand through a series of tools. Moreover, it is something vital and alive. The word 'traditional handicraft' physically embodies the skills, techniques, and know-how of craftsmen or art practitioners, culturally, it holds expressive aspects expressing diverse hidden meanings attributed by craftspeople and local people. Traditional handicraft in Jingdezhen, if it is to survive, is in need of a new self-understanding and increased public awareness of its value to society. From the point of view of anthropology, handicraft is the most basic form of human labor. It is a unique socio-cultural phenomenon of the way of life of human beings, which has its cultural significance expressed in the multiple relationships with nature, society, and other relevant aspects. That is, the traditional handicraft in Jingdezhen porcelain industry is related to, and interacts with, the local people's social lifestyles, since the time of agricultural civilization.

Craft-based object is an essential output of porcelain production. Having a sufficient craft-based object supply is not only the material basis for human survival, but also an important guarantee for local economic development, social harmony, and stability. The Chinese central

government has issued a series of policies to support and encourage Jingdezhen modern porcelain industry development. The protection of the state's policies, the continuation of porcelain culture, the inheritance of beliefs and ceremonies, have all given the traditional porcelain handicraft with local knowledge a long-term vitality.

In contemporary society, especially in the rise of the national heritage movement shaped both by global processes and local specificities, the traditional porcelain handicraft in Jingdezhen has also been given new meanings. It is necessary for us to interpret it with caution. The entry of Jingdezhen's hand-made porcelain techniques in the national representative list of "intangible cultural heritage" in 2006 has put the traditional porcelain-making techniques into the scope of political rights. In recent years, with the development of porcelain cultural tourism, Jingdezhen has relied mainly on the rich porcelain cultural resources to vigorously develop a new mode of the development of modern porcelain industry with personalized customization, participation experience, and cultural tourism, implementing the cultural strategy, and declaring the creation of the National Porcelain Culture Ecological Protection Experimental Zone to vigorously promote the addition of traditional porcelain handicraft to the traditional scenic areas, continuously enriching the porcelain culture.

### **The Adaptation of Individualized Traditional Porcelain Handicraft to Technology Society**

With the advent of the information and technology era and the subsequent blooming of the knowledge economy, which has had an unprecedented impact on the traditional handicraft culture as well as traditional porcelain-making techniques have gradually become marginalized in the economic competition; therefore, a group of scholars assumes that the re-creation and use of traditional handicraft culture is an irresistible and indispensable social process. Given this reason, I have been drawn into discussions about traditional porcelain handicraft in Jingdezhen. As we all know, traditional handicraft from its birth paid much attention to exquisite hand-made skills, local knowledge and craftsmen's wisdom, which could not be replaced by machine production. Craftsmen relied on a pair of dexterous hands to design, make, and produce a variety of porcelain items. Craft-based objects can be generated through craftsmen's hands, no matter what kind of material. Each piece is unique because of its authenticity and creativity endowed by craftsmen or art practitioners.

In the current information technology society, I perceive that all sorts of high-tech products have been pouring into our daily lives. Meanwhile, in recent years, the increase in the concern about local ways of life, living cultures, has aroused the awareness of the significance of functions of traditional handicraft specifically, and contributed to the continuity of the implementation of traditional handicraft as a domain of intangible cultural heritage and maintained the sustainable development. Hence, the products created by human being's hands, to some extent, can be considered being a beneficial supplement to high-tech items, thereby balancing our spiritual and psychological needs in modern society and generating a high-sentimental social atmosphere. The art products with rich and splendid handicraft culture express the idea that they can bring people emotional joy and psychological comfort during the

process of making. A particular phenomenon that the popularity of modern porcelain with hand-made skills in Western countries is perhaps the best example to illustrate this point.

Modern ceramic studios are more common and enjoy more popularity among young people than standard drawing studios in the traditional sense. For example, 'Workshops at Terra Ceramics' is located in the city center in Prague and provides a 6-week beginner wheel course, private classes as well as a wide choice of intensive one-off workshops. I came across such a typical ceramic studio by accident. One day, I noticed it on the way to the insurance company for medical reimbursement. I looked through the glass of the studio for a while, then walked into the studio to whisper with a young lady dressed in an elegant skirt. She sat on the chair of her position, making ceramic. When I asked her why she came to the ceramic studio of this sort for crafting? She gave me the following answer: "Umm...I am a clerk working in a financial institution, and I always feel surrounded by modern technology every day...However, crafting makes me perceive a sense of the affinity of nature and it is an occasion for the release of the pressure and bad moods. When I come here to make porcelain objects that are in line with my preferences, I think it is an important adjustment to my everyday work, and it has become an integral part of my life." This excerpt from my field notes expresses that in present-day society, industrialization has drastically changed human lifestyles and led to a gradual disappearance of traditional cultural elements. For instance, technological invention, mass tourism, as well as the process of urbanization and modernization have caused feelings of uncertainty people experience. These processes strongly affect the attitude toward tradition. They, to some extent, arouse sentimental, nostalgic feelings about traditional things and invoke a brand-new consciousness that seeks to achieve a new means of communicating with the past. In a nutshell, the value of traditional handicraft has been appreciated by people; thereby, the inevitability of its existence also could not be disregarded.

With the idea of machine production being most efficient, the principle of simplicity in information technology, and the principle of market supremacy in a consumer society, all these in fact have had an unprecedented impact on the handicraft culture. 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 removes the local knowledge of craftsmanship. In the modern context of reflection, people will increasingly call for techniques, skills, and know-how that are features for handicraft, which express a trend in a consumer society that highlights personalization, richness, diversity, harmony, and symbolization. Hand workmanship is to meet such needs.

Jingdezhen traditional porcelain handicraft is profoundly steeped in the local culture and furnished with lots of artistic and cultural values. For instance, craftsmen and artists producing porcelain based on hand workmanship usually emphasize a set of intangible values, for instance, uniqueness, minimal waste, dexterity, originality, and cultural expressions, sentimental needs, multiple meanings, symbols, reflected over the crafts-based items particular to the local society; and, tangible values, for example, the raw materials and tools utilized, manufacturing details in craft-based items, space utilized for producing and spatial features, like interior elements, all of



these humanizing characteristics that machine productions cannot merely manufacture. Many instances in the market of craft-based porcelain products can illustrate this point. For example, the so-called artistic porcelain entered the market in 2006, progressively occupying the sales market of antique-imitation porcelain (Figure.1). Many consumers have no special requirements on the fame and age of porcelain; in fact, they pay more attention to patterns and ornaments full of local ethnic styles and hand-made skills. Thus, local craftsmen also give positive feedback by transforming the appearance and operation of porcelain works to bring them more in line with consumers' tastes and demands of the consumer market. In order to better encourage craftsmen to develop their brilliant hand-made techniques, traditional porcelain handicraft is looked upon as intangible cultural heritage in Jingdezhen and best outstanding craftspeople as a national living treasure. Besides, the title of 'Master Crafts in China' at different levels also can be conferred on them.



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

Source: Author

On the other side, we could not erase the beneficial effect of modern technology and machine production on traditional handicraft. As one art practitioner puts it, 'in most cases, modern technology is suitably applied to the mass production of daily necessities porcelain and is rarely used for artistic ceramic creation. However, the constant temperature electric kiln is one of the modern technological appliances that we often use for high-quality objects. The reason is that the firing time of some porcelain objects will reach over one month, if you use the traditional wood kiln to fire, the temperature is, in fact, difficult to control with human labor, and the successful yield is extremely meager. If a constant temperature electric kiln is used, the yield is relatively high.' In this sense, the ability of craftsmen to innovate boldly in terms of the traditional handicraft and continuously combine new technologies and modern devices is also an important means to inherit and develop the cultural connotation of porcelain.

Another example can clearly represent this opinion as well. Like, more and more repairers of ancient porcelain relics inherit traditional restoration methods by hand, while utilizing modern advanced technologies, materials, and electronic appliances so that the damaged cultural relics can keep valuable historical information while recreating the historical performance, improving its research values. After restoration, those ancient ceramics can be displayed in the static window in the different museums for visiting and providing educational significance (Fig.2), stimulating visitors' perception and imagination of handicraft production methods, such as the display of Jingdezhen Folk Kiln Museum.



Fig. 2 – Photos of the static window display in the Folk Kiln Museum.

Source: Author

### **The Happy Marriage of Humanizing Traditional Handicraft with Mass Tourism**

It has been widely accepted that the arrival of mass tourism has resulted in traditional handicraft inadvertently entering the tourism market. The demands of more and more tourists on souvenirs based on hand workmanship and their search for local knowledge have often been talked about by the contributors as a way of the revival and preservation of traditional handicraft.

Although natural and tangible sceneries, architectural dwellings, have been the focus of interest of tourists from past to present, living cultures, local customs, the ways of life, and traditional handicraft have invoked interest in recent years. In recent years, in line with the increase in the emphasis on intangible heritage traits, tourism mobility to uncover the way of life of local people, the traditional handicraft, and cultural activities and festivities speeded up. The traditional porcelain handicraft has been included in the list of tourist attractions, and this execution is beneficial to conserve traditional handicraft and regenerate the relationship between traditional handicraft and craftsmen, as these make a more rigorous demand on the capabilities of craftsmen. For example, in the Exposition Area of Ancient Kiln and Folk Cultures in Jingdezhen, the invited experienced craftsmen (Fig.3) vividly display the traditional porcelain-manufacturing through different processes, like, shaping the pot on a wheel, perfecting the shape, glazing, painting, etc., while inviting tourists to participate actively in the on-site operation, which facilitates the conservation and sustainable development of porcelain



craftsmanship to enter the mainstream tourism market together with the construction of local museum endowed with new meanings.

Also, in the exhibition area of porcelain kilns of the past dynasties, visitors can see the ancient porcelain workshops, the oldest porcelain production line globally, and the porcelain folklore exhibition area. What's more, the art re-creation area also has a multitude of cultural and creative landscapes. Here, tourists have opportunities to experience clay-making, glaze configurations, and other relevant porcelain-making processes in the billet house (i.e., traditional porcelain workshops), and at the same time, to customize craft-based porcelain objects according to their own preferences. In this regard, it can be said that a combination of both presence and experience not only greatly enhance the authenticity of the traditional porcelain handicraft culture, but in fact, the indigenous techniques and know-how involved and even the craftsmen in the performances have all kindled local pride and cultural identity among the local and national population.



Fig. 3 - One of experienced craftsmen reproduce the traditional hand-made porcelain skills in the Exposition Area of Ancient Kiln and Folk Cultures in Jingdezhen.

Source: Author

In addition, among the museum's exhibits, traditional porcelain handicraft culture is an important component of the local cultural system, with its unique charm being that it allows tourists to imagine and to have a sense of a craftsmen's lifestyles in that world, rather than just staying on the surface of the perception of cultural value. For instance, on October 18, 2005, China's first large-scale ceramics-themed art museum was officially opened in Jingdezhen, which precisely demonstrates the industrialized operations of the collaborations among local porcelain culture, tourism culture, and museum culture. 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, etc., and strives to present the related knowledge of porcelain-making to the visitors more comprehensively and broadly.

Apart from craft-based objects for souvenirs and display, the adaptation of the same sort has occurred in the case of craft-based porcelain objects used both by local people and in the restaurants, hotels, and other places experienced by visitors. On the premise of ensuring the comfort of tourists, craft-based porcelain objects can serve as a decoration to shine the exhibition spaces such as hotel halls, corridors, and guest rooms; they can function as dining utensils for cooking and eating in the restaurants. These porcelain objects based on hand workmanship can help create an integrated environment to better understand porcelain handicraft and appreciate local traditions. They even can be made into utilitarian devices placing in the city, and the like. The lamp posts and dustbins of Jingdezhen are the notable case in point that can comprehensively describe it (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 - Different types of lamp posts standing in the different parts of Jingdezhen.

Source: Author

On the one hand, street porcelain lamps standing in Jingdezhen city inherit the practical functions of traditional Chinese lamps, and further extend the aesthetic and decorative dimensions of the lamps. So, the change of traditional steel lamp posts into ceramic ones suggests the idea of an active transformation of the previous lamp posts without cultural flavor into the tangible carriers displaying traditional porcelain craftsmanship culture. In this regard, there is no denying that tourists can strongly perceive this expression of the local and traditional porcelain culture at first sight when they come to Jingdezhen.

To till now, I have, in this part of the research, discussed local people and craftsmen how to respond actively to the demand of mass tourism on the basis of the traditional handicraft, and it can be demonstrated that traditional handicraft has come to represent a particular cultural symbol and a sort of valuable cultural capital of the local society under the influence of mass tourism, thereby generating an idea that craft-based objects are not necessarily an item of mere



souvenir. It is undeniable that mass tourism as one of the social dynamics causing change leads to a change in traditional porcelain handicraft producing cultural and economic factors. In this vein, a joyful marriage between the traditional handicraft and mass tourism also objectively has the function of promoting economic development and cultural exchange, as well as maintaining the cultural and national identity among local people.

### **A Crossover between the Exquisite Traditional Handicraft and Cultural and Creative Industry**

This current phase has been leapfrogged through the intrusion of lots of novel technologies: the development of the Internet and by intimate touch with a more high-ranking knowledge system. Under such a clearly demarcated context, innovation has become an inherent requirement for the self-protection and sustainable development of traditional handicraft endowed with a multitude of modern characteristics. In recent years, there has been a popular Internet term called 'crossover'. Whether it is the 'crossover singer' of various TV shows or the interdisciplinary subjects in academia, it seems to describe a socio-cultural phenomenon, that is, the linking connections of different spheres with each other, thereby creating abundant and fruitful results. Given it, the crossover between the traditional handicraft and the practice of modern creative industry has brought about an upsurge of creative craft-based objects in Jingdezhen, where the government departments and national cultural agencies have issued a series of policies to encourage and support such a meaningful practice.

In contemporary China, creative craft-based objects are intended to maintain the particular idiosyncrasies of traditional culture, which embodies humanity, harmony, and uniqueness. Simultaneously, hand-made skills and culture-based creativity also play significant parts in the upgrowth and creative invention of craft-based objects. Robert F. Murphy puts forward the essence of 'invention' in *Cultural and Social Anthropology*, believing that invention may be based on human genius, of which there is a store in all societies, but this genius must operate within the framework and with the materials set by culture. It is also true that although necessity is the mother of invention, the need is a cultural thing. Therefore, it is believed that techniques, skills and know-how embedded in traditional handicraft have been further re-used through individual production and creative processes.

The principal director of the Palace Museum once piquantly said that to embrace more and more tourists and promote our traditional culture, we cannot maintain a rigid image. To attract young audiences, we must act in accordance with the penchant for young people. In line with it, Jingdezhen has long been trying to make use of diversified and cooperative forms to arouse young people's attention. How lucky is that Jingdezhen successfully found an artistic and creative development direction that is in line with the local culture and catering to the consumer market after continuous exploration and pursuit, which can be clearly practiced in the following paths: first, integrating local representative culture into the branding set-up of innovative craft-based products; second, in search of good design and creativity, at the same time, injecting traditional craftsmanship into the branding establishment; last but not least, paying more

attention to the importance and application of visual communication design in establishing the branding of innovative products (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5 - A variety of creative porcelain products with exquisite hand-made skills selling in the art community of Jingdezhen.

Source: Author

As I have stated above, a thriving creative craft-based product must, on the one hand, possess its practical value in use; on the other hand, it should carry abundant cultural and aesthetic connotations. Only derivatives based on traditional handicraft culture can continuously withstand the polishing of time and the examination of the current market.

## Conclusion

As an important part of the traditional cultures, the traditional handicraft is making its influence felt upon the overt, creative and modern cultures.

If tourism can aid in hindering the trend of increasing conformity and cultural homogeneity shaped by global processes employing conserving (albeit in a differing form and with differing functions) traditional cultures that would otherwise vanish, that would seem to be a pragmatic outcome. However, we cannot de-emphasize such problems and take success for granted. Properly speaking, the effect of mass tourism on the meaning of craftsmanship culture, albeit praised by various scholars, has incurred some complaints, and the excessive commercialization makes traditional handicrafts lose their original meaning, is one of them. To answer this complicated question concerning whether tourism is a beacon or a shackle, many factors should be taken into consideration.

In so far as the sustainable development of traditional porcelain handicraft, reasonable and appropriate measures can be put forward as follows: first, the legitimate and legal inheritor needs to be designated to avoid loss of valuable hand workmanship involved in porcelain-



making; second, we should note that we cannot ignore the passing on of its cultural connotations in the contemporary society.

Let me briefly recapitulate the argument so far. By studying the modern analysis and interpretation of traditional handicraft in contemporary settings, this article reveals how traditional porcelain handicraft cultures practice in contemporary society, to be specific, 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 three different kinds of modern practices of the traditional porcelain handicraft culture in Jingdezhen are the adaptation of individualized traditional handicraft to modern technological society, a happy marriage of humanizing traditional handicraft with mass tourism, and a successful crossover between exquisite traditional handicraft and cultural and creative industry.

My discussion not only develops our knowledge of the probable positive effects of mass tourism on handicraft, but reveals a kind of analysis clearly illustrating the convergence of traditional culture with modern culture within the present-day context. My research further adds fertilizer to the knowledge of the diversity of handicraft culture and research in porcelain culture in particular. Traditional culture with many new characteristics may indeed be everywhere. However, if we want to better understand the deep thrust beneath this phenomenon, we should further review social structures at different levels, cultural ideologies, and concrete historical trajectories.

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