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# THE USES OF MODERNITY IN A CHINESE CRAFT TRADITION

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To what extent can one talk of tradition in today's China, in this country where only a few decades ago tradition was something to be broken, and where the State controlled all sectors of activity?

In this essay I wish to address the question of tradition and modernity in the context of the pottery craft industry. Rather than talking about tradition and change in the style of objects, I look at the social context in which craft is produced, and how it has changed over the past fifty years. Indeed there is a marked contrast between formal style, which has been to a large extent conservative during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the dramatic social changes that have taken place. How can one explain this apparent contradiction?

My case study focuses on the production of purple clay ("*zisha*") teapots in the town of Dingshuzhen, Jiangsu province, where I have spent 8 months of fieldwork. My data comes mainly from discussions with craftsmen, and observation. I have been in particular sensitive to the issue of the change in conditions of apprenticeship, from the traditional master-apprentice system, before the 1950's, to a formal teaching in classes of 10 to 20 students in a factory as of 1954, and back to what appears to be a situation similar to the pre-communist era, starting in the 1980's.

In a discussion, a craftsman who has gained quite a reputation for himself, and who has passed on his techniques to his son, told me that the situation has in a way gone "full circle": the Communist era's experiments aimed at rationalising production have given way today to a situation similar to what had preceded them. I wish to discuss such a statement, giving first an introduction to this particular kind of craft that is *zisha*, and the changes that have taken place in the apprenticeship system over the past fifty years. As I have become familiar with the situation in the town, I have come to realize that the nature of these changes make it difficult, if not meaningless, to define where tradition stops and modernity starts.

## The purple clay of Dingshuzhen

A few days spent in Dingshuzhen are enough to understand how the title of “Pottery Capital of China” came to be attributed to the town. In the centre, and in all enviroing villages, pottery is everywhere. All imaginable types of pottery are made here. Roof tiles and flowerpots are piled up along the streets and on the edges of the canals, waiting to be dispatched by truck or boat to cities across China and abroad. It is estimated that 30’000 people in the county are employed in pottery related activities. Factories abound, though the majority of people work within the context of their own family and home.

Among the multitude of types of pottery made there, the most famous are the teapots made of *zisha* clay, a clay with purple overtones that is unique to the region, and reputed the best for brewing tea due to its physical and chemical structures. The clay is ill suited for throwing on the potter’s wheel, which has meant that quite a unique technique has been developed over time for making these teapots. The clay is first beaten into slabs and disks, then patted into shape to make the body, to which the various elements are added one by one: foot rim, neck, handle, spout ... The technique offers much freedom in the crafting, so that teapots come in all shapes and sizes: square, round, or made to resemble bamboo, pumpkins, trees, animals, etc.

Historically, this ceramic tradition is quite unique in China for having had close ties with the *literati* class during the Ming and Qing dynasties, in contrast to, for instance, the porcelain of Jingdezhen, which was under the patronage of the emperor. The *literati* were consumers of these teapots – it was for them an essential object to have and collect, in the same way as, for instance, calligraphy tools. But more than consumers, many *literati* were actively involved in the creation process. They would for instance collaborate with potters by inscribing calligraphy or drawings on unfired pots, and some are known to have contributed new designs. This tradition still continues today, as it is not uncommon for university professors, painters and calligraphers to submit a design for a master craftsman to execute.

Today, the purchasers of the best quality teapots are mainly businessmen in Taiwan, Hong Kong or Shanghai, who often pay exorbitant prices for pots made by famous artisans.

## The creation of the factory

In the case of Dingshuzhen, the drive to collectivisation that followed the arrival of the Communists to power resulted, in 1954, in the regrouping of the master craftsmen of the region in a cooperative, which became a full-blown State-owned “factory” (*gongchang*) four years later. This factory was to retain the monopoly over the production of *zisha* ware until the 1980’s. It recruited and trained apprentices, introduced a system of grades based on merit, and became the only centre to which peasants from the surrounding villages could sell their pots.

However, the term factory might be misleading here. In the case of Dingshuzhen, little was made to rationalise techniques of production. It is true that a significant innovation – the plaster mould – was introduced in the late 1950’s, making the process faster, and enabling the average worker to produce pots of reasonable quality. But apart from this, rationalisation of techniques did not occur. Significantly, the plaster mould was not used with the slip-cast technique of production, a most time-efficient technique but with the disadvantage of producing thicker and more fragile objects. Instead, pots were made to a large extent using the traditional technique, roughly shaped by hand and pressed in the mould to perfect the form. Hand-made pots too continued to be made in the factory because for some designs this technique was deemed more efficient than the use of moulds.

Division of labour was another rationalisation significantly absent from the factory. Even with the help of the plaster mould, making a *zisha* teapot can be a lengthy process and one that involves mastering a number of different techniques. This is why the learning process can also be quite lengthy. This could lead one to think that division of labour would be a logical step in efforts at rationalising production. Nevertheless, at no time was this introduced. This, craftsmen explained to me, is because the quality of every step of the process influences the next. For instance, an improperly beaten slab of clay will compromise the overall quality of the teapot, however much work is put into trying to correct the mistake at later stages. High-level workers therefore simply did not want to rely on the work of novices, which meant that every step, save the preparation of the clay and firing, was performed by the same individual. Even the manufacture of tools was not left to others, and apprentices were taught to make their own tools early in the learning process.

The factory only minimally rationalised methods of production, but it did bring “rationalisations” of a different kind, social in nature. Firstly, for the first

time, recruiting of apprentices did not rely on familial or personal relationships. This led to a “democratisation” of the industry, allowing access to people who had no previous relationship with it. The 1950’s being economically difficult times, it was individuals of very diverse backgrounds who answered the call of the factory, the main employer of the time in the region. In this environment, youngsters from peasants, landowners and traditional potting families learnt and worked side-by-side.

Secondly, the knowledge of masters, until then passed on from generation to generation within the family, became public knowledge, a knowledge that was to be imparted for the good of the newly formed craft community as a whole.

Thirdly, the system of one-to-one apprenticeship that existed before the creation of the factory was replaced by teaching in classes of 10 to 20 people. This imposed a few changes to the way the craft was taught, as well as imposed a degree of competition that did not exist in the previous system. In this new system, the master was able to choose the most talented and decide to promote them to more advanced levels of training.

## Full circle?

The factory as institution has today largely disappeared. The physical structure of the factory still exists, but the State-owned centre of production has now become a private company, which basically rents out workshops and provides services such as firing and sale of products. This is the result of a slow transition that started in the mid-eighties, when communal workshops slowly gave way to private workspaces. Craftsmen were later given the opportunity to work at home and teach their families in a private space. This was of course made possible by changes in the policies of the government of Deng Xiaoping, but also by a boom in the demand for high quality *zisha* products, which meant that masters no longer needed to rely on the factory for sale, and thus started selling to intermediaries in Hong Kong.

These new arrangements saw the reappearance of the practice of teaching one’s own children. This seems to have been a logical development. Firstly because by reintroducing work at home, the children of potters were in immediate contact with the work of pottery. Secondly, apprenticeship is a lengthy process, which is usually said to take three years, that needs intensive super-

vision. It is natural that this apprenticeship take place within the family, now that the factory no longer provides a teaching framework.

As I mentioned in the introduction, one craftsman suggested to me that the situation has gone full circle in the space of a few decades. Until the 1950's, pottery was mainly a familial affair, passed on from generation to generation – people talked of “*yijia, yihu*”, “one family, one pot”, in other words individual families were known for making specific designs or types of pots. Today, after the factory's attempts at rationalising and democratising, one is back to a situation where people teach their own child or grandchildren. And children often carry on with the style of their parents, not only because this is the style they have learnt, but also because part of their own fame will depend on the name of the parents, and the style attached to that name.

But here I wish to suggest two ways in which the situation cannot really be said to have gone full circle. First, going back to the factory years, there are some elements that make one think that the rational teaching structure was getting mixed up with a more “traditional” method of teaching.

I suggest that the one-to-one apprenticeship system has always been potentially there, specifically because division of labour did not take place within the factory. Indeed, a lengthy period of apprenticeship was still needed to master the different techniques involved, and as I have been constantly reminded, that kind of apprenticeship is most suited to one-to-one learning. After the initial three-year teaching period in classes, it was still necessary for workers to seek the counsel of masters for individual tutoring. Also, it always remained important for workers to identify themselves with the leading figure of their master. As a result, still today, those who learnt under the factory system continue to identify themselves with their teachers, in the same way as, traditionally, apprentices identified with their master.

Second, the factory is still today playing a significant role, acting as a centre for exchange, despite the fact that many are working in their own home.

It seems to be an enviable situation to work at home, though not everyone can afford it. It is a privilege of the masters to retreat there, away from the critical gaze of colleagues. Indeed in the factory, anyone can walk into a workshop and offer unsolicited comments about one's work.

But working away from the factory has its disadvantage, namely of losing contact with the rest of the pottery community. As a result, people working at home pay more or less regular visits to those former colleagues who have found it easier and preferable to stay at the factory. I have the feeling that for them, this going back to the factory is a necessary condition for having their status of

master recognized. In that frame of mind, the master is someone who can afford to work on his own, whilst still offering advice to friends and teachings to the younger generation.

The children of those masters, who are learning at home, are also sent from time to time to visit the factory, for instance to ask advice about a particular pot design that their parents are not familiar with. So although one is back to a situation of “dynasties” of potters, a significant part of learning also takes place outside the family, in the factory.

Once a craftsman working at the factory talked to me in rather harsh terms about a colleague who no longer participated in social activities and did not even come to the factory anymore. He further mentioned the works of the person as having been rather good at one time, but become poor in quality in recent years. The link was not explicit, but he seemed to suggest that cutting one’s ties with the social life of the factory implies the inability for a craftsman to develop his own style.

## Conclusion

The study of the community of potters in Dingshuzhen leads me to think that the present situation is something of a hybrid. If, behind the modernist appearance of the factory, traditional techniques and modes of teaching survived essentially unchanged, the rediscovery of tradition that is taking place today owes much to the reshuffling of social structures provoked by the factory, that resulted in both the creation of new pottery “dynasties” and the creation of an invaluable centre for informal exchanges.

I am often surprised at how easily, in China, new ideas are put to the service of tradition. As I have mentioned, craftsmen have remained very conservative about the formal properties of the objects they make. Those artists who say they want to “find their own way” are more often than not criticised by others. As a craftsman once told me, one cannot put aside 5’000 years of Chinese civilization and 2’000 years of pottery tradition. Accordingly, in Dingshuzhen innovation is necessarily inscribed into tradition.

The history of *zisha* pottery is one of a constant search for improvement of the basic styles and techniques dating back at least to the Ming dynasty. What craftsmen retain of the recent factory period is the spirit of cooperation and possibilities of exchanges that have made the twentieth century the most prolific

period in the history of *zisha*. One might identify the changes that were introduced as emblems of “modernity”. But in the eyes of the *zisha* potter, these are simply new tools that have been put to the service of the tradition’s quest for perfection.

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