

The Rise of Chinese Design: The Inheritance and Development of Porcelain in Traditional Handicrafts by Contemporary Chinese Designers

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Abstract: Throughout history, Chinese porcelain, represented by Jingdezhen, enjoys a high reputation. Jingdezhen is a famous town with thousands of years of history in porcelain making, and also a representative city of Chinese traditional handicrafts. Jingdezhen porcelain industry has formed a systematic porcelain making process, rich traditional culture and folk customs in thousands of years of development. Under the impact of the industrialization concept during the transition period, Chinese porcelain industry has faced severe challenges for a long time. With the rise of Chinese design, porcelain in traditional handicrafts has ushered in new opportunities for development. The rise and fall of handicraft porcelain also shows the epitome of the inheritance and development of Chinese traditional handicrafts. In the context of modernization, traditional handicraft industry is constantly exploring new development models to meet the needs of today's era. The inheritance and development of porcelain in traditional handicrafts by contemporary Chinese designers is not only the inheritance and continuation of traditional handicraft techniques, but also the reconstruction and re-creation of tradition.

Keywords: Chinese design; Porcelain; Traditional handicrafts

1. Introduction

China is the hometown of porcelain, and the invention of porcelain is a great contribution of the Chinese nation to world civilization. In English, the word "china" has become synonymous with the country "China". To Westerners, China once was known as the "Silk Country", a legendary land of spices, tea, and especially translucent pottery which was likened to "the pearl of a small shell" (porcella) by Marco Polo, hence the name "porcelain". They believed that the possession of these precious objects helped to discover and understand the new world. Therefore, this luxury trade became the real link between China and the West. In order to better meet the aesthetic styles of different customers, Chinese people were no longer limited to their own national styles, but created tea ware for Japanese tea ceremony, plates with Koran inscriptions for Muslims, and large enamel pots for Christians ^[1].

During the Age of Discovery, Europeans set sail to reach China and brought back plenty of exquisite porcelain. When these beautiful pieces of porcelain were presented to Westerners, they were all shocked and then quickly showed their interest. The large-scale export of Chinese porcelain seems to have begun in the Tang Dynasty, with early Chinese porcelain being sold to Japan, South Asia, Central Asia, East Asia, West Asia, and Africa. In all dynasties in Chinese history, porcelain was one of the main export commodities ^[2]. In their works on the history of French porcelain, Auscher et al. mentioned that Louis XIV's love and pursuit of Chinese porcelain influenced the whole of France. Due to insufficient supply of porcelain from the East, France was forced to actively learn Chinese porcelain making technology, thus promoting the rapid development of French porcelain manufacturing ^[3].

Known as the "the Capital of Porcelain", Jingdezhen is famous all over the world for its long history and exquisite technology in porcelain making. *Ching-Te-Chen T'ao Lu, or, The Potteries of China* written by Lan Pu in the Qing Dynasty was successively translated into French and English by French sinologist Ru Lian ^[4] and Hong Kong official Geoffrey R. Sayer ^[5], further improving Westerners' knowledge of Jingdezhen and Chinese porcelain. In 1920, American journalist Frank Lentz regarded Jingdezhen in the National Geographic magazine as "the world's famous porcelain center and the home of the world's porcelain industry" ^[6]. The above historical materials show that Jingdezhen is well-known in the West, and these translation materials have provided valuable reference for Westerners to explore Chinese porcelain, and greatly promoted Western porcelain industry.

2. The main problems existing in China's porcelain industry during the transition period

Despite the historically high reputation of Chinese porcelain, Westerners now have a lot of negative opinions about products made in China. They think that such products are poor in quality, exported in large quantities, mass-produced, low in manufacturing cost, unqualified for international standards, jerry-built, and contain carcinogens, preferring products from other countries^[7]. “Made in China” has gradually become a derogatory term^[8]. Chinese consumers are also increasingly keen to buy foreign products. When it comes to Chinese consumers’ opinions about products made in China, some state that although willing to support domestic products out of patriotism, they still have doubts about the quality^[9]. By summarizing a large number of literature and news, the reasons why Chinese consumers prefer foreign products are as follow: 1) foreign products are of good quality and low price; 2) due to insufficient enforcement of intellectual property rights, Chinese consumers are afraid to buy counterfeit goods at home; 3) quality inspection overseas is stricter than that at home; 4) foreign style design is better and more novel than domestic one^[10]. It can be concluded that with the improvement of living standards, the tempo of society is speeding up, and consumers have begun to feel disgusted with the mass-produced products of cookie-cutter factories. Consumers have paid increasing attention to high quality, and focused on brand, personality and uniqueness.

3. The Inheritance and Development of Porcelain in Traditional Handicrafts by Contemporary Chinese Designers

Under the influence of foreign culture, contemporary Chinese designers are trying to find the characteristics of Chinese design. China and some Western countries used to be keen and powerful in porcelain manufacturing, but now they have just become major producers of porcelain. Back in the late 19th century, “Made in Germany” was labeled as cheap, low-quality, and fake. Later, Deutscher Werkbund appeared and proposed that designers and traditional craftsmen should cooperate with each other to improve product design. Through such reforms, “Made in Germany” has gradually become synonymous with high-quality products, thus promoting the economy and improving national cultural literacy^[11]. Similarly, Chinese designers have gradually realized the importance of traditional handicrafts. Many have begun to understand traditional handicrafts in depth and strengthen communication with craftsmen. As far as designers are concerned, they not only value craftsmen’s meticulousness about the manufacturing process, product details and quality control, but also think highly of traditional handicrafts which reflect the relationship between human, nature and social environment. Their philosophy of simplicity and advocating harmony with nature is worthy of inheritance and study by future generations^[12].

Chinese design theorist Wang Shouzhi pointed out that the economy, design industry and design education are developing rapidly in Asia. China is still imitating and plagiarizing Western festival designs, poor in overall design. Most designs are relatively dull, monotonous, and lack originality. However, as a country with rich traditional culture, China can get rid of its model and usher in a new state of creation, even when presenting its own products again. Wang said, “if we want to give a new definition of global industrial products in the 21st century, in my opinion, they are developing towards diversification, personalization, experimentation and non-systematization.” He also suggested that China is the center of world’s manufacturing and cannot lose its profound traditional culture. Therefore, in the future, “Made in China” can be transformed into “Designed in China”^[13].

Nowadays, modern Chinese designers realize that there is no need to give up their traditional culture, and research, innovation and reform should be carried out based on original traditional culture, namely traditional handicrafts. However, it is not enough for contemporary designers to study traditional handicrafts alone. They have to play their role by jumping out of the framework of original traditional handicrafts, so as to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of traditional handicrafts, and to extract their characteristics. Meanwhile, they should develop bold ideas to explore new elements and innovations of porcelain according to the characteristics of materials, product functionality, technological modeling, etc., combining it reasonably with modern design. In addition to quality assurance and innovative ideas, designers also need to establish their own brand culture under the general trend of the world economy. By looking at the world’s major design brands, it can be seen that they all refine core products and highlight the brand’s design concept, so as to show their own uniqueness. For this reason, Chinese designers are aware of the importance of brand, especially when China plays an important role in the development of the contemporary world. As a country with a long-standing traditional culture of porcelain, China should have its own unique brand of porcelain, so

as to better integrate Chinese design into the world's^[14].

4. The Rise of Chinese Design—Take Jingdezhen as an example

Take Jingdezhen as an example. Some contemporary designers with new ideas and attitudes have established their own porcelain brands and studios in Jingdezhen, and hired excellent local traditional craftsmen to create high-quality porcelain products.

4.1. Lanyin Dongfang porcelain studio

Zhao Lei, the founder of Lanyin Dongfang, was born in Inner Mongolia in 1980s and graduated from Jingdezhen Ceramic University. In 2008, he came to Jingdezhen from Ordos, Inner Mongolia alone. Fascinated by Jingdezhen's porcelain culture during his studies, Zhao Lei decided to stay there to establish his own porcelain studio. In fact, many designers like him have their own studios in Jingdezhen. After years of efforts, Lanyin Dongfang has a growing reputation in Jingdezhen, and has cooperative relations with many domestic brands. In July 2015, I interviewed Zhao Lei who invited me to visit his studio located in a village in the old factory of Jingdezhen in Jiangxi. The road leading to the studio was narrow and muddy. It took about ten minutes to walk to a three-story house, which was no different from the house next to it. Dozens of rows of finished porcelain were put at the entrance of the studio. Wearing a dark Tang-style linen shirt, Zhao Lei was calculating the porcelain blanks to be air-dried. Seeing me, he put down the blank in his hand, wiped his hands with a cloth, and greeted me with a smile. He showed me the entire studio and other related equipment. The studio has a total of six employees, the oldest of whom is no more than 45 years old, and they are all working hard. Zhao Lei said, "most here are traditional crafts. I want to use porcelain as a carrier to show the world Chinese design and better inherit Chinese traditional handicrafts. I hope our brand can create household porcelain products that meet the aesthetics of modern people, and reproduce high-quality traditional craftsmanship."

4.2. Interview record

Zhang: Does the brand name "Lanyin Dongfang" have any special meaning to you?

Zhao: It was originally named "Lanyinzi". I like blue. Because I am from Inner Mongolia, I often think of the blue sky in Inner Mongolia. And Yinzi, referring to footprint, is a piece of advice for me to start a business by moving forward step by step in a down-to-earth manner. Our brand takes creating Oriental elegant life as its guiding principle, hence the current name "Lanyin Dongfang".

Zhang: What do you think of traditional handicrafts?

Zhao: I hope that traditional handicraft culture can be passed on from generation to generation, but Chinese traditional handicrafts face many problems. Due to the rapid development of industry, many machines have replaced human hands. Faced with this situation, most craftsmen choose to give up their craft. Fewer and fewer people are willing to work in the field of traditional handicrafts. In the past, design and manufacturing were done by the same person. Now craftsmen have the technology and rich manufacturing experience, but they lack innovation in design. With the change of the times, the sub-industry has become increasingly precise, leading to the birth of designer. As contemporary designers, we need to know that innovation and dissemination of culture are like the close cooperation between brain and hand. Therefore, we should communicate with craftsmen and learn from each other.

Zhang: How do you view the development of Jingdezhen's household porcelain industry?

Zhao: Jingdezhen can provide us with a complete porcelain production system, which attracts many young entrepreneurs with enthusiasm for porcelain like me. In addition, Jingdezhen has been integrated into Western culture a long time ago. There are many people from all over the world like me drifting in Jingdezhen, so it is a very inclusive city. Jingdezhen has experienced the age of handicraft and that of industry. For a long time, there was no porcelain brand of its own here. The workshops here were all OEMs for some big brands. On the contrary, those well-known porcelain brands were all abroad, which sounds ironic. As the "the Capital of Porcelain", Jingdezhen did not have a highly recognizable Chinese porcelain brand? At that time, Chinese porcelain manufacturing meant that it was cheap and of poor quality, and even some high-end brands were reluctant to admit that their products were actually made in China. However, over time, many Chinese brands have begun to focus on "cultural confidence" and the quality of their products, and they hope to meet the market's demands by reviving traditional

Chinese craftsmanship. At present, the outside world has gradually begun to change the perception of Chinese manufacturing and brands, especially in such an age of personalization, so we are aware of the importance of originality and quality in porcelain manufacturing. Lanyin Dongfang adheres to the application of Chinese raw materials, the design of Chinese designers, and the production of Chinese craftsmen, creating a high-end household porcelain brand in China.

Zhang: How do you ensure the quality of your products?

Zhao: We pay attention to each step and detail of porcelain, from research and development to production, from product to market, and even from trial production to mass production. All products must be checked one by one. For some products, we've even spent years of learning, researching, and manufacturing and testing. Each step seems simple, but it calls for rigorous attitude. If there is a problem with one step, the whole batch of porcelain has to be smashed and reproduced.

Zhang: Have you encountered any difficulties in cooperating with craftsmen for so long?

Zhao: Sometimes there will be little friction between designers and craftsmen. Some craftsmen are reluctant to change their original fixed ideas. They are afraid to break the tradition and dare not try other techniques. But after our continuous communication and experiments, we have found an effective solution.

Zhang: Do you have any expectations for the future development of household porcelain?

Zhao: At present, there is still a small amount of plagiarism in Jingdezhen. I hope that consumers can resist counterfeiting and protect the intellectual property rights of Jingdezhen porcelain. This will not only enable a healthy development of the porcelain market, but also contribute to the protection of the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. In addition, for household porcelain, raw materials are the most fundamental. It is well known that these raw materials are non-renewable and limited. I hope that porcelain waste can be reused in the future, so as to make the ecosystem healthier and more environmentally friendly.

5. Conclusion

China's porcelain industry has a high reputation in history, but at the same time, it faces a decline in reputation in the period of industrialization transformation. With the rise of Chinese design in the new era, China can get rid of its model and usher in a new state of creation, even when presenting its own products again. Modern Chinese designers realize that there is no need to give up their traditional culture, and research, innovation and reform should be carried out based on original traditional culture, namely traditional handicrafts. However, it is not enough for contemporary designers to study traditional handicrafts alone. They have to play their role by jumping out of the framework of original traditional handicrafts, so as to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of traditional handicrafts, and to extract their characteristics.

In Conclusion, Chinese designers are aware of the importance of brand, especially when China plays an important role in the development of the contemporary world. As a country with a long-standing traditional culture of porcelain, China should have its own unique brand of porcelain, so as to better integrate Chinese design into the world's. Therefore, in the future, "Made in China" can be transformed into "Designed in China".

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