

# Handmade Porcelain in Jingdezhen : Identity Construction and Cultural Identity in the Context of Intangible Cultural Heritage, China

Jiang Xinda<sup>1</sup> and Peera Phanlukthao<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

*Jingdezhen, known as the porcelain capital of China, has a glorious history of porcelain making for thousands of years, which has given birth to countless outstanding craftsmen. Jingdezhen handmade ceramics embody distinct national and regional characteristics and are important representatives of traditional handicrafts. Its "hand-made porcelain skills" and "traditional porcelain kiln workshop construction skills" were included in the first batch of China's national intangible cultural heritage list in 2006, marking the start of the intangible inheritance and protection of hand-made porcelain. Today, China's intangible cultural heritage protection work has made significant progress. However, in-depth research on the inheritors of "intangible cultural heritage" still has a long way to go. This study uses identity construction and cultural identity as the framework, focusing on the intangible inheritors of Jingdezhen handmade porcelain. It aims to explain the process of their identity construction and cultural identity. The research comprehensively uses field surveys, literature reviews, case analysis and other methods, and goes deep into the workshops. , the studio communicates face-to-face with intangible cultural heritage inheritors, and provides comprehensive research results for the protection and development of intangible cultural heritage inheritors of Jingdezhen handmade porcelain.*

**Keywords:** *Jingdezhen , Handmade Porcelain, Identity Construction, Cultural Identity, Intangible Cultural Heritage ,*

## INTRODUCTION

### The Identity Construction of the Inheritor of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Jingdezhen Handmade Porcelain Craft

### The Historical Process of the Construction of the Identity of Jingdezhen Ceramic Craftsmen in China

If you want to find an art work with a long history, a long-standing aesthetic standard, and a long-term important role in the cultural exchange between China and the West, there is probably nothing more suitable than ceramics as a research object. In the Neolithic Age, China had already nurtured a colorful and dazzling colored pottery culture. By the Song Dynasty, China's ceramic skills had reached perfection, among which the five major kilns of Ru, Guan, Jun, Ge, and Ding were particularly famous. With the rise of blue and white porcelain firing technology in the Yuan Dynasty, blue and white porcelain quickly became a shining pearl among Chinese porcelains. During the Ming Dynasty, the aesthetic tradition of the Yuan Dynasty was continued, and the blue and white porcelain technology was more maturely developed, and on this basis, a variety of colorful porcelain varieties such as five-color and doucai were derived. Entering the Qing Dynasty, ceramic art inherited various types of porcelain before the Ming Dynasty, and integrated Western enamel techniques to innovate unique porcelain types such as enamel porcelain and pastel porcelain. Compared with the Song Dynasty's pursuit of a simple and elegant pottery style, the painted porcelain that emerged in the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties showed a more delicate and colorful decorative aesthetics.

However, in the late Qing Dynasty, the Jingdezhen porcelain industry suffered a heavy blow from the Taiping Rebellion. At the same time, the financial difficulties of the Qing court also led to the gradual decline of the imperial kiln system, and the handmade porcelain making skills were once stagnant. Faced with multiple problems such as the collapse of the imperial kiln system, fierce competition from imported foreign porcelain,

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Fine-Applied Arts and Cultural Science, Mahasarakham University, Thailand

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Fine-Applied Arts and Cultural Science, Mahasarakham University, Thailand E-mail: 365876964@qq.com, (Corresponding author)

the gradual backwardness of traditional technology, and the change in ceramic aesthetic tastes, what kind of response did Jingdezhen need to make in the early 20th century? And what kind of opportunity did this response provide for the transformation of the identity of Jingdezhen porcelain craftsmen?

During the historical intersection of the Republic of China and the new China, war and revolution dominated the history. The porcelain industry in Jingdezhen was severely impacted, so that the entire porcelain industry was constantly in self-innovation, and the identity of the porcelain craftsmen was quietly constructed. Until the 20th century, the industrialization of Chinese ceramics completely changed the face of ceramic production, and promoted the practitioners of art ceramics to break away from the identity of craftsmen. With the introduction of Western pigments and printing glazing technology, the painting process of ordinary daily porcelain became more convenient and efficient. At the same time, with the introduction of Western concepts such as "fine arts", a group of porcelain makers and painters who were committed to improving the porcelain industry jointly established the "Porcelain Art Research Society" in 1919. They clearly put forward the goal of improving the porcelain industry and recovering their rights, and used this as a symbol to distinguish themselves from traditional craftsmen who stick to the rules and do not think about improvement. For example, since 1979, the Chinese government has launched the selection of national-level arts and crafts masters. So far, 31 people in Jingdezhen have won this honor in six selections, and some of them were later selected as inheritors of national intangible cultural heritage. The protection of intangible cultural heritage officially began in 2006. It can be seen that China has continued to protect the inheritors of the intangible cultural heritage of porcelain making, and has achieved many results to this day. chapter2 :From the end of the Qing Dynasty to the founding of the People's Republic of China (1898-1949), the identity and cultural identity of the inheritors of Jingdezhen porcelain

### **The Identity Construction of Jingdezhen Handmade Ceramic Craftsmen Under China's Industrialization Process**

In the early 20th century, Jingdezhen porcelain industry was committed to industrialization, aiming to improve traditional production methods and enhance the efficiency of social organizations in order to enhance the international competitiveness of this Chinese porcelain center. The use of precision equipment such as industrialized improved machines and instruments has, to a certain extent, eliminated the importance of experience and brought opportunities for changes in the industry's identity and status. At this time, the way of education is also changing. The new school education system has strengthened the use of innovative technologies and reshaped the way practitioners are produced: new technicians are no longer trained by the traditional apprenticeship system, and practitioners are naturally no longer masters and skilled craftsmen in the traditional handicraft era. They become designers, engineers and industrial workers in the industrial production of ceramics.

These efforts have promoted the birth of a group of modern ceramic artists. Most of them graduated from institutions such as ceramic schools and were trained by teachers who returned from overseas, especially graduates of Japanese industrial schools. These newly trained technicians and managers are different from traditional craftsmen and focus on professional skills. The market ultimately proved that antique porcelain and hand-painted porcelain are the core advantages of Jingdezhen. Although there have been attempts to use new pigments and simplify decoration to reduce costs, the preciousness of hand-painted high-end porcelain is more prominent.

So, what is the value and significance of handmade porcelain craftsmen who rely on a craft in the era of industrialized mechanical production? Jingdezhen has a long history and is famous for its antique porcelain and hand-painted high-end porcelain. In the early 20th century, despite its mature ceramic production technology, it was already lagging behind Europe and Japan. For this reason, officials and gentry merchants launched a ceramic improvement movement. Although the results were limited, the new schools and research institutions established along with industrialized improvements successfully cultivated Jingdezhen's early modern ceramic engineers. At the same time, the status of Jingdezhen's porcelain painting craftsmen was significantly improved after the Anti-Japanese War. They were officially called "porcelain painting experts" and "calligraphers and

painters". They established a porcelain art research society to promote the development of porcelain art and distinguish themselves from traditional craftsmen, marking the transformation from craftsmen to professional experts. In fact, we can see that in China in the 20th century, there were far more high-quality and low-priced ceramics available for ordinary consumers to choose from on the market than in the handicraft era. In this case, brands become particularly important. They have become an important channel for famous craftsmen to realize their wealth in this industrialized era. These craftsmen or artists have become the representatives of the skills of local ceramic production, their works are regarded as typical of local ceramics, and their work institutions have become the models of local ceramic production.

At the beginning of the 21st century, with the closure of state-owned factories and the transfer of the ceramic industry to the rear of the Pearl River Delta, most of the ceramic factories have closed down, and only artistic handmade ceramics are still in the market in Jingdezhen. The emphasis on traditional skills, styles and regional characteristics means that the master-disciple relationship of craftsmanship is far more important than formal education in colleges. The genealogy of craft inheritance is still an important resource for constructing identity. It is made by artists themselves, from Jingdezhen Ceramics Research Institute, Jingdezhen Art Ceramics Factory, Jingdezhen Sculpture Ceramics Factory, through exhibitions and media promotion, and widely disseminated inside and outside the industry circle, establishing a classic imagination of ceramics for people in an era. Through these classic or representative works, the identity of intangible cultural heritage handmade ceramic artists has been established. Outstanding craftsmen have also become representatives of skills under industrial transformation, and have become an important part of the industry, corporate culture and brand story.

### **The Process of Transformation from "Ceramic Craftsman" to "Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritor"**

1957 was an important year for Jingdezhen handmade ceramic practitioners. That year, China's policy shifted to rely more on ceramic artists to create artistic works in ceramic production, and reduce production matters. Against this background, the first National Arts and Crafts Artists' Representative Conference was held in Beijing, China in 1957, marking that the social status of artists was officially recognized by the state, and they replaced artists as the design subject of industrial production. The conference was led by the industrial department, and the participants were mainly artist representatives from all over the country, including cooperative artists, self-employed artists, artist representatives from state-owned and public-private joint ventures, and arts and crafts workers who worked closely with artists.

Then the time came to 1978 to 1979, which was an important period of critical turning point in the change of the identity of Jingdezhen handmade porcelain craftsmen. In 1979, the method of evaluating the professional titles of arts and crafts personnel was promulgated for this type of craftsmen. Personal talent became the basis for evaluation, and professional title status was the basis for giving wages and benefits. The evaluation of the professional title of arts and crafts personnel has its own particularity, but it is also part of the professional title evaluation of all technical personnel (cadres). Hua Guofeng, Ye Jianying, Deng Xiaoping, and Li Xiannian met with representatives attending the meeting on the 16th. At this meeting, 34 technical personnel were awarded the title of "Arts and Crafts Master" (this title was later changed to "Chinese Arts and Crafts Master"), including Master Wang Xiliang, the master of Jingdezhen. Craftsmen were eventually replaced by artists.

This type of ceramic arts and crafts master later became an important candidate for the inheritor of the intangible cultural heritage of handmade porcelain. In 2004, China officially joined the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Over the past 20 years (2004-2024), the protection and inheritance of China's intangible cultural heritage has taken a long and solid road. In March 2005, the General Office of the State Council of China issued the annex to the Opinions on Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage in my country. In May 2006, the State Council of China officially promulgated the First National Intangible Cultural Heritage List, which systematically divides my country's intangible cultural heritage into ten categories, including folk literature, folk music, folk dance, traditional drama, folk art, acrobatics and competition, folk art, traditional handicrafts, traditional medicine and folklore. This classification framework provides authoritative guidance for the collection, compilation and protection of intangible cultural

heritage. Later, the "Representative Inheritors of National Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects" referred to in the "Interim Measures for the Identification and Management of Representative Inheritors of National Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects" approved by the Ministry of Culture of China on May 14, 2008 refers to the inheritors who are recognized by the cultural administrative department of the State Council, bear the responsibility for the inheritance and protection of the national intangible cultural heritage list projects, and have recognized representativeness, authority and influence. So far, the concept of intangible cultural heritage inheritors has been formally proposed, clarifying the obligations and responsibilities of inheritors.

To this day, China has introduced a series of policies to protect ceramic handmade porcelain craftsmen, giving them professional title assessments and financial support. In 2006, the first batch of China's national intangible cultural heritage lists was officially announced, and "ceramic handmade skills" ranked first among 89 traditional handicrafts, and among them, "Jingdezhen handmade porcelain skills" ranked first in the porcelain category. In 2008, the Ministry of Culture of China promulgated the "Interim Measures for the Identification and Management of Representative Inheritors of National Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects", and Jingdezhen also had 4 ceramic artists selected into the list of national handmade porcelain intangible cultural heritage inheritors. As of 2024, there are 12 intangible cultural heritage inheritors of handmade porcelain in China, covering various ceramic techniques, and it is believed that they will continue to increase in the future.

In short, the construction and maintenance of cultural identity is a complex process, which involves objective identity recognition and subjective psychological confirmation, as well as the judgment and evaluation of individual or group members on their own interests. Intangible cultural heritage, as people's specific cultural production or lifestyle, plays an important role in this process. For traditional porcelain-making artists, their identity construction has undergone a transformation from traditional craftsmen to nationally recognized intangible cultural heritage inheritors and arts and crafts masters. Their identity construction has also changed accordingly, from inheritors of traditional skills to an indispensable part of modern industrial production. This has not only improved their social status, but also prompted them to explore new paths to integrate with modern industry while retaining traditional skills.

## **Research on the Development of Jingdezhen Handmade Porcelain Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritors from the Perspective of Cultural Identity**

### **Construction of the Cultural Identity System of the Inheritors of Jingdezhen Handmade Porcelain Intangible Cultural Heritage**

People's cultural identity of intangible cultural heritage is manifested in various forms, including individual identity, ethnic identity, regional identity, blood identity, occupational identity, religious identity, folk identity, national identity and national identity. These identities not only jointly reflect the subjective value and significance given and confirmed by people through the specific practice of intangible cultural heritage, but also highlight the extensiveness of people's cultural value recognition and an important difference in self-identity value recognition with culture as a carrier. When people choose and confirm their own identity, they inherently need to be based on the recognition of specific values and be influenced by such recognition. This is also the key to the formation and development of the inheritors of Jingdezhen handmade porcelain intangible cultural heritage.

From the perspective of the construction and maintenance mechanism of cultural identity, it is mainly affected by two factors: one is objective identity recognition, and the other is subjective psychological confirmation. Objective identity recognition is mainly confirmed by obvious "differences" relative to "others" such as blood, geography, occupation, cultural lifestyle, etc. For example, when we talk about the inheritors of Jingdezhen's intangible cultural heritage of handmade porcelain, their unique porcelain-making skills and cultural lifestyle are the explicit signs that distinguish them from other groups. When talking about the source of identity formation, Manuel Castells said: "Although identity can arise from dominant institutions, it can only become identity when social actors internalize and construct their meaning around this internalization process." (Castells.2006.5)

Subjective psychological confirmation is more complicated. It comes from common historical and cultural memories, cultural psychological structural characteristics, and the comprehensive interest weighing of individual group attributes. Simply put, people will decide whether to identify with this group identity based on their historical and cultural background, psychological feelings, and what benefits this group identity can bring to themselves.

From a subjective perspective, the intangible cultural heritage inheritors' deep recognition of cultural values and their active choice and confirmation of group cultural identity have an implicit but powerful influence and constraint. Intangible cultural heritage is like a living history book, recording the collective cultural memory of an ethnic group or nation. Just like the inheritors of the intangible cultural heritage of handmade porcelain in Jingdezhen, they are not only passing on the porcelain-making skills, but also passing on a cultural memory. This memory includes the history, culture, local customs and practices of Jingdezhen, as well as the various requirements and taboos in the porcelain-making process. These cultural memories are passed down from generation to generation by the inheritors of the intangible cultural heritage, allowing future generations to deeply understand and confirm their ethnic identity.

### **Changes in the Cultural Identity of Jingdezhen Handmade Porcelain Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritors Under the Process of Modernization**

Promoting the sustainable development of intangible cultural heritage on the basis of harmonious cultural relations is crucial for the protection and development of intangible cultural heritage inheritors. The inheritors of Jingdezhen handmade porcelain intangible cultural heritage are a specific case under this topic. Their experience vividly demonstrates the profound changes in the cultural identity of intangible cultural heritage inheritors under the background of today's industrialization process.

Facing the wave of industrialization, Jingdezhen handmade porcelain craftsmanship has encountered unprecedented challenges. Mechanized production has quickly occupied the market with its advantages of high efficiency and low cost, resulting in the shrinking living space of traditional handmade porcelain craftsmanship. However, it is in such adversity that the cultural identity of Jingdezhen handmade porcelain intangible cultural heritage inheritors has been reshaped and sublimated. They not only stick to the ancient skills, but also regard it as a responsibility and mission of cultural inheritance. They know that handmade porcelain is not only a production process, but also an art form with profound historical heritage and cultural spirit.

Therefore, they began to actively explore the combination of handmade porcelain craftsmanship and modern life, and strive to find the fit between tradition and modernity. Through creative design, they combine traditional handmade porcelain making skills with modern aesthetics to create ceramic works that have both traditional cultural charm and meet modern aesthetic needs. At the same time, they also focus on brand building and the development of cultural tourism. By creating a unique brand image and holding a variety of cultural tourism activities, they attract more people to understand and pay attention to Jingdezhen's handmade porcelain making skills.

For example, the Jingdezhen "Huangyao" ceramic brand, the founder of "Huangyao" Huang Yunpeng is the representative inheritor of the national "intangible cultural heritage" project "Jingdezhen Handmade Porcelain Skills-Blue and White Painting". During his lifetime, Master Huang Yunpeng continued to contribute to the cultivation of intangible cultural heritage inheritors. Huang Yunpeng's inheritance base was awarded the first batch of national "intangible cultural heritage" production protection demonstration bases in 2011. He insisted on retaining the integrity of the traditional handmade porcelain making process and core technology. From raw material washing to molding, painting, firing and other processes, Jingdezhen's traditional porcelain making technology is used to restore the charm of cultural relics to the maximum extent. Huang Yunpeng also cooperated with universities, museums and other archaeological and cultural institutions to introduce the younger generation and add more talents to the inheritance of Jingdezhen ceramics "intangible cultural heritage".

This change in cultural identity is not only reflected in the adherence to and innovation of the skills themselves, but also in the integration of a deep understanding of traditional culture and a global perspective. The inheritors

of the intangible cultural heritage of Jingdezhen handmade porcelain are demonstrating with their actions how to realize the revitalization and utilization of cultural heritage on the basis of respecting tradition. Through innovation and development, they enable these precious cultural heritages to continue and flourish in modern society. At the same time, they also pay attention to cultural diversity and sustainable development, and strive to promote the harmonious coexistence of intangible cultural heritage and modern society.

In short, the cultural identity of the inheritors of the intangible cultural heritage of Jingdezhen handmade porcelain has undergone profound changes in the context of today's industrialization process. They not only adhere to the ancient skills, but also regard it as a responsibility and mission of cultural inheritance. Through innovation and development, they strive to promote the sustainable development of intangible cultural heritage, and provide valuable experience and inspiration for the protection and inheritance of other intangible cultural heritage projects.



Figure 1: The picture shows a traditional handmade porcelain artist from Jingdezhen hand-paintinging the lid of a covered bowl

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Figure 2: This picture shows the author, his father and Master Huang Yunpeng, at the Imperial Kiln Scenic Area

### **The Survival of the Inheritors of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Jingdezhen Handmade Porcelain from the Perspective of Cultural Identity**

Today, the organizational form and structural order of Chinese society have undergone great changes. The ritual life, old values and taboos of traditional society are gradually disappearing, which has caused many folk and mass cultural activities to lose their original cultural background. At the same time, the reproduction technology of modern society has not only changed the production mode of traditional culture, but also affected the social foundation on which the production and dissemination of traditional cultural meanings rely. As Walter Benjamin said: "Reproduction technology has freed the things being reproduced from the traditional field." (Benjamin. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* [M] Translated by Wang Caiyong, Beijing: China City Press, 2001:10.)

With the advancement of industrialization, the social structure has undergone tremendous changes, and the differences between urban and rural areas have become increasingly obvious. Many people who originally lived and worked in rural areas have moved to cities, which has led to a gradual reduction in the inheritance group of traditional culture. At the same time, modern communication media have replaced traditional interpersonal and oral communication methods, and many cultural phenomena have been stripped from their original environment, losing their original time sequence or taboos, and are presented in the same way to people from different regions and cultural backgrounds. These changes have made traditional cultural life fragmented and disordered, and the original cultural significance has been continuously deconstructed in the changes of the social and cultural environment. Both cultural behavior and material carriers of culture have now become more superficial symbols of history, memory and cultural identity, losing the social driving force for sustainable development and facing a survival dilemma.

As an important social practice in traditional society, intangible cultural heritage is an important part of the production and representation of ancient social culture. It has a "symbiotic relationship" with society based on the expression and confirmation of value demands in real life, and has been maintained and developed in the



inheritance of generations in ancient society. However, today many intangible cultural heritages have become obviously alienated from people's daily lives, which is exactly the survival crisis they face. Take Jingdezhen handmade porcelain as an example. It is not only a skill, but also a "symbiotic relationship" with society based on the expression and confirmation of value demands in real life. In ancient society, the Jingdezhen handmade porcelain craft was maintained and developed through inheritance from generation to generation, becoming an important part of local culture and life.

However, today many intangible cultural heritages such as Jingdezhen handmade porcelain have become obviously alienated from people's daily lives. With the acceleration of modernization and the change of lifestyle, the practical application of these traditional skills in modern society has gradually decreased, and they are facing a survival crisis. For the intangible cultural heritage inheritors of Jingdezhen handmade porcelain, how to combine these traditional skills with modern society and let them reintegrate into people's daily life has become an urgent problem to be solved.

To solve this crisis, it is necessary to re-establish the value connection between intangible cultural heritage and people's current life, promote them to turn to modernity in cultural connotation, and make them meaningful to people again. Only in this way can intangible cultural heritage obtain the fundamental driving force for survival, revitalize and pass on. For example, the concept of "productive protection" was first proposed by Mr. Wang Wenjian in the book "Introduction to Intangible Cultural Heritage", which means "protection in a production way". "Productive protection" is to turn intangible cultural heritage and its resources into productivity and products through production, circulation and sales, which can make money and promote the development of related industries. More importantly, this can protect intangible cultural heritage in the actual production process, so that protection and economic development can promote each other and form a virtuous circle.

## **CONCLUSION**

Intangible cultural heritage, as a special carrier of human cultural memory, is not only an important way to express and maintain the recognition of diverse cultural values, but also a unique system for synchronously constructing the spiritual home and order of mankind. The general attention paid by the international community to the protection of intangible cultural heritage today deeply reflects people's recognition of unique cultural values. The inheritors of Jingdezhen handmade porcelain intangible cultural heritage are an important living inheritance factor of Chinese ceramic culture. It is crucial to vigorously promote the display, dissemination and research of Jingdezhen handmade porcelain skills, integrate them into modern life, and make them an important part of people's daily life. The identity construction and cultural identity of the inheritors of Jingdezhen porcelain intangible cultural heritage should be comprehensively constructed through the joint efforts of individuals, society and the country. With the country's emphasis on the protection of intangible cultural heritage and the advancement of institutionalization, they have relied on the tempering of their own skills and the pursuit of ceramic art to cooperate with the national policy protection, and have won the recognition and support of the government and the general public, so as to better realize the protection of Jingdezhen handmade porcelain intangible cultural heritage inheritors.

Nowadays, in the macro context of the protection and inheritance of traditional intangible cultural heritage in China and the world, the inheritors of Jingdezhen's handmade porcelain intangible cultural heritage are not only highly valued as important inheritors of traditional skills, but also have gained a clearer identity and social status due to the continuous improvement of the intangible cultural heritage protection system. With the in-depth implementation of intangible cultural heritage protection, Jingdezhen's intangible cultural heritage inheritors actively participate in cultural inheritance and innovation activities, and their skills and cultural values have therefore been more widely recognized and disseminated, which not only further enhances their cultural identity and pride, but also provides valuable experience and demonstration effect for the protection of intangible cultural heritage in Jingdezhen and even the whole country.

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