

# ***Artisans in the Present Artistic Market: A Case Study on Jingdezhen Porcelain***

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the challenges and opportunities artists face in Jingdezhen, a village historically renowned for its blue and white pottery. The ceramics industry is a vital economic pillar in Jingdezhen, as reported by the Chinese Government in 2016, “Jingdezhen's porcelain products were exported to 75 countries and regions with a value of 256 million yuan (\$37.17 million U.S.)”. However, as they shifted from a command economy to a market economy in the 20th century, artisans struggled to maintain a living. Under the command economy, artists in Jingdezhen had stable government support and a guaranteed market for their work. On the contrary, the shift to a market economy has introduced competition and a decrease in demand, making survival more complex. Therefore, through the lens study of Jingdezhen, this paper will analyze how artists can survive, and how art is valued in the ever-evolving market.

**Keywords:** Jingdezhen, Porcelain, Artisans, Ceramics, Artist

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Background of Jingdezhen artisans**

Jingdezhen's artisans can be classified into three main categories: traditional craftsmen, designers, and Jingdrifters (those who migrated to Jingdezhen to learn ceramic craftsmanship). Researcher Ruoxi Liu from the University of Cambridge noted “A diverse set of craft labor categories have emerged and developed in this traditional craft town” [1]. This paper focuses on analyzing the first type — traditional craftsmen — because they play the most vital role in preserving and imparting the ancient techniques and cultural heritage of Jingdezhen's porcelain-making tradition, and they face the most dire situation.

### **1.2. Research topic definition**

**Ceramics:** Pots and other articles made from clay hardened by heat, encompassing a wide range of items including earthenware, stoneware, and porcelain. In this research paper, ceramics and porcelain will be used interchangeably.

**Command economy:** An economy in which production, investment, prices, and incomes are determined centrally by a government.

**Market Economy:** An economic system where the production and pricing of goods and services are determined by the supply and demand of the market.

**State-owned Enterprises:** A business entity that is established and/or owned by a national or state/provincial government.

**Intellectual plagiarism (In Art):** take or copy a painting and circulate it into the world as if it is your own without noting your purpose and citing the original

## 2. Case study: the dynastic era

During the dynastic era, Jingdezhen flourished as a renowned center for porcelain production, earning China its international reputation as the source of fine ceramics, with the term "fine china", reflecting the country's expertise in crafting delicate, high-quality porcelain. This case study explores two pivotal periods of this success—the Tang and Qing dynasties—both of which marked the peak of porcelain craftsmanship, with each era contributing unique qualities and innovations that solidified Jingdezhen's status as a center of artistic and economic excellence.

### 2.1. Tang Dynasty (618-907AD)

JingdeZhen, formerly known as Changnanzhen, originated during the 6th century Sui Dynasty. By the Tang dynasty, Jingdezhen had grown into one of China's major economic sectors, primarily due to the Golden Silk Road era, demanding high-quality porcelain for trading. Jingdezhen's products, especially its crafted ceramic vases, and sculptures, had made its first appearance on the trading market, where it immediately became highly praised among all foreign markets across Asia and the Middle East. Scholar HaiYing Liu noted that "Jingdezhen ceramic sculptures had developed with highly sophisticated techniques within a few centuries. Export ceramics were mainly various household items and small sculptures." [2] These goods were not only functional but were appreciated for their fine work of art and their delicateness. Chinese porcelain became a symbol of power and wealth, an object that was highly demanded with limited supply, and a significant part of the Silk Road trading.

Artisans were required to produce functional objects—dishes, bowls, and vases—yet they managed to introduce subtle variations in shape, color, and decoration that made their work stand out. For instance, they experimented with different glazes and motifs, developing unique blue-and-white porcelain that would later become iconic. The artisans' creativity was reflected in their ability to blend form and function, producing objects that were both practical and highly decorative.

During this era, quality and creativity reached new heights as artisans worked within a loosely supervised system. The state, particularly the imperial court, was primarily concerned with the revenue porcelain generated, and ensuring that the artistry reflected the empire's prestige. Therefore, this created loopholes for artisans, where there weren't rigid guidelines or methods for porcelain production. While the emperor was seen as the ultimate authority, artisans were free to follow general rules but still had room to explore new techniques and develop their creativity. This model of success was used to ensure the quality of the ceramics being produced where of its highest standard, maintaining both efficiency and aesthetics.

### 2.2. Qing Dynasty (1644-1912AD)

The Qing Dynasty marked a significant era in the history of Jingdezhen porcelain, known for refining and elevating the art form to unprecedented heights. Qing Dynasty underwent a period of transition, where the Manchures dominated control, still creating remarkably good quality pieces. Unlike the Tang Dynasty, where Jingdezhen was primarily recognized for its innovative integration of international styles through the Silk Road, the Qing Dynasty solidified Jingdezhen's reputation for technical mastery and intricate craftsmanship.

Qing administration of porcelain production was both detailed and centralized. The imperial court closely supervised the porcelain industry, through the control of the “imperial kilns” in Jingdezhen, which is the last step and the heart of how porcelain is made. There had been countless management officials in Jingdezhen, such as Li Yanxi, Secretary of the Storage Office of the Imperial Household Department; Zang Yingxuan, Director; and Che Erde, a clerk in the Bureau of Forestry and Crafts, Ministry of Works. However, a pivotal figure that stood out during the Qing Dynasty was Tang Ying (1682-1756), who served as the superintendent of the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen from 1728 to 1756. His contribution to the development of porcelain art was very much instrumental in the success of the craft during this period. Tang Ying was responsible for producing high-quality porcelain for the imperial household, while also “Tang recorded as a stele inscription and appearing in other workshop archival records”, noted by Duke University professor Ellen Huang [3]. Under his leadership, Jingdezhen attained new heights in artistic and technical achievement, making it one of the most successful periods in the history of Chinese porcelain.

Porcelain during the Qing Dynasty carried a different meaning than it had in previous eras. In the Tang Dynasty, porcelain was primarily a luxury good used for trade, a means of showcasing China’s wealth and sophistication to the outside world. However, by the Qing Dynasty, porcelain had become deeply intertwined with Chinese cultural identity and imperial power. The production of porcelain was no longer just about creating beautiful objects for export, it was about crafting symbols of authority and prestige for the emperor and the elite. Each piece of porcelain produced during the Qing Dynasty was a reflection of the empire’s strength and the emperor’s control over the cultural and artistic expressions of his people. The great care taken at every level of production, from material selection through firing, was indicative of the precision and order within the imperial command structure. Porcelain was not merely a commodity—it was a manifestation of the emperor’s power and the artisans’ ability to uphold that power through their craft.

### 3. The present

More than a thousand years from the past, the Golden Age of Jingdezhen porcelain, the reality for local artisans had changed dramatically. While still known as the “Porcelain Capital”, local artisans in Jingdezhen encounter challenges beneath the seemingly flourishing industry. Global demand for Jingdezhen porcelain remains high, yet market shift and revolutionized mass production had derived from the original ancient crafts and meanings. Currently, social anthropologist Maris Boyd Gillette describes the status of Jingdezhen local craftsmen as “precariousness”, as they face job insecurity and maintaining satisfying living standards [4]. While Jingdezhen porcelain products demonstrated global popularity and increasing attention, the local artisans have been struggling to make a living.

#### 3.1. Current problems faced in Jingdezhen

Since the late 20th century, the Chinese government has been actively closing state-owned enterprises in order to reform the once-planned economy to be more market-oriented. This led to a large number of workers facing unemployment. As researcher Chang Liu of Shanghai Tongji University observed, “Jingdezhen...shut down hundreds of ceramic factories, and thousands of workers lost their jobs [5]. Without the state-owned enterprise, workers and skilled artisans had nowhere to go as there were few private enterprises after the closure. To make matters worse, the production process in state-owned enterprises focused only on specialized mechanical techniques, not diverse artistic practices. According to a peer-reviewed paper published in the International Journal of Intangible Heritage, researchers Yawen Xu and Yu Tao noted that state-owned enterprises “lowered the involvement of artistic elements in the production and consumption of porcelain crafts, hindered the market’s role in signaling customers’ preferences to producers” [6]. The structure of state-owned enterprises restricts

workers' income growth and skill development, as a result, preventing them from starting their own businesses after they leave the previous state-owned corporations. With the absence of jobs, traditional craftsmen are confronted with the plight of depleting income sources. The shift from a centrally planned economy to a market-driven system revealed a wave of creative destruction, forcing artisans to adapt or face obsolescence.

Moreover, In the age of globalization and mass production, Jingdezhen's traditional ceramics face a daunting challenge: establishing a distinct brand and meeting evolving market demands. Despite its historical renown as the "porcelain capital" of China, Jingdezhen struggles to differentiate its products in a crowded marketplace saturated with mass-produced alternatives. Tongji University's researcher Luo Lin commented on Jingdezhen's homogeneous product problem, "for the porcelain with or without brands, nearly all of them stay in town and focus on production, neither without improving aesthetic quality nor branding. From the perspective of the product, the existing products in the market have too many similarities and lack differentiation" [7]. The lack of branding strategies and the proliferation of identical production processes increase this challenge, causing a decline in consumer interest and, subsequently, revenue for local artisans. Moreover, artisans' plagiarism leads to infringement on intellectual property, hence stifling new design innovation, with artisans confining themselves to the designs they had already learned. Professors and scholars from East JiaoTong University noted that "the series of intellectual property infringement problems [the ceramic industry of Jingdezhen] faces is a major obstacle to its promotion worlds" [8]. Intellectual plagiarism, with artisans producing identical products, results in most artisans lacking a unique niche in the market.

### 3.2. How should artisans make a choice

In traditional China, those who pursue art or craft are often criticized for possessing no future, as artists or artisans aren't a job, but a mere interest. The notion that art leads to uncertainty and financial instability has been the reality faced by many artists in Jingdezhen. Professor Shun Rao and Jing Liu from the School of Design and Art, Jingdezhen Ceramic University, noted that "The inheritors have given up these traditional techniques in the face of difficulties in life" [9]. Despite generations of hard work previously in the porcelain industry, current inheritors of such crafts are less willing to continue their legacy. Given this lack of artistic pursuit, the reality is many artisans had given up the creativity aspect of art, and created everyday objects such as cups, dishes, and vessels in order to sustain a living. These functional items, differing from the past, are now valued for their aesthetic element, but for utility, often sold for an incredibly low price.

For many artisans in Jingdezhen, the decision to produce utensils and functional items is not out of choice but of necessity for living. With the introduction of TaoBao, an online e-commerce platform similar to that of Amazon, the market demand for more affordable options dominated creativity. Making matters even worse, with the dramatic downfall of the economy in China due to COVID, the Artnet midyear report noted that auction sales in China had lowered by 49% from the past [10]. Buyers are more willing to compare the prices of those functional dishes, as e-commerce platforms have made it easier for consumers to access a wide range of products from different retailers, and thus the a decrease in the value of functioning objects. Therefore, in this market-driven environment, creativity becomes a luxury only some famous artists can afford, leaving the artisans and traditional craftsmen to continue fundamental skills lacking jobs.

## 4. Art & craft: functionality

James Renwick Alliance for craft, a nonprofit alliance in America, notes that "As fine artists create work that utilizes varying materials, and craft artists make conceptual work, there is no clear division." [11] However, Eden Gallery, a well-known international contemporary art gallery from London

claims that “despite the quality and creativity behind crafts, they are technically not art” [12]. Therefore, what is art? Should craft be considered as art? The distinction between art and craft still remains an ongoing debate, where should everyday materials, such as cups, dishes, and vases be considered art since they have design and aesthetic incorporated?

#### 4.1. Definition of arts and craft

In the content of Jingdezhen, the fine line between craft and art is discussed heatedly. Billie Session, in her novel *Art Education, Ceramics Curriculum: What Has It Been? What Could It Be?*, noted that in the past, ceramics had either been considered a “low” craft or “high” art” [13]. During the Tang and Qing dynasties, especially the foreign world’s first time interaction with fine porcelain, many had considered it a mysterious art form, captivated by its dedicated craftsmanship and artistic preciseness. Historically, Jingdezhen’s porcelain was revered not just for its functionality but for its intricate blue-and-white designs, where Porcelain was “more precious than gold in 17th century Europe” [14]. There was no fine line between crafts and art, where craft was a form of art, worthy of exhibition and collecting. Yet, as the market shifts toward mass production and decrease in demand for artwork, this blend of art and functionality has been losing its value

The essence of the question can be boiled down to how art and craft are defined. In the contemporary market, craft is defined as intensive labor work, with the possibility of being replicated by others or machines. Thus, porcelain had always been considered as a craft, since every step in making a porcelain had been meticulously planned out, following strict procedures and guidelines. Moreover, another standard of craft is defined by its replicable feature of the object. Jingdezhen porcelain, once again, is easily replicable with some mastery, as batches of exported porcelain all had similar patterns and designs. Therefore, in contemporary discussions, porcelain would often be seen as laborious craft work, contrary to abstract and non-functional contemporary art.

#### 4.2. Moving forward

T’ai Smith, assistant professor from the University of British Columbia argues that “the ‘honorific’ variety of labor called craft is ultimately rather close to ‘ordinary manufacture,’” [15]. blurring the lines between what we consider everyday items and what we deem artistic. However, the fact that these pieces are functional does not detract from their beauty, and should not be devalued. The creation of a ceramic utensil, while intended for daily use, requires the same level of manual skill, precision, and even creativity as a purely decorative piece. Indeed, during the dynastic era, porcelain was not only acknowledged as a craft but also highly appreciated by the emperor and the imperial court as a symbol of cultural and artistic sophistication.

With the successful model from the past, Jingdezhen’s ceramic works should still occupy a unique position at the intersection of art and craft. While the current market prioritizes utility, the artistry hidden underneath the ceramics—whether they are dishes or sculptures—remains evident. This change of perspective would open up a broader definition of art because it includes objects of daily use as manifestations of creative labor.

### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research paper highlights the challenges that Jingdezhen artisans face with the present market economy. Once a flourishing porcelain town during the dynastical era, artisans needed help with market competition, job insecurities, and the pressure of mass production. The meaning and form of porcelain had now evolved into a daily object, a declination of creative freedom leading artisans to produce functional and low-cost. Moving forward, efforts to preserve traditional techniques while adapting freedom and creativity could potentially help future artisans escape the

current dilemma. Ultimately, balancing tradition with innovation will be key to sustaining Jingdezhen's legacy.

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