



Symbols, Aesthetics, and Circles: A Cultural and Economic Study of the Purple Clay Industry

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Abstract. Yixing Purple Clay, as a representative of traditional Chinese handicrafts, have a long history. In recent years, with the rapid development of the Chinese economy, the Yixing Purple Clay industry has encountered new growth opportunities. Yixing Purple Clay teapots are favored not only for their health benefits but also for their unique cultural value, becoming an important component of cultural economy.

The Yixing Purple Clay industry integrates the characteristics of craftsmanship and cultural industries, promoting a positive interaction between the economy and culture through the use of cultural elements. It enhances cultural vitality and creativity, meeting people's expectations for a better life. As a cultural symbol, Yixing Purple Clay products carry profound cultural significance in their inscriptions and shapes.

The future development direction of the Yixing Purple Clay industry should include exploring cultural connotations, innovating product design, enhancing product added value, and being wary of aesthetic alienation. The sustainable development of the purple sand industry requires a commitment to culture to address market changes and improve economic benefits.

Keywords: Yixing Purple Clay, Ceramics, Cultural economy, Handicrafts, E-commerce, Aesthetic

1 Introduction

Yixing Purple Clay, a traditional Chinese ceramic ware, has gradually gained prominence in the ceramics industry since the Tang Dynasty, garnering love from consumers both domestically and internationally. In recent years, with the rapid development of the Chinese economy, the Yixing Purple Clay industry has also experienced substantial growth. As people increasingly pursue a healthy lifestyle, the unique health benefits of Yixing teapots have become more widely known and appreciated.

Economically, the Yixing Purple Clay industry has created numerous job opportunities in China. According to statistics from the China Industry Association, over 70% of Yixing Purple Clay processing enterprises are concentrated in regions such as Jiangsu and Zhejiang. Furthermore, the Yixing Yixing Purple Clay industry has stimulated related sectors like mold manufacturing and transportation.

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Despite the significant economic benefits brought by the development of the Yixing Purple Clay industry, its economic performance is not always stable. In recent years, due to changes in market demand and technological advancements, some low value-added products such as imitations have started to dominate the market, leading to a decline in profit margins for the Yixing Purple Clay industry.

2 Literature Review

In "Symbolic Economy: New Form of Cultural Economy in the Context of Consumer Society," Zhang Peiqi (2016) argues that the spatiotemporal attribute is a fundamental attribute of cultural economy, which determines the development laws and forms of cultural economy. Cultural economies from different historical times and regions will exhibit significant differences. Symbolic economy is a new form of cultural economy in consumer society, encompassing economic activities that provide goods with symbolic value or goods with both symbolic and utilitarian value, known as the commodification of goods. Symbolization is a fundamental logic of symbolic economy operation. Therefore, it is necessary to adhere to the operational laws of symbolic economy, focus on brand building, and develop cultural economy.[1]

Wu Xingzhi and Wang Wenwen (2023) in "Appreciation of Elegance and Vulgarity: Study on the Survival Forms of Handicraft Heritage" argue that handicraft heritage embodied in the daily life of local communities is a culturally practical model that reflects fundamental human understanding of nature, society, and the universe. With the development of cultural tourism and consumer society, traditional handicrafts have transitioned from daily necessities to crafts, leading to a juxtaposition of using these crafts in daily life as "self" and viewing them as crafts by "others," sparking discussions on the protection and inheritance of these crafts. Focusing on the Bai ethnic tie-dye cloth in Dali, Yunnan Province, this study analyzes different individuals' varying perceptions of the value of handicraft heritage from the perspectives of ontology and ontology, resulting in different forms of handicraft heritage. The value of contemporary handicraft heritage lies in the unity of value judgments between "self" and "others." Therefore, while promoting the dynamic inheritance of contemporary societal handicraft heritage, it is important to understand the value system of integrating levels of handicraft heritage and the significance of the coexistence of handicraft heritage as everyday items and crafts.[2]

In his work "On the Crossing and Transformation from Brand and Symbol to 'Cultural Economy'" published in 2008, Zhang Fengnian believes that brands and symbols are a reality that no one can resist. Through the convergence of commodities and symbols, meaning is magnified, and culture directly participates in the value-added game of commodities. The meaning of culture itself gains new significance and validation along with symbols. There is an urgent need to transform cultural resources into "cultural capital" and brand image associations into the "symbol economy", thereby realizing a new economic form, namely cultural economy.[3]

3 From the Perspective of Cultural Industries, the Yixing Purple Clay Art and Business

During a four-day interview and investigation conducted in Yixing City, the capital of Yixing Purple Clay, the author interviewed practitioners in the Yixing Purple Clay industry. The interviewees included entrepreneurs selling Yixing Purple Clay through e-commerce, Yixing Purple Clay craftsmen, and physical Yixing Purple Clay store operators, ultimately compiling interview data exceeding 10,000 words.

3.1 Development Process of Yixing Purple Clay Pottery

Yixing Purple Clay, with its cultural popularity, can embody the cultural characteristics of China. For instance, as Confucius said, "A gentleman does not get angry, for then he is no longer upright." The term '气' carries multiple meanings, including the dignity of a royal court. On the other hand, Yixing Purple Clay is a practical ceramic ware. Throughout history, two popular beverages in human society have been coffee and tea. Yixing Purple clay serves as a container for tea, making it an important tea ware. Master Gu Jingzhou is a grand master in the field of Yixing Purple Clay, a tea sage in his own right. It is said that "Yixing Purple Clay lasts 500 years, while Jingzhou's contribution spans 100 years." His comprehensive skills are unparalleled in the past and the present. In history, there were outstanding figures like Shao Daheng and Chen Shouzheng, but Gu Jingzhou standardized Yixing Purple Clay craftsmanship, education, and products.[4]

In the realm of Yixing Purple Clay production, artisans are categorized into various levels. An assistant worker is an assistant craftsman with senior professional titles, including deputy senior and senior levels. The primary professional titles are staff level and assistant level. The titles in ascending order are: craftsman, assistant craftsman, senior craftsman, senior-level craftsman, and senior professional craftsman.[5]

3.2 As a Cultural Symbol, Yixing Purple Clay Products

The cultural significance presented by Yixing Purple Clay is a symbol of culture. For instance, in Chinese philosophy, upon seeing a gourd, one might think of the phrase, "What medicine is sold in this gourd?" Thus, craftsmen are inspired by the gourd to create teapots. People's understanding of things is often constructed by linguistic symbols [6]. The potter's inscription on the Yixing Purple Clay teapot conveys the author's aesthetic pursuit and philosophical thoughts, such as "A cup of clear-minded tea, half a pot of tranquilizing soup," symbolizing the philosophy of a simple and resolute life, striving for tranquility and vastness. This inscription theory embodies the spiritual essence of natural virtue, where words accompany the pot and the pot follows the esteemed words. It possesses cultural and practical significance, as well as cultural significance[7].

The shape of the pot also carries symbolic value. Yixing Purple clay teapots represent several classic types. The lotus seed pot is a traditional and classical pot type,

with the lotus symbolizing the birth of everything from the heart. The lid rises, adorned with a bead-shaped knob, giving an appearance of height. The rounded pot body and the tightly fitting lid exhibit excellent symmetry. The smiling cherry blossom pot has a full body, smooth lines, precise craftsmanship, and exudes an air of a nobleman. The scene, boat, and stone ladle pot type is simple and concise, displaying ancient and elegant characteristics [8]. The top of the pot is smaller than the bottom, ensuring stability in usage. The spout is short and sturdy, while the knob connects the pot lid at the two ends in a parabolic shape resembling an arch bridge.

3.3 E-commerce Communication and Sales Business Models

In Yixing City, where the Yixing Purple Clay industry is concentrated, there are numerous enterprises selling Yixing Purple Clay through live e-commerce. Their main business model involves product selection, procurement, live sales, and establishing stable channels, sources, and quality of goods by connecting with private workshops responsible for producing Yixing Purple Clay. The scale of these private workshops varies, ranging from highly experienced and honored master craftsmen in Yixing Purple Clay to workers who start mass production after simple training. They produce small to medium quantities of high-end products and large quantities of low-end Yixing Purple Clay products.

Entering the handcrafted Yixing Purple Clay industry requires at least tens of millions in capital to sustain. An important cost is accumulating a diverse range of Yixing Purple Clay products before sales. The head of a medium-sized enterprise mentioned storing eight million worth of goods in the warehouse. Additionally, establishing connections is essential for obtaining high-end products [9]. Machine-produced Yixing Purple Clay products are relatively easy, with low costs for products priced at 199 to 299 and in large quantities.

For Yixing Purple Clay enterprises, another crucial aspect is live sales, leading to a significant investment in anchor training. Anchors of enterprises mainly selling low-end Yixing Purple Clay products have monthly salaries ranging from five to ten thousand, with many recruited from other regions. On the other hand, anchors of enterprises producing mid-to-high-end products can earn up to fifty thousand monthly and are primarily locally trained. Surrounding the anchors, dedicated teams help with preparing content, styling, designing product selling points, pricing, maintaining hardware equipment, providing customer service, etc. Anchors are required to be knowledgeable about Yixing Purple Clay culture, possess good public speaking skills, storytelling abilities, and to some extent, play the role of a Yixing Purple Clay consultant.

3.4 Yixing Purple Clay Teapot Aesthetics and Its Cultural Circle

The aesthetic feeling of the Yixing Purple Clay teapot is a unique artistic quality that lies beyond the boundaries of the West, pursuing a different charm of essence, energy, and spirit. This is closely connected with Chinese literature, calligraphy, music, and drama while maintaining its own distinctive style. Craftsmen of Yixing Purple Clay

believe there are two ways to enjoy tea: one is simply steeping it in water, while the other involves a spiritual experience. With the improvement of living standards, the pursuit of spiritual enjoyment becomes more significant. For instance, a saying in the production of Yixing Purple Clay teapots goes, "Square within round, round within square," proposed by Master Gu Jingzhou, meaning understanding the roundness leads to acting in a square manner, suggesting that wisdom should be well-rounded and actions should be upright, summarizing the traditional Chinese philosophical guidelines for living.

Regarding the appreciation of Yixing Purple Clay teapots, "teapot enthusiasts" form a relatively stable cultural circle. Without a discerning eye, one cannot appreciate the "charm" within the Yixing Purple Clay teapot. Within this circle, respect and admiration are given based solely on the individual's ability to perceive and understand the artistry involved. This level of understanding is often associated with one's cultural literacy and economic strength. A high-quality Yixing Purple Clay teapot can fetch a price in the six to seven digits, leading enthusiasts to compete in maintaining their teapots and mutually appreciating the cultural significance of each piece. Teapots priced in the hundreds or thousands of dollars are rare in such circles and are typically reserved for personal tea ceremonies in daily life. [10]

4 Conclusions

In summary, the Yixing Purple Clay pottery industry has played a significant role in driving economic development, yet it also faces challenges. Therefore, we need to increase policy support and enhance market supervision to ensure the healthy development of the pottery industry.

In the future, we should further explore the cultural connotations of Yixing Purple Clay pottery, innovate in product design and manufacturing techniques, enhance product added value to cope with market changes, and improve economic benefits. However, we should also be vigilant against the alienation of the aesthetic appreciation of Yixing Purple Clay art.

Yixing Purple Clay, besides its practical function, is cherished by people for its cultural charm, being neither obsequious nor vulgar. A drop of water can reflect the sun, a teapot can glimpse the various aspects of life. Life is like a pot of tea, with each utensil representing a different landscape. Life is like tea leaves, whether it be rising or falling, sorrowful or joyful, it is filled with memories, exuding a clear fragrance, prompting people to reminisce. When combined with commercialization and gradually becoming popularized, the cultural connotation of Yixing Purple Clay itself is easily equated with high prices, leading to the emergence of a "contempt chain" in hierarchical levels, demonstrating differences in cultural taste.

The Yixing Purple Clay industry is malleable, market-driven, receiving attention from local governments. Coupled with the efforts of folk craftsmen, this industry is still vibrant. The history of Yixing Purple Clay has seen ups and downs, yet practitioners unanimously believe that one must have a steadfast heart, to remain committed

to this cause, this industry, this product, with the key being to uphold its cultural significance.

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