

Generations in contrast: Master Chen Deyong 陈德永's pottery and its legacy in Nixi 尼西, Yunnan

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Abstract

This article is based on an analysis of a traditional pottery craft in a village on the fringes of Tibet, and investigates the fundamental role it plays on the local economy, society and family structure. The reconstruction of the craft's operational chain, from raw materials procurement to commercialization of the finished products, is closely related to Nixi village's relative prosperity and it is a manifestation of the specific ecological niche in which the settlement is nestled. Economic, social and cultural elements, in summary, merge within the socio-technical study of the ware, in which the master potter, as the bearer of the tradition and the main economic figure, both of the community and the individual household, plays a pivotal role. Last but not least, the article also focuses on the social change that is particularly noticeable in the contrast of lifestyles and religious and economic motivations between Master Chen Deyong and his urbanized offspring.

KEYWORDS: art consumption, commodification, agriculture, social change, rural society, traditional craftsmanship.

Theoretical inspiration and research methodology

There is, in the life and activity of a traditional craft inheritor, no hiatus between life and work. Products are, as we will see, directly an emanation of the physical properties and usefulness of things, as they found *raison d'être* and historical nurturance within the local conditions.¹ These conditions are a natural merging of technical, and only then economic and social, factors as Leroi-Gourhan taught us a long time ago with such theoretic-

¹ Which is consistent with the famous definition of commodified goods as "fetishized goods" in Marx's *Capital* ([1867] 2010, Vol. I, Chapter I, Section 4).

cal-practical terms as *Tendance Technique* or *Technical Milieu* (Audouze, 2002). As Dean Arnold (1985) has demonstrated, furthermore, there is an interrelationship and mutual influence between ceramic work and environmental resources. The amount of time dedicated to agricultural work for subsistence or commercial necessities directly affects the time dedicated to pottery making. In Nixi Township (North-west Yunnan Province, China), where this article's fieldwork was conducted in 2023, for example, winter is the off season for both activities. So they need to be harmonized within seven to eight months a year.

According to local young people, their migration to the nearby city of Shangri-la, which is in continuous expansion, has gradually led to a detachment from their ancestral tradition of pottery making.² The other reason is more materialistic; that is a shift from the hard-working life of the previous generation and the resort to steady or guaranteed salaried jobs, such as small businesses, factories, the tourism industry and various services in the more connected cities of Sichuan and Yunnan. This, inevitably, further led to a gradual move away from manual craftsmanship, associated agricultural practices and the old economic model and values that still govern the lives of the Nixi local community. In this article, I explore how local ceramics making has always been an integral part of the local community and its social practices, due to its economic necessity as a vital source of income, but also as an agent of social respect for the masters and their families, practical usefulness, and a certain ecological balance, as a perfect complement to seasonal agriculture. The detachment from these conditions of livelihood leads to the gradual abandonment of these values, which appears to be a personal choice, a conscious socioeconomic shift and a sign of modern Chinese development towards urban spheres and an increasingly urbanized economy.

The method adopted in this article is inferential and inductive and tries to relate a certain technique and praxeology (mode of production) to overlapping sociocultural structures (social relations of production), in a similar way that Marx intended to do when he tried to relate the infrastructure of workers' conditions in the industrial machine to a much broader superstructure that exploited and reiterated their lives as commodities in the market (Godelier, 1977, p. 3; Bloch, 1983). In other words, social relations of production are always an emanation and a consequence of a certain mode of production (that comprises tools, energy, techniques and expertise of a certain *ars* [Lemonnier, 2012, p. 3]) and are embedded in it. But, in a more comprehensive, almost ecological way, if we un-

² As an important provincial town in many sectors: tourism, industry, manufacture, religion, education. Now Shangri-la is linked to the rest of the country by a new airport.

earth the effective grounding, values and modalities through which people organize their work, life habits, and spirituality through the relationship that they have with their objects, then we will be able to decipher underlying local values, either conceptual or processual or both. The anthropology of technology method precisely aims at deciphering and recognizing the *chaîne opératoire* of a mode of production in order to retrieve the sociocultural meaning of a certain practice in a local context and its links with “people’s shared representations and practices”, which also comprise their deeply embodied relationships with the environment (Lemonnier, 2012, p. 13). However, on-the-field experiences, encounters, and data urged me to consider a connecting element: how traditional techniques and the specific knowledge (Lemonnier, 1992, p. 6) necessary for their production relate to and generate local systems of knowledge and socioeconomic organization and how, conversely, socioeconomic (mainly sociological) changes triggered by external or general trends (in China but more broadly in the Anthropocene) affect the inheritance, local fruition and commercialization of techniques.

The aesthetic contribution of the craftsman is always embedded in apparently technically elementary, unsophisticated objects of functional need (e.g. pottery, cauldrons, jars, storage vessels) and reflects his understanding of the art as has been accrued over the long years of apprenticeship. It is the amalgam of the two needs—of the two elements—almost unconscious as the typology, functionality and morphology of the objects become embedded in constant production, which provides the emergence and development of a traditional practice whose value is altogether aesthetic, cultural and utilitarian (of economic necessity). Nixi Black Pottery, in fact, is a highly respected craft in nearby valleys, and something the local people are proud of—pride of religious and practical usage, the symbol of family and personal honor, an object of value to exhibit to guests, serve tea and asserting one’s own social standing. These are signs of distinction that have been passed on by Master Chen to his children, exemplifying the power of belonging to a heritage that has shaped the local livelihood in both substance and thought.

The Master’s approach, as explained in the continuing part of this article, is tacit and experiential rather than deliberate and verbal; he lets his actions and embodied knowledge speak through his attitudes and finished products. He is magnanimous in his demeanor, a man of solid reputation among his peers, driven by a stolid and rigorous work ethic. His children, intimidated, perhaps, by the prospect of a life of physical burden such as that (but with connected self-reliance, strength and independence), took advantage of this knowledge in a formalist economic, utilitarian way, as though their father’s creations, coming from history, dexterity, skill, spiritual dedication, were to be

equalized to mere economic fetish that could be abstracted from its contexts and reproduced as mere commodified goods, for the entrepreneurial objective of capital accumulation, marketing and ostentation. Hence, they are a product of a radical change in values, livelihoods, and habits that is typical of a country in which cultural commodities are becoming symbols once again of status, in which neoliberal development and entrepreneurship are collating in certain rampant consumerism, in which financial success and social standing (through conspicuous consumption and assertive exhibition of goods) are progressively standardized as mainstream categories through the active and passive role of social media devices.

The craftsman is always aware of his imprint on his tradition and, inevitably, original in his own personal development, albeit still following the furrow of tradition that apparently, in the background, reproduces itself in a coherent fashion (Ingold & Hallam, 2007). It is the amalgam of the two forces of passivity and conscious participation in the heritage that gives life to a beautiful object whose value lies in its temporality and affectivity. According to Ingold (2018, p. ix), education is an amalgam of social learning, the habitus that permeates the learner as a member of a certain cultural imprint, and personal reinterpretation of work, work ethic and style. Awareness of place and skill is certainly at the core of technical expertise, and it is what reunites community and individual in a situated, shared enterprise of value reenactment. Certainly, to be aware of the rules and the role of a certain art within a traditional sphere, while at the same time needing to be free to overcome the canon's technical and aesthetical constraints, is what characterizes a meaningful practice and the inescapable conditions for the continuation of an art form (Caruso, 2021). Following this narrative, Nixi Black Ware follows established standards of form and function but silently pervades the space in which it is used with its humble elegance as pervasive and unobtrusive as a gust of wind in the depth of the mountain forests that surround the hamlet. Each and every potter at Nixi, including Master Chen, who is the principal focus of this article, imprints on the objects his touch and personal spirit that otherwise would be almost indistinguishable.³

The methodology used in this research is grounded in the anthropology of techniques, but it is definitely influenced by the ecological anthropology of Tim Ingold (2000, 1997), as well as Alf Hornborg (2006, 2015, 2018) and David Graeber (2001, 2013) theories on the anthropological production of value. Godelier (1978 et al.) and Meillassoux (1981) especially put emphasis on the great intuition of Marx and Engels (see Bloch, 1983), that

³ Mainly in the decorations and symbols imprinted on the vessel and preference for shapes, that depend also on customers' trends.

social relations of production and the material means of production concur in the generation and definition of the mode of production. The superstructure, in other words, is contained *in nuce*, produced and reproduced within the infrastructure. Material means of production and mode of production concur in the formation of a social apparatus and vice versa.⁴ Thus, if one aims to decipher the wider, intrinsic socioeconomic foundation, which is evolving over time, let me begin the analysis from the operational chain of production, in which skill, dexterity and attention (Ingold, 2000) and the specific, local knowledge as individual adaptations and responses to socioeconomic constraints, are exerted by the actors.⁵ It is in the individual enactment of attitudes, work ethics, technical choices (Lemonnier, 1993), or, to use a fashionable term, agency (Gell, 1998; Dobres, 2010), that the art and its legacy can actually be reproduced within a coexisting set of values that initially encompass the individual inheritor but eventually merge with it once the person is recognized by commonly accepted standards and canons (Gowlland, 2009). It is the ecology of the craft that comprises life and work and heritage in the making that I attempt to unearth in this article, along with its connected social changes.

The following text will explore how the artisan parents and their more merchant-minded children are actually divided, consciously or unconsciously, by conflicting interests, values and ways of dwelling that originate from their education, upbringing, and broader economic and social trends triggered by a certain mainstream influence within modernity and Chinese society. We will see how this modern entrepreneurial mindset is contrasting with the old couple of craftsmen and their sociotechnical ecological consciousness.

It is in the thorough understanding of a technique and its secrets of production that we can grasp the cultural implications, extents and signifiers of that particular *ars*, from the Latin *to work, to make*. Habitus and social relationships are always at the core of, and encompassing, technical attitudes, , and may eventually reflect the social context in which, like Nixi village, there is uniformity in practice and thought, economic self-sufficiency and a formalized, mutual exchange of resources. In this regard, Master Cheng's children's individual agency/business mindset is probably connected with, and a consequence of, the social changes brought by "capitalism with Chinese features" in places as remote as Shangri-la town, under which jurisdiction Nixi is found. I believe that is in the middle of the two narratives—the individual choices and the social trends—that we can

⁴ "Marx and the anthropologists he inspired focus on the organization and productivity of labor, whereas it is the tools, objects, materials, gestures, and skills that need to be explored to understand how much "the mental and the material" (Godelier, 1986b) are intertwined in productive forces (Lemonnier, 2012, p. 37)".

⁵ Which is often non-verbal and thus disguised and contained in technical mastery (Lemonnier, 1992, p. 6).

locate the key to decipher social change as it shifts from an agricultural-artisanal to a more consumeristic and service-centered way of life. This is happening on a large scale in China, often to the detriment of conviviality⁶, circular and other forms of culturally-oriented, native ecological economy, whose example and embodiment is traditional cultural heritage and its inheritors, as active reproducers of a living community and its closely ingrained environmental niche, its values and genius loci, and not as a consumable factor—mere amusement for collections and museums. The result of a progressive abandonment of agricultural and artisanal practices in lieu of standardized practices of living is also, coincidentally, one of the main critical factors in present day China's youth unemployment and demographic aging. Is this a consequence of their inaptitude to respond with their own intellectual, volitional forces and skills to such socioeconomic dire straits or, on the contrary, a radical change in such cultural and physical tools of perception and intervention at a more profound stage (Ingold, 2000, p. 181)? Anthropology is able to explore the causes of this situation at a micro level, in an engaged method, trying to bridge the gap between the mental and the material processes at stake (Godelier 1986: chapter 1). An analysis of the stories and livelihoods of the potter and his wife, their locality and family will lead us to the description of the art's operational chain, to situate the manufacture into a coherent social system. This is fundamental in order to uncover and decipher the incorporation of the practice by the potter (and his wife), and his habitus, and, by conversely, the contrastive directions taken by their offspring. Concluding remarks will be of a more sociological nature, perhaps inspired by Mauss' totalizing reflections at the end of the *Gift* ([1950] 2002).

Master Chen Deyong and family: Continuity and change

My fieldwork, which lasted for about six months in spring – summer 2023, began almost by chance, thanks to a lucky encounter in the city of Zhongdian aka Shangri-La 香格里拉, in Northern Yunnan Province. A lady in her shop, whom I had spotted using black pottery for tea, gave me the contact of a person who took me to the village the next day. Nixi 尼西 is a tranquil and sparse settlement just beneath the winding road that connects Zhongdian and Deqin, on the way to enter Tibet autonomous region, on the way to Lhasa. This is a variant of the ancient 茶马古道, or Tea Horse Road, the other one being in nearby Sichuan. The importance of this commercial road during the late T'ang to the Ming dynasty, on which caravans traded tea and spices from China with products from

⁶ The fabrication of illusory, artificial needs dictated by the industrial machine and its advertisement at the core of capitalistic systems is one of the issues explored by Ivan Illich in *Toward a History of Needs* (1978).

the Tibetan plateau, resulted in the relative prosperity of such commercial emporiums (e.g. caravanserais) as Nixi, and its Dark or Black Pottery, utilized to carry liquids (tea, water, liquors) and store barley and other grains of daily use. Typical cauldrons designed for Tibetan Butter Tea (similar to Russian Samovars) and as Tibetan Hot Pot cookers are also some of these vessels' main uses.

Vast, unperturbed forests surround the village in every direction, and the atmosphere is very peaceful at any time of the day. The driver led me to a modern house, connected to an old wooden one by a courtyard adorned with flowers and small trees. In a similar pattern to the majority of houses in the Tibetan region, the main hall of the house is the center of daily activities: dining, resting, tea breaks, and the welcoming of guests and visitors.⁷ I was welcomed there by the patriarch, Master Chen Deyong, and his wife, always busy in the kitchen with food preparation. They belong, with the entirety of the village of Nixi, to a Tibetan Khampa ethnic group, inhabitants of the ancient region of Kham in the Eastern-Southeastern Tibetan area.⁸ Khampa people speak various dialects of the Khams language which is intelligible with standard Tibetan at a basic level. Tibetan Buddhism is practiced by everyone, but especially the older generations, with great fervor and religious consciousness: practice and belief is here, as we will see, the fulcrum of life.⁹

Master Chen is a humble, kind, affable person, always eager to share a laugh with anybody. He is not able to read or write, for he began working the clay following his uncle's footsteps in early adolescence, and, in fact, since he could remember. He is still engaged in pottery making and agriculture every day, almost from dawn to dusk, and even most evenings. He is a person of great tenacity, entirely committed to his craft, which is pursued every day as a fundamental source of vital spirit and economic necessity, embodied throughout his actions as they have been ingrained through his living memory with the fundamental processes of ceramic manufacture. Pottery is his life; living is pottery in all its sustenance and conscious enactment. It is an art that requires not only a vigorous body and much fatigue, but a steady commitment of many years of intense apprenticeship. A full immersion into the basic technical steps necessary to gain confidence eventually, after many a setback, leads to mastery and autonomous skilled ability. Young

⁷ Almost always taking place around the wood-burning stove (the hearth) over which a water boiler is located.

⁸ The three historic regions of Tibet are: Kham, Amdo (to the Northeast) and Ü-Tsang in Central Tibetan Plateau. The climates in Kham and Amdo vary, but mostly range from temperate pine-dominated forests in the deep alpine ridges to rainforests high in biodiversity in the valleys. Pine forests give rise to steppes and altitude prairies above 4-5,000 meters above sea level.

⁹ Both at the level of rituals, as occasions of sharing and community gathering, and at the more tacit level of active daily behavior.

generations, exposed to the modern world and its potentials, opportunities, amusements, shun this total bodily commitment, replete with pain but also satisfaction, and, rather, seek more opportunities in the city, where consumerism is rampant and life comforts that do not require manual labor are more appealing. Master Chen's wife spins the traditional squatting loom to make woolen clothes for themselves and their grandchildren, while helping in household chores which are equally life-giving. Together they grow vegetables, including tubers, maize and barley in large parcels of land they own scattered throughout the valley. They raise chickens and goats. In general, they are food-wise self-sufficient and are able to make a surplus each season (the producing season lasts from roughly March to October) to supplement their relatives and the local market. Barter for surplus goods (honey, butter, rice, noodles) is not uncommon, especially among kin and friends, but is declining in favor of currency. The local economy, which has always been centered around agriculture, dairy products, and pottery (sold directly to merchants or travelers by the main road that connects the former fiefdoms of Dali and Lijiang, with Lhasa and further, winding 500 meters above the valley), is now expanding slowly to reach the art-curio market through online retail channels, social networks and even some live auctions. The craft has been included in the "Provincial Intangible Heritage" label and may slowly begin to participate at nation-wide fairs and exhibitions. Apart from that, at the time of writing, Nixi Black Pottery is relatively unnoticeable even among pottery connoisseurs on the mainland.¹⁰

While having butter tea and bread, the usual welcome to any visitors, we agreed on the terms of my stay there and talked about the village situation. There are a few hundred people living in Nixi currently, and about 30 households involved in pottery making. At many times, Master Chen mentioned to me the scarcity of young people in the village, due to their progressive migration to urban areas in recent times.

"There are a few, if any, young people here any more. They have all gone to the cities, Zhongdian, Dali, Kunming, Chengdu. They think that work in agriculture and pottery making is too hard and not lucrative. It requires patience and longtime endurance and commitment, a time that could bring also satisfaction, contentment and well-being. But they search for a fast and ready return, for more opportunities, and they cannot find it here. Black pottery is too hard for them."

This is, perhaps, the central social problem that the community is facing at present, with other issues following suit (the modification in pottery production, its purposes and sys-

¹⁰ Due, in part, to its geographic marginality and proximity with some Dark Pottery manufactures of similar features such as Jianchuan and Daocheng. Both these productions are, according to a brief survey, on the verge of disappearing altogether due to lack of young inheritors and similar economic problems.

tems of distribution, etc.). The old couple's three children have all but followed the same path, leaving the house after getting married in their early twenties and resettling in urban centers, forming what Yan Yunxiang (2009) and other scholars call the new phenomena of *duanqin* 断亲 relations. I noticed that their personalities and livelihoods are radically different from their parents. A sensible deviation from tradition is visible in their familiarity with the Chinese language, which their parents can hardly speak at all. School education in Zhongdian and many years of living in a developing urban context has determined a manifest sinicization (the historical phenomena of adoption of Chinese cultural influence or *hanhua* 汉化) of their daily habits, with tea, White Liquor 白酒, and Chinese food that have partially replaced the staples of Tibetan diet (e.g. *tsampa*, roasted barley or wheat flour, Tibetan: རྩམ་པ་, Chinese: 糌粑). A certain entrepreneurial, consumeristic, business-oriented mindset, stands in contrast with the self-sufficient, humble lifestyle of the parents. Money accumulation or spectacular exhibition of symbols of status (the "entrepreneur mentality") are sought out in association with social networks and the continuous exhibition of the self or family success through videos, brief descriptions, photos. Religious belief is another sharp contrast between the two generations. The parents pray and recite mantras in the old house's small temple room every morning at 6 and every night after 9 for about an hour. In addition, they participate to the village collective chanting and prayer gathering in the main temple 3 days a month, usually on Sunday. Their three children do not participate in any of the above rituals, and have almost entirely abandoned religion as a meaningful practice, being completely immersed in business or mundane activities.¹¹ The eldest son runs several businesses, none of which could he disclose to the ethnographer. He is apparently quite wealthy, owning several cars and a huge house in Zhongdian with a big modern gym and other technological facilities. Over the tea table, itself a distinctive (China's cultural revival or *wenhua re*¹²) symbol of guests' reception and conversation (the urban gentleman's official token of status and financial prowess), where he has summoned the anthropologist, the young man indulges in video calling to and the exhibition of relevant personal *guanxi* 关系 (Gold et al., 2002; Yan, 2003, p. 39) or social relationships, some of them being his allegedly good connections within local government. Once he showed me a photo of his

¹¹ By this term I mean religion in its original meaning from the Latin "religere" (to gather together, to bind) as a community-cohesive practice of aggregation, mutual sharing and help.

¹² See: Song, X. (2003). *Reconstructing the Confucian Ideal in 1980s China: The "Culture Craze" and New Confucianism*. In: Makeham, J. (eds) *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

son, now a soldier in the national army.¹³ He boasted his strength and therefore that of his son (or by association, the nation) with power lifting at the gym. Smoking, tea consumption over a tea table and hanging bottles of Moutai liquors are other stereotypical symbols in the process of progressive amalgamation of minorities into the economic prosperities of the modern Chinese National Community. Numerous scholars (i.e. Keister, 2002) have affirmed that conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899 [2007]) of luxury items such as expensive tea and liquor, ceramics, cigarettes, wine, and, of course, cars prompt the recognition and acceptance of a person's status within dominant criteria of power in Chinese society. *Mianzi* 面子, (social face, or, in other terms, self-assertiveness, power and prestige¹⁴) in this regard is very important as an immediately recognizable surface that functions as a powerful attractor/aggregator of common interests between fellows (united by commercial and social interests). Entrepreneurial attitudes are clearly visible in Master Chen's first son's personal trajectory, who started his business very soon after getting married at 17 and leaving home. He frequents his parents' house and pottery workshop very often, mainly to accompany groups of tourists or businessmen or functionaries. He helped renovate a nearby old house into a museum-exhibitory workshop, in which schools can visit and even be offered learning and accommodation. Under Mao's imposing portrait standing in the wooden living hall, they eat snacks, drink tea, smoke and talk.¹⁵ Then usually visit the actual pottery workshop on the other side of the courtyard and leave in about an hour. Hardly any words pertaining to real cultural information or craftsmanship are exchanged between him, his accolades, and his parents, who remain guests-spectators in their own house. Their son has invested significant resources in building a structure with modern facilities that will host an inn or guest house for those who will visit his father's workshop. He offered the anthropologist the opportunity to take over the hotel and administer it. The anthropologist kindly declined his offer.

The daughter of Master Cheng runs a caterpillar fungus shop with her husband, a Chinese ex-soldier to whom she got married at 19 and eloped. They have a son and live in Jianshui 建水, South-East Yunnan. She seems quite dependent on her mobile phone, and indulges in continuous and repetitive photographing and video making that, I expect, might be soon posted on social media. Her social media reiterates a spectacle of herself

¹³ A certain influence and adaptation to mainstream Chinese sociocultural values is reflected also in such nationalistic displays.

¹⁴ Gold, Guthrie, Wank 2002, p. 9. Effective use of *guanxi*, which is nurtured through gift receiving and giving, and prompts feelings of obligation and reciprocity, can provide *mianzi*.

¹⁵ In a clear Han Chinese way aimed at producing and reinforcing mutual *guanxi*.

and her trips, her son's handsomeness, and her business as a 虫草 (caterpillar fungus) retailer.¹⁶ The most family-centered spectacle of business initiatives, of course, involves Nixi Black Pottery's exhibition, as she contributed, with her brother to the renovation of the museum-exhibition workshop (see the above paragraph). This functions also as an entrepreneurial activity in which every student, she confessed, pays a certain amount of money for the experience of pottery making. This initiative curiously resembles similar studio-potteries that offer courses to neophytes in urban areas in China, Japan, Europe and America.

The second son of the old couple runs, with his wife, a restaurant in Zhongdian and another fungus shop in Lijiang 丽江, the old emporium city now completely transformed into a commercial tourist hub.¹⁷ His brand new car in front of the restaurant where I visited with his parents on a Sunday morning seems to be an indicator of relative affluence. His social media pages, showed to me by him and his parents, seem to feature, again, caterpillar fungus in abundance and similar business successes.

The old artisans' children, especially the first son and the daughter, seem to be concerned with the preservation, exhibition, commercialization and cultural marketing of their local ware, through various initiatives in which they are trying to involve the local government. This concern undoubtedly matches with their life values, which seem to be motivated by economic profit, development, the search for modernity through prosperity and the cultural revival in China as it has become a symbol of Chinese economic revival since the 1980s (Zhang, 2013). Cultural commodification and speculative accumulation here contrast with the survival of the actual living culture that was modeled on a distinctive sustainable and self-sustaining agricultural model. The present paper is concerned with this contrast and its reverberations on the safeguarding of the living craftsmanship in question. In the specific case, if nobody will take the burden to uphold and inherit the Master's knowledge, it could disappear altogether in the future. The first son has some notions of Black Pottery making, but has recently started to use a normal throwing wheel instead of the ancient practice of paddle and anvil to beat and almost sculpt the clay that his father, and other local craftsmen, still continue. This involves a radical shift in the mode of production, and probably a mechanization and standardiza-

¹⁶ For an explanation about properties and usage of caterpillar fungus, see <https://www.usu.edu/herbarium/education/fun-facts-about-fungi/caterpillar-fungus>. This particular fungus, which fetches very high sums on the Chinese market, is renowned for its alleged medicinal properties. It is one of the only sources of income for rural Tibetan people who spend entire days digging the ground trying to find these fungi on very high, desolated mountains, and sometime can only find a few or none to sell to local retailers. Caterpillar fungus has, in recent years, become a symbol of status, power and wealth on the Tibetan Plateau and adjoining areas.

¹⁷ Following a similar pattern of the other nearby ancient towns, Dali and Shaxi.

tion of the whole process in which the local clay must be kneaded in the machine instead of in the classic, manual way with a wooden hammer on the ground. It is a sign that the tradition is evolving in a decidedly commercial way, in which what counts is the aesthetic similarity, but not the technical-living practice of making.

Chen and his wife partake of an existence that is steady, persevering, made of slow rhythms and indefatigable efforts. According to the classification made by Dean Arnold (1985, p. 90), we can say that their craft is a part-time specialization, with the good season (March to November) being the central focus of pottery production and agriculture labor, due to temperate climatic conditions, and the winter being the rest season of almost any activity. Nixi black pottery typology and technical manufacturing processes have responded and adapted, as we will see, very aptly to severe and flexible alpine climatic conditions, in which winter is too cold and unprofitable for pottery production¹⁸ and May and June are the rainy season, so it is impossible to fire the pots. Therefore local potters' subsistence needs must be complemented by agriculture due to these climatic constraints (called by Arnold a "regulatory feedback mechanism" [1985, p. 81]).

The various adaptations and features of this ware, in its uses and production, and the sociocultural background upon which this ware is produced will be investigated further, after the description of its operational chain, following an anthropology of technology framework (e.g. Lemonnier, 1992).

The operational chain of Nixi black pottery

Clay procurement and processing

The clay is harvested in the valley just below Nixi village, on the slopes of towering mountains. Master Cheng told me a big load of clay is harvested once a year, usually in autumn. The local clay is particularly dense and coarse, with many rocks and impurities in the mixture. It is processed with very simple, primitive utensils and methods. First, it is placed in a big container. On the ground, there is a wooden tub where clay is put to soak in water for about one full day. Excess water naturally flows away thanks to a hole in the lower part of the wood.

¹⁸ Similarly to the Central Andes as mentioned in Arnold (1985, p. 80).

Figure 1

Master Chen Deyong pounding lumps of clay to reach malleability, correct moisture and eliminate residual air within.



The next day, the still moist clay is pounded several times (as in Figure 1) with a heavy wooden baton, and lifted up regularly so it does not stick to the ground, until its texture becomes homogeneous. Then, the various portions are coalesced and formed into a ball of clay, which is inserted into a box, ready to be used. This process is physically intense and takes about one hour or more. Master Cheng always does this work in the morning so he can have enough balls of clay for three or four days of labor. Balls are then moved to the workshop for the next phases of work.

Vessel formation

Clay is brought to the workshop, which lies exactly opposite the modern (albeit in classical colors and features) building where the old couple sleeps, consumes meals and receives guests. The technique of forming Nixi black pottery dates back ‘to the beginning of time’—the locals say more than 2000 years ago.

The long history of the technique is visible in the apparent simplicity of the working tools: raw pieces of wood carved, smoothed into paddles, anvils, scoops, sticks with a round part at the bottom, etc.¹⁹ Clay balls are flattened on the working table (everything is made of wood) with a wooden hammer to strike it vigorously.

Water is always added in the process so to avoid clay breakage. Clay is pounded in order to form a flat shape which is long and round (as in Figure 2). This is cut at the edges

¹⁹ The material is essentially local pinewood but, because of their simplicity, these tools require great dexterity to use.

in order to create a rectangular form. The clay that has been cut away is regrouped together and molded by quick beating into a foot base (Figure 3, to the left).

Figure 2

The clay ball is initially elongated this way.



Figure 3

Clay is flattened with a hammer to form the foot or the wall of the vessel.



This sort of base is put on a manual rotating wheel, and the rectangular form is placed on top, make it rotate in order to form a proto-vessel.

The next steps now are manual: the two clay parts are pressed together with the fingers, the wheel is made to rotate, and the two forms become amalgamated into one. Now a wooden paddle is used to bat the surface of the vessel in order to smoothen, adjust and strengthen the overall structure of the vessel, while the wheel is rotated gently. Gentle but firm pounds are also exercised on the vessel's rim (as per Figure 4), that has to be continually adjusted because it tends to become too thin or frail due to lateral pressure.

Figure 4

The lump is pounded with a circular motion.

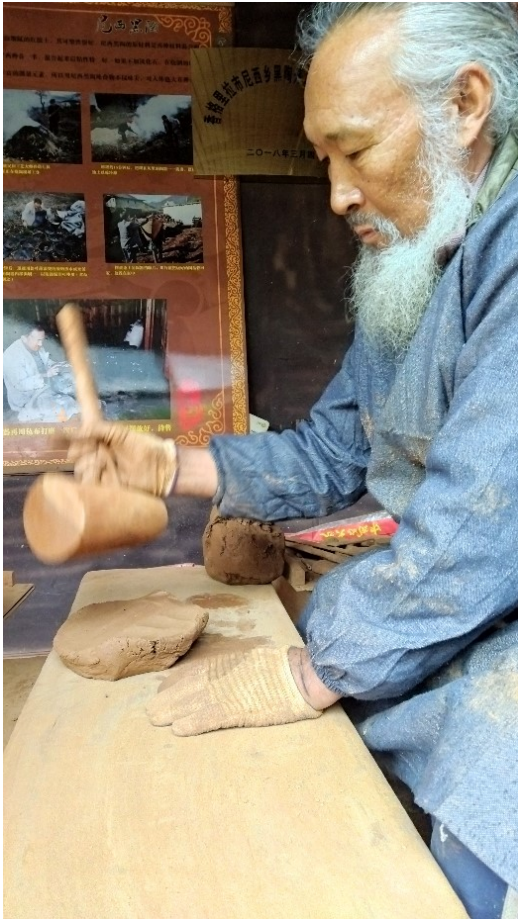


Figure 5

The clay basis is almost ready. Its sides will be then cut to form a clean rectangular shape.



When the rim has been pounded, it enlarges its size, and the vessel shrinks immediately, so more lateral beating has to be done, while the other hand always holds the paddle (Figure 5).

The supplementary hand, therefore, connects the beating hand, giving it stability, while in the meantime keeping the vessel up in a straight position and also turning the wheel constantly (as per Figure 6). This is, overall, a very economical (in terms of energy expenditure) technique that, nonetheless, needs relaxation and continuous effort until the vessel has taken the desired shape and consistency. The interior of the vessel is progressively shaped and smoothened, always dipping the forming tools into a water basin, by inserting into the vessel a stick with a round part at the bottom, mentioned above.

Figure 6

The two clay flat parts are then put one over the other to form a vessel. With this simple stick the inside part is consolidated.



This stick, applied to the bottom of the vessel, is made to rotate with the help of the other hand, which supports the structure of the vessel and pushes the wheel. The stick can either amplify the belly of the object or simply make it rounder. Movements of the hands can now restrict the neck of the vessel, amplify it, or carve an indentation in it so a ewer or teapot can be made.

This forming technique is just the most basic one, sufficient to produce the most elementary forms, such as a tea cup. It is, nonetheless, the same rationale that is applied, through many other phases, to form complicated vessels. We will see the various forms produced in Master Cheng's workshop in the following sections.

Trimming and burnishing

When the vessel has reached the desired texture and shape, a small leather strip is pressed between two fingers and applied on the rim, to smoothen it and make it round (Figure 7, on the left). Then the vessel is removed from the wheel and placed on a bench where it will remain for one or two days, covered with plastic. At this stage, the vessel, now more solid and dry, is beaten again with a paddle in order to strengthen its structure and eliminate eventual humidity in it. Now the vessel is rubbed with a rough cloth or sponge to make it smooth and polished. At the end of this phase, the pots are put on a shelf to dry, waiting for the firing procedure. The drying place is either in the workshop, on benches, or near the house, in the working shack situated in one of the fields, the biggest of which is, in fact, used for agriculture.

Figure 7

Master Cheng polishing and burnishing a vessel with a brush.



Firing

The kiln is found on the edge of the field, in the back of the house. It is a simple mound structure of stones pressed together with layers of concrete and other materials (Figure 8, on the right). Potters from Jingdezhen, Master Cheng told me briefly, came to the village some ten years ago and contributed to its building in a somewhat modern fashion. According to Cheng, the new kiln is more efficient and has more stable firing conditions, while at the same time keeping highly consistent aesthetic results with tradition. Traditional kilns were not, in fact, closed, but were open (like the one in Figure 9, below) and had remained in operation since the dawn of time (no one can recall when, according to my interviewees around the village) up until a few years ago. Now all the potters use simple mound kilns fired with wood.

Figure 8

A recently built, one-chamber wooden kiln.



Figure 9

An archival image of open-air firing.



The operation of former open air kilns is, by comparison, similar to kilns found elsewhere, and that I personally encountered in previous research about folk pottery making in Kampong Chhnang, Cambodia (Caruso, 2024). The pots are accumulated in the middle of a ventilated area, in a sort of loose pyramid-shaped structure supported by local pine wood branches. The temperature is controlled by the potters to ascend gradually up to a peak of 700–800°C. The whole process lasted for about two hours. Then the kiln cooled down for about an hour. Now the potters could get the pieces, whose color ranged from yellow-gold to ochre and immerse them immediately in a “bath” of sawdust ash into which the anaerobic conditions changed the pots’ color into a uniform black (the last phase of open air firing can be seen in Figure 10, below).

The same color, and the same reducing conditions of firing (the almost total absence of oxygen), are prompted nowadays by the rigid control of air that flows into the kiln, and by the fact that the kilns have no chimney, so all the combustion smoke stays inside the chamber while the pots are firing. Smoke causes the gradual output of oxygen and its substitution with CO₂ and carbon monoxide that causes the pots to turn black in color. The modern kiln is more capable but more costly to use, since it requires greater amounts of wood to be burned and more time of operation.

Figure 10

Towards the end of open-air firing.



Also for this reason, it is used sparingly by Nixi potters, almost once every two months of activity. A preoccupation among them is to fill the kiln as much as possible prior to each firing.

Many pieces, as I could witness, turn out to be incomplete after the first firing, and need to be re-fired once or twice again. This is another difference between the modern method

and the traditional method, in which, I am told by Master Cheng, 95% of the pieces could be fired well after the first time.

Systems of distribution and use

Figure 11

Cauldrons used for everyday cooking.



Nowadays, customers' orders of pottery pieces have switched online, on *taobao* and other huge shopping providers. This is a widespread pattern in today's Chinese art and craft market, and I found it in other pottery centers around China. This has been made possible, among other factors, by the spread of technology and communications, the reduction of delivery costs, and the easing of transaction procedures. Master Cheng's sales are administered by a nephew of his, who controls an online shop and receives customers' orders. Other potters in the village maintain or provide with their pots small shops/restaurants that are distributed on the main road above the village, where traffic is constant, although slow-paced. Another major activity of the workshop is to host tourists and travelers, (most of the tourist industry in China, especially in remote mountain places like this, is made of groups of company employees), that pass by the workshop, and pay a fee to make some cups aided by the master.

Figure 12

Burner with tea or water ewer. The applied color parts are fragments of cheap porcelain from Jingdezhen.



This happens once or twice a week on average. Most of the vessels produced here are made to be used, following a tradition that is eminently pragmatic. Master Cheng once told me, responding to what was the aim of his pottery: “practicality and appreciation is its function”. During my fieldwork, he was mainly busy producing big pots for hot pot, which is a very popular entertainment and favorite meal consumption among Han Chinese. Their production is very complicated, and require many intersecting sections and processes.

Figure 13

A saucer.



Figure 14

A tea service decorated with a dragon on the sides.



Tea pots and cups are the newcomers (Figure 14, left), certainly as an influence from the mainland, but not a very simple ewer which is used every day for serving butter tea, which is consumed many times every day in Tibetan areas; that is an old production (Figure 12, previous page). Cauldrons and saucers are certainly more traditionally Tibetan shapes (Figures 11 and 13, above), and are still used in the kitchen in many local houses for cooking.

Trends in craftsmanship and village economy: Recent developments

The ruling class, made up of specialists in the possession of things who are themselves therefore possessed by things, is forced to link its fate with the preservation of this reified history, that is, with the preservation of a new immobility within history. Meanwhile the worker at the base of society is for the first time not materially estranged from history, because the irreversible movement is now generated from that base. By demanding to live the historical time that it produces, the proletariat discovers the simple, unforgettable core of its revolutionary project; and each previously defeated attempt to carry out this project represents a possible point of departure for a new historical life (Debord 2002: 5/143).

In recent times, Nixi Black pottery technology has remained sturdily loyal to its manufacturing standards, although some changes have naturally occurred. Some potters, like Chen, say the vessels' quality has improved thanks to the establishment of modern, single-chamber kilns. They say cups seem more lustrous, less opaque, and the black gloss seem more compact and dense than before, where defects and uneven coloring was quite commonplace. Some other potters in the village speak with vague tones of nostalgia for old open-air firing, to which they were accustomed and which proved to give a natural, primitive tint to the objects. Other manufacturing procedures, as illustrated before, have remained largely the same. The Cultural Revolution (1966-76), that caused

immense loss and destruction of traditional arts elsewhere, has left this ceramic manufacture unscathed due, perhaps, to its marginality, relative isolation, limited distribution and utilitarian nature. Cooking utensils, that still form a relevant core of this craft's production, have traditionally been used in Nixi's households and nearby valleys, but were never exported further than Deqin and Zhongdian, the two nearest urban centers of significance. This is, and was, also the result of craft competition with similar black ceramics produced in Jianchuan 剑川, near Dali 大理, and the village of Axi 阿西, near Daocheng 稻城, in Sichuan.²⁰ Certainly cooking utensils could be tolerated during the Cultural Revolution more than tea paraphernalia, which was considered rather superfluous to the creation of a supposed egalitarian, humble, new society. This can be noticed in the revival of some Chinese historical teaware (Caruso, 2023), that could begin only after Deng Xiaoping's economic and social reforms of the late 1970s.

Figure 15

The collective and periodic prayer-mantra recitation that reunites the majority of elders of Nixi village. It is also an occasion of debate, making and breaking of rapports and settlement of disputes.



It has been highlighted in recent research that craftsmanship that is inscribed and ingrained in the technical memory of the practitioners has real status of cultural heritage because it has become part and parcel of their daily habits, at conscious and unconscious levels (Caruso, 2023; Ingold, 1997). Pottery making is the first and foremost preoccupation for Master Chen, whose art and life are united by vital necessity, determination to

²⁰ Recognition there during spring 2023 allowed me to estimate the progressive erosion of these productions, with very few craftsmen remaining active. Sociocultural factors similar to the one in Nixi are the probable cause of this trend.

accomplish periodical tasks and constancy of work. Continuity and satisfaction in fatigue and labor enrich his and his wife's livelihood, a life which is admirably tenacious and independent, solidly grounded in experience and economic reality which are praxis and knowledge—in a word, sentient ecology: how to feed, sustain one's family, living according to resources locally available and natural needs. It is independent because the couple can largely sustain itself with the fruits and vegetables they grow in the good season and pottery sales, to local retailers and, progressively, on online platforms.

In the couple's daily activities, we see three elements converging to shape their demeanor, intended as skillful practice, life resilience and stability of character:

Established knowledge of the local ecology and humans' dietary needs according to that ecology, therefore a compatible exploitation of that ecology through agriculture that utilizes mostly compost, dung, and compatible practices.

Awareness to be following a common path, a common destiny, a common responsibility which is not imposed on them; rather a necessary condition resulting from marriage and the creation of a family, which is, in Nixi, a sustainable and convenient economic strategy.

Last, but not least, a perceived and embodied pride that comes from Nixi Black Pottery's long tradition of local manufacture, its primitive techniques and function, and the urgency to persevere in its legacy, despite the lack of young apprentices throughout the village and a gloom future ahead.

Such practices, inscribed on the body and actions of the actors as technical, non-verbal knowledge explicated through skill, dexterity and degrees of involvement with the materials and spatial surroundings (Ingold, 1997, p. 111; Merleau-Ponty, 1964), are more resilient than other kinds of activities that are virtual, and therefore more ephemeral in their status, subject to climatic change.²¹ We can confidently argue, in comparison, that social media, young people's fashion trends, or worldwide coffee culture, in a word the "virtualization" of society, are phenomena subject to erratic variation, modification, change, because they are dependant on the same patterns that propel the volatile world of commodities.²² Further, cultural phenomena, material practices that are inscribed in the embodied wisdom of the actors, are paramount in the assessment of social and eco-

²¹ It is the case of cultural activities mediated by language and visual expression, for example. What Leroi-Gourhan calls the "dernier degrés du fait" (Audouze, 2002, p. 284).

²² That is, these trends follow, for the most part, a capitalist trend on the accumulation of goods and only secondarily other values such as the search for beauty, hedonistic pleasure or voyeuristic exhibition. On the erratic world of Fashion see the classic work by Simmel (*American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 62, No. 6 (May, 1957), pp. 541-558).

conomic structures of the culture in question. As Leroi-Gourhan argued long ago (Lemonnier, 1992, pp. 51-52), the *dernier degrés du fait* are more external structures: the more volatile, if more visible, measures that allow us to understand material processes and facts.²³ On the contrary, the first degrees of fact represent the physical, technical and pervasive forces of a process: its functionality and use. The abrupt modification of these moments would, in essence, put the entire craft into jeopardy, for lack of coherent basis and standardized rules of craftsmanship (Van Der Leeuw, 1993, p. 240). Certainly, in our case, the form of cauldrons and pots witness a practical necessity, but even more importantly social relationships inherent at the origin of those material practices are a precious indicator of the organization of the broader society (from individual to family to village society) and the values upon which it is constructed. In our case, the progressive disinterest of Master Chen's children to their father's livelihood and art, apart from materialistic purposes in which the latter becomes a mere proxy—a fetish for advertisement and “cultural consumption” by tourists and visitors to the workshop—puts this art and its moral foundations at risk, for lack of reliable inheritors.

Until a decade ago, Nixi black pottery was not sold for money, but circulated in a limited area by means of barter of goods that different village households produced in surplus (meat, barley, yak butter, vegetables). Changes brought about by the Keynesian market system have not hitherto affected the techniques or aesthetic results, apart from the growing productions of big jars for hot pot (火锅), and tea sets that are clearly due to Han Chinese dietary influences. The same sort of informal economy still regulates life within Nixi's community. Three times a month, usually on Sunday, the majority of the community above 30 years old (younger people are not admitted) gathers in the central temple for a joint prayer and chanting (as showed in Figure 15, page 17) that lasts, only interrupted by a frugal lunch (cooked by one family in rotation), from 8 AM to 4 PM. This is a large social gathering that has both a social and a religious function. In here, social contracts are reinforced or attempted, agreements of various sorts are stipulated, mutual help is requested, and friendships are reaffirmed. The serene and calm refrain of the mantras serves to appease the spirits, but also to reinforce an atmosphere of unity and common destiny. The exclusion of reiterated non-participants apparently goes unnoticed, but it is in fact considered detrimental to one's own status or decision making power within the community, in which a council of elders (patriarchs) retain real control and faculty to settle or pinpoint rules, more pervasively than the rather superficial pow-

²³ “Features whose functional character is negligible and which operate only in the symbolic dimension”.

er of the local party cadre, which is not, in fact, invited to the religious congregations either by tacit exclusion or personal disinterest.

The same spirit of spontaneous, disinterested help is noticed during agricultural labor. During my fieldwork, I happened many times to share labor time, to my initial surprise, with random groups of middle-aged women. They were naturally helping Master Chen and his wife during rather arduous or complicated tasks, always bearing a happy demeanor. After a whole day or afternoon's work, they were invited to the house for refreshment. Money was sometimes offered in compensation, but almost always refused by everyone, as though it was a sign of treacherous or dishonest behavior.

This collectivist spirit stands in contrast with certain modern youngsters, who nowadays have almost entirely disappeared from village life. Young people, students, and students-to-become-workers, first are enrolled and live at schools in Zhongdian or other towns, and then either get married or find a job in the same environment or both. Such silent expropriation of life from the village has been going on for some time now. This social phenomenon triggers, and is determined to a certain extent, by profound social change in terms of consumerism and a generalist cult of money that matches very well with the individualization of Chinese society since roughly the 1990s (Yan, 2009) or, for reasons of social isolation, the allure of the urban centers, and economic stagnation. The elders (including Master Chen) lament that fields are now left fallow or worse, due to lack of labor; religion is unattractive to young people, who are drawn to city life by the internet and modern temptations; traditional craftsmanship, like pottery and woodcarving (which is popular in the region), are increasingly being neglected. Children only seldom return to their family house, and when they return, they do it for business reasons. The daughter of Master Chen returned home once during my stay there, and seldom helped her mother or father in menial tasks. Instead, she insisted that I took photos of her while ostentatiously refilling candles of liquid butter, while letting the parents do the job instead; she did not help with the cooking, etc. The senior son always visited for very quick moments, one hour or so, in which, with self-confident acting as the housemaster, accompanied visitors for a tour of the house and workshop. Drinking tea and smoking with guests are, seemingly, his favorite pastimes, following very popular Chinese customs. The junior son of the family never visited during the time I was there. Due to extensive economic and social changes throughout China and ensuing changes in the regimes of values, younger generations are putting more emphasis on consumer goods and contemporary urban life. It is as though the production of conscious mo-

ments of history in the making has left its space to a sort of contemplation of historical passivity.

Urban life in China has become progressively hectic due to technology and communication, or at least this is the projection of modern life according to the youth that I interacted with, and elders lament the inability of young generations to accept long-term learning or working duties, with no immediate outcome. Patience and slow accumulation of meaningful practice, the slow nurturing of skills that ultimately would lead to accomplishment are seen by the youth as burdensome and unworthy. Master Chen says: “they prefer internet and social networks, their lifestyle is faster than ours, they can’t wait anymore, they need immediate return from jobs. That is why they relocate to towns and seek ready business”. The problem is that, as the previous citation goes, if business of a certain type, whose only objective is the accumulation and pursuit of money, is thoroughly embraced, the seekers are also enwrapped and influenced by the same mentality. Old values, in which cooperation, exchange, mutual help, disinterested offering, and barter, were central in a certain social structure and religious worldview that privileged circularity and redistribution of resources, are being progressively eroded by a business-centered mentality imported from Mainland Chinese environments in which individuality, private entrepreneurship and capital accumulation have become the priority. These young generations, epitomized by the three children of Master Chen and his wife, are more than eager to avoid the struggles that their parents have to sustain every day, in the fields and pottery workshop. It is apparently a completely different mentality: immediate search for success at all costs without ethical guidelines to check this speculative search versus slow accumulation of meaningful activities driven by long accrued and established religious standards; urban life and its many temptations and opportunities and resources versus vernacular life and serene but tenacious struggle to produce crops and handicrafts, in an effort to make do with one’s own resources. Traditional heritage could become just a matter of display of visual content and wealth instead of the cultivation of skill in humble and modest behavior that does not assert itself directly but patiently awaits social recognition to be uttered; traditional learning, in both agriculture and pottery making, and respect of that traditional expertise are still criteria of moral standing against self-regard, quick learning of entrepreneurial strategies and so forth. Will there be a middle way, a compromise between the severity of tradition and the seductions of modernization?

Major challenges, future perspectives for Nixi's pottery

The fact that human beings are organisms whose life and reproduction depends upon their interaction with organisms of other species, as well as with abiotic components of the environment, does not rule out the possibility that they are also aware of themselves as beings who can relate to one another as subjects, and who can therefore—on this intersubjective level—enjoy a distinctively social life. Likewise, the fact that human beings are the bearers of genes whose specific combination is a product of variation under natural selection does not mean that they cannot also be the bearers of cultural traditions that may be passed on by a process of learning in some ways analogous to, but by the same token fundamentally distinct from, the process of genetic replication (Ingold, 2000, p. 2).

Social change due to a shifted urban habitus, youths' reluctance to inherit their elders' craftsmanship, and more reliance on a mainstream market economy could eventually threaten the existence of the ritual economy of the village of Nixi (whose geographical scenario can be glimpsed in Figure 16, page 22) which is just one of many similar situations in the vast Tibetan plateau, with countless other villages, farther away from main communications and roads, and much more at risk of abandonment, along with their sociocultural structures. Master Chen, during one of the many tea breaks, told me with a mixture of sadness and resignation: "who will plow and harvest the fields once all the old people are dead or unable to work and the young people have gone elsewhere? What will the people actually eat?". these are crucial questions in Chinese human geography that need to be addressed soon. Rural Revitalization (Greenop, 2019), a trending program in government-sponsored projects, is failing to attract the youth back to their vernacular homes, as more and more people are migrating to metropolises to find more secure jobs but also hardships and uncertainty.

My main research focus was to understand the local traditional heritage standards and emic canons of expertise and quality assessment, and how these elements relate to other situations I explored in the existing literature and during past fieldwork experiences throughout China, especially regarding established politics about the conservation and evaluation of traditional craftsmanship (Caruso, 2024; Gowlland 2009). It is, theoretically, a study of how technical expertise and a related ecologically-centered economy generate and mold a *modus vivendi*, and, coincidentally, how socioeconomic values, habits and attitudes are inseparable from personal or historical variations. The collective and the individual, thought and praxis, persons' place and time are constantly interfering with each other in a dialectic. Above all, thought and practices of the individuals are at the same time a result of conscious choice and immersion and collation in social con-

straint and mutation.²⁴ This is the example of the old couple's children: their active choice was to seek a different life from their parents, based on capital accumulation, production and consumption, in a progressively industrialized or commodified society, but at the same time their radical life difference is the result of their education, upbringing and sociocultural situation as products of a context. In this sense, Debord (2002, p. 7) was probably right when he assessed that the salaried worker by becoming the object and objective and subject of his own mass-produced world, becomes the commodity that him or herself contributes to produce. Thus an original economy based on local resources, sharing, redistribution, conviviality, self-sufficiency and freedom of time, is being affected by the global economy, promulgated by the mass-consumer market, whose imperatives are endless accumulation, craving for endless resources and goods, standardized living, and artificial needs; in sum, if we wish to cast a label on this separation, we could call it ecologically centered versus artificial society—*homo faber* versus *homo technologicus*.

The fields that dot Nixi valley are a precious source of food, fruit and vegetables for Zhongdian and other areas that are situated too high (more than 3,000 meters) to produce the majority of crops.²⁵ Here, grapes are harvested open-air and many kinds of vegetables are also cultivated in greenhouses. An interesting consociation of cauliflower and cabbage with vineyards and various fruit trees is practiced. In general, Master Chen and his wife, along many other farmers, do not use any pesticides in their fields, because chemicals would kill rodents and other organisms that form a balanced ecosystem which is itself a self-regulatory mechanism (Fukuoka, 1978). This is also a moral responsibility as advocated by Lamaism. Master Cheng and his wife are strict vegetarians and do not consume animal products apart from milk and butter. They do not consume alcoholic beverages either.

²⁴ Invented traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), embodied habits similar to animal imprinting or collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992 [1941]) shaped by civilizational myths have been theorized as causes of this passive or active adaptation of social behavior to social and historical constraints.

²⁵ In fact, the villages in the valley of Nixi are self-sufficient for the majority of food and wood, the latter still used in most households for cooking and heating purposes.

Figure 16

A prospective view of Nixi village and surrounding fields and mountains. the land is fertile and mountains protect the place from freezing weather, despite the altitude.



The traditional preparation, compost, manure-based fertilization of the land, and other phases of agricultural labor need time to be learned, practiced and bequeathed from one generation to the next. Long hours, days, and years of observation, repetition and learning must be followed by practitioners in order to acquire an independent knowledge of practice. The same stands for pottery production, as here long time apprenticeship (of up to 10 years, starting in early adolescence) is even more crucial for the successful transmission of the right techniques and their embodiment. Especially so since Nixi Black Pottery is mainly a single-craftsman's responsibility throughout its whole operational chain, from raw material procurement to finished product. In this craft, the apprentice has to withstand a thorough, full time involvement into the process on a day to day basis in order to inscribe and naturalize into his bodily gestures, physical awareness and posture the various methods of work.²⁶ This involvement requires care, attention, scrupulousness and patience (Ingold, 2011, p. 2). Mind and body as a whole have to concentrate on the work in a sort of generational procedure in which, as Tim Ingold and Helen Hallam (2007) have argued, practical dexterity and visual knowledge are not con-

²⁶ As Tim Ingold (2000, p. 37) argues: "Rather, the learning of technical skills appears to depend on what might be called "technology acquisition support systems" (Wynn 1994, p. 153). These systems, as Wynn argues, are not even partly innate. They are rather systems of apprenticeship, constituted by the relationships between more and less experienced practitioners in hands-on contexts of activity. And it is on the reproduction of these relationships, not on genetic replication—or the transmission of some analogous code of cultural instructions—that the continuity of a technical tradition depends".

tained in the initial design of the object, or imprinted in the mind of the designer, but rather in the continuum that bridges the initial design with practical rendition. It is here that the empirical concept of embodied learning is found (Jackson, 2013, p. 64): in the actual moment of conscious practice, in the awareness of the creative moment, in the union and continuity between *mimesis* and *poiesis* (of Aristotelian reminiscence, see Remotti, 2013) that underlines the mastering of any traditional technique. Thoroughly acquiring the right postures and techniques, through endless repetition, error and reflection on error, the apprentice is finally able to find freedom of interpretation within the constraints of rules (Caruso, 2021). The naïve conception of freedom without the mastering of rules in artistic practice is untenable because would inevitably conduce to excessive naïveté, marginal attainment and mostly dilettantism, apart from a few examples of geniuses who were capable of profoundly reinventing their respective fields of art (Pollock, Mozart, Caravaggio, Kandinsky).²⁷ Nonetheless, most of them did, in fact, receive a formal education in their subject before instilling their revolutionary sparkle in it. All of them were mentored by established masters in their respective tradition.²⁸

The wide spread of the internet and social media have led to increasing separation between the world of needs, a consciousness of the local ecology and its conditions of reproduction (perhaps equivalent to Ingold's "sentient ecology", 2000:10), and the fictional world of virtual relations and artificial needs (Illich, 1977; Debord, 2002, p. 8). It is as though long, coherent, patient focus on one single practice (more than that, a whole being into practice) had been progressively eroded in favor of fast-response multi-tasking activities that require less effort but increased synaptic temporality to be performed. This is precisely the consequence of protracted use of social media and mobile phones, with its continuous zig-zagging and fast surfing of news and messages that do not require (or are modeled to avoid) great efforts and concentration on a single performance.²⁹ In this case reading is one of the activities most affected, but mental effort is rather the key to understand why this deficit is easily transmissible to more manual practices such as pottery or agriculture: the mental and the material are always correlated (Godelier, 1986, p. 5; Bateson 1972). All of the children of the old couple, and even the 29 year old nephew who almost every day helps them out at home and with customers and guests, handle the mobile phone almost without interruption, for photos, instant messaging and more. The nephew would often, in moments of idleness, hole

²⁷ This is the *vulnus* in which a big part of postmodern art has fallen in my personal opinion.

²⁸ Mozart was notoriously inspired by Cimarosa and the Neapolitan School, as he confessed in his memoirs, the same for Kandinsky and the great Flemish landscape painters.

²⁹ Interesting research evidence is found here: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5403814/>.

himself up in the house's main living room sofas and play with his mobile phone in awkward positions. Fast, nervous speaking without attention for listening to the interlocutor is indeed a behavior he has definitely in common with his cousins. This could be caused by shyness and nervousness given by the anthropologist's presence, or a lack of exercise in conversation or oral production, but could also be psycho-behavioral issues for which more specialized research is needed.

With this scenario in mind, we cannot be surprised that pottery making and agriculture are practices whose characteristics are less and less attractive for the new generations, at least in this geographical area. I have knowledge of young movements aimed at a return to nature, and a sort of vernacular renaissance that is taking place in Europe, some of whom are shyly appearing in mainland China. The problem in the Chinese case is that, if fewer and fewer people will be working in the fields, as Master Chen already stated, what kind of food, especially healthy food, will be eaten afterwards? The obvious problem would be an increase of mechanized agriculture and more invasive and sophisticated chemicals that will be spread on the ground in order to maximize the production in the shortest time possible. The use of chemical additives on agricultural crops will be used even more systematically in order to transport it to ever-growing metropolitan centers and last longer periods of time (Fukuoka, 1985, introduction). This will be detrimental to traditional practices diffused in local situations, which often, as is the case in Nixi, use natural, culturally-imbued, ecologically minded methods modeled after the local environment, flora and fauna. Mechanized and industrial production could potentially cause a further degradation of eating habits among the majority of the population, which is increasingly relocating to urban areas, exposed to standardized, packaged and industrially processed food whose production and transport require pesticides and fast-growing fertilizers.³⁰ Another alarming concern is the expanding gap between those who can afford to spend on high quality food and the majority of the population that has to rely on the large-scale retail trade, thus reiterating conditions of structural poverty in urban areas (Banerjee, Duflo, 2011). Concurrently, a loss of traditional craftsmanship like Nixi Black Pottery will cause an increase in the production and use of plastic and other industrially produced tableware that is already widespread in restaurants of any sort.³¹ These materials, it goes without saying, are not beneficial for the consumers' health (Wilburn et al., 2002). In comparison, clay, since it is made with local, ecological

³⁰ There is a parallel problem of vulnerability of city life: overpopulation, unhealthy diets, pollution, competition for life and work, isolation, etc.

³¹ I remember four years ago, before the Covid-19 pandemic, it was still quite common to see ceramics, even cheap ones, used at restaurants in Mainland China. Now it has become a rarity, even at higher scale restaurants.

materials, is always considered a healthy material for the consumption of beverages and food by both producers and consumers alike. It is, undoubtedly, a taste enhancer, especially in the case of teaware.³² More than this, any traditional craftsmanship carries within its *modi vivendi and operandi*, as I tried to demonstrate in this and other articles (Caruso 2023), an ecological approach that encompasses the economic and social sphere of local life, elements that are able to reveal latent information about the place in question and its people. This is called, again, tacit or embodied knowledge. It is a form of knowledge that is embedded in practice, it is almost always transmitted through esoteric lines (within the family line, or from master to disciple), and cannot be easily or entirely discerned by words.³³ That is why its existence is crucial for the conservation of living cultural heritage, rural practices and human diversity in general, as they are expressed in meaningful practices and rituals. Its existence is now in jeopardy due to the interruption of family lines of apprenticeship and absence of a young workforce.

We wish the institutions would be willing to promote conservation of these traditional practices for the benefit of society, not for benefit in mere economic terms, but certainly in more general, holistic terms. A culture can be deemed a living culture if it is experienced and known according to traditionally established patterns of use, which are naturally subject to change, without drastically altering their aim.³⁴ This is not happening when a cultural production is destined only for the use and consumption of tourists, in merely commodified terms. This is to condemn it to become part of a meager spectacle of illusions to which many commodities and their users are already relegated in the present world.³⁵ Of course it is possible that these commodities take alternative trajectories and be endowed with renovated meaning (affective, historical), following the life of their users/possessors (Kopytoff, 1986). But it is even more likely that commodities become enmeshed in the logics of commodified lives (the “market mentality”) in which

³² Some pottery, like Yixing tea ware, is said to absorb the flavor from many tea infusions and release them, enhanced, with any new infusion in the course of time. The older the cup, the better the flavor.

³³ Even though I appreciate his description, I cannot agree completely with Ingold’s definition of skill and technology as two separate means of action onto matter (2000, p. 316), but I rather think of them as a continuum of practice and learning, as they are found during the process of apprenticeship.

³⁴ See the UNESCO’s definition of Intangible cultural heritage: “Cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants.” (<https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>).

³⁵ This was the social issue that Marx revealed with the analysis of social relationships within an industrial environment. Becoming and being exposed to continuous reproduction of commodities, the lives of workers become themselves fictitious and commodified: “In analyzing commodities, money, capital, etc., Marx revealed his greatness by grasping the reverse order of those facts which, in the daily life and representations of people living and acting within a capitalist mode of production, are presented the other way round. He also revealed the phantasmic nature of social relations” (Godelier, 1978, p. 3).

objects are quickly used and consumed, or, at most, are exhibited and therefore lose their function and usefulness.³⁶ This is the unfortunate fate of many an object displayed in museums (Trione & Montanari, 2017). Thus they become mere fetishes, or phantoms, of the role they had in their real cultural circumstances, according to specific environmental possibilities, and for the people who made sense of them to produce conscious life-forms.

Consent to Publish declaration

Master Chen Deyong and his family are aware of my intent to write an article about their lives and have granted me their permission to publish the manuscript, that is for scientific and divulgatory purposes.

³⁶ This is not so far from Marx's famous statement that workers' lives subjected to alienation become themselves alienated. Their reiterated subjection to the same laws that govern the production and expendability of the goods make themselves become goods as well. The same discourse is present in Debord (2002).

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Povzetek

Vsebina članka temelji na analizi tradicionalne lončarske obrti v vasi na obrobju Tibeta in raziskuje temeljno vlogo, ki jo ima v lokalni ekonomiji, družbi in družinski strukturi. Rekonstrukcija operativne verige obrti, od pridobivanja surovin do trženja končnih izdelkov, je tesno povezana z relativnim blagostanjem v vasi Nixi in predstavlja specifično ekološko nišo, v kateri se nahaja vas. Ekonomski, družbeni in kulturni elementi se, na kratko, združujejo v družbeno-tehnični študiji keramike, v kateri lončarski mojster kot nosilec tradicije in osrednja gospodarska figura, tako skupnosti kot posameznega gospodinjstva, igra ključno vlogo. Nenazadnje pa se članek osredotoča tudi na družbene spremembe, ki so še posebej opazne zaradi različnih življenjskih slogov ter verskih in ekonomskih motivacij mojstra Chen Deyonga in njegovih urbaniziranih potomcev.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: potrošnja umetnosti, potrošnja, kmetijstvo, družbene spremembe, podeželska družba, tradicionalna obrt.

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