

# An Introduction to Yixing Zisha Stonewares

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Figure 1. Tools for hand building Yixing teapots, for sale outside the Number One Yixing Factory in 1994. In addition to traditional equipment made of wood, plastic implements are now also used.

WHEREAS JINGDEZHEN IS CHINA'S PORCELAIN capital, Yixing is her stoneware citadel. Yixing wares are mostly objects made for the production and serving of tea, although small furnishings for the literate man's desk were also made. Unlike at Jingdezhen, no imperial factory was ever established at Yixing but certain high quality wares were made there for imperial use. The market for Yixing wares was then the middle class and later as tea drinking spread to the West, customers abroad. In contrast to Jingdezhen where assembly line potters created mass-produced porcelains anonymously, workers at Yixing often signed their individual creations or had them inscribed by a scholar or an artist. For both ceramic centres their location and thus the availability of raw materials determined the ceramics made.

At Jingdezhen there were kaolin and petuntse for porcelain. Near Yixing at Huanglongshan in Dingshu county were rich deposits of clay in a range of natural colours. These could be used singly or mixed. Best known is *zisha* (purple sand), but there is also orange-red, beige and blue-green clay. Besides these colours, dark green and black clays are achieved today by adding artificial chemical dyes (cobalt oxide or manganese dioxide). Coloured Yixing clay contains a high level of iron, about 9%, as opposed to Jingdezhen porcelain that has less than 1% iron impurity. It does not

soften easily with the addition of water and so unlike Jingdezhen porcelain clay is unsuited to throwing on the potter's wheel. As a result the Yixing tradition centres on hand-building by paddling and luting or using sectional moulds. Wheels were used for trimming when the pot is leather hard and for finishing.

An extensive range of tools made from bamboo, wood and metal have developed for building and decorating Yixing tea wares. This vendor's stall, set up in front of the No. 1 Yixing Factory in 1994 shows the addition of modern plastic tools to those made in traditional materials (fig.1). Flat spatulas are used for shaping. Ovoid blocks of wood are used for measuring the diameter of the mouth of the tea pot. They also sell various tools for incising decoration into the leather hard bodies on the street outside the factory. Yixing tea wares were fired in dragon kilns, built up the slopes of local hills with interconnecting chambers, measuring up to 200 feet long. Nearby, wooded hills provided fuel to fire the kilns and average stoneware temperatures of about 1200 degrees centigrade were reached.

The area in which Yixing is found in Southern Jiangsu, bordering Anhui and Zhejiang provinces is a place of terrific natural beauty. During the Ming and Qing dynasties this

region was the cultural and economic centre of Chinese civilisation. Painters, poets, calligraphers, retired officials and rich industrialists populated the region. From the late Ming, these men patronised the Yixing potteries and there developed a unique connection between scholar and craftsman. This is reflected in the type of object made at Yixing: tea wares, and items to furnish the scholar's desk - such as cylindrical pots for storing brushes and droppers for adding water to solid ink in preparation for calligraphy (fig.2). Yixing artisans also incised their wares with poems and scenes similar to those small format illustrations found on fans. They sent only small orders of Yixing tea wares as tributary objects to court. For example two *famille rose* covered bowls, made about 1720 and marked *Kangxi yuzhi* [Made for the imperial use of the Kangxi emperor] in the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

China is the birthplace of tea drinking and tea drinking was an activity indispensable to its literary gatherings. A change in the fashion for tea drinking from whisking powdered tea to brewing loose tea was well established by the late 14th century, the beginning of the Ming period. In 1378 Ye Ziqi wrote "People no longer use powdered tea from Jiangxi, tea in loose leaf is preferred everywhere." Tea making paraphernalia changed accordingly. Instead of the wide-open bowls previously used for drinking tea, new vessels were required for the new tea production method. Steeping tea appears to have developed in the 16th century when several treatise were published describing the tea making process anew. This explains the emergence of the teapot. Yixing teapots were considered ideal vessels for making steeped tea. Stonewares do not conduct the heat too fast so boiling water may be poured into them without cracking while their coarse interiors keep the colour, fragrance and taste of the tea. The earliest Yixing *zisha* wares with confirmed dates were made in the early 16th century.

Popular stories veil the origins of the Yixing industry. Recorded in the 16th century, a legend states that an eccentric monk led natives of Yixing to the clay deposits that would bring them "riches and honour". Xu Xiutang depicts this monk in a sculpture made in 1984, now in the Flagstaff House Museum. Zhou Gaoqi wrote down the story



Figure 2. Yixing water dropper modelled after a lotus pod with applied nuts and fruits, showing the use of contrasting naturally-coloured clays. Trompe l'oeil effects were especially popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. Given by Sir A.W. Franks, before 1880 (BM reg. no. OA F.2462)

in the Tianqi period (1621-1627) in the *Yang xian minghuxi* (Chronology of teapots from Yangxian) giving us the first literary reference to Yixing tea wares. Gong Chun is the first potter's name associated with Yixing. During the Zhengde (1506-1521) period while serving the scholar Wu Shi, who was studying at the Jinsha temple for the triennial civil service exams, Gong Chun supposedly modelled irregular teapots from a single lump of clay. His teapot in the shape of a node on the trunk of a ginkgo tree is much copied and a version exhibited at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco was made by Jiang Anqing about 1930.

An old dragon kiln was excavated at Yangjiaoshan, Yixing in 1976. Shards recovered come from a globular teapot with a dragon head spout, a hexagonal teapot with quatre-



Figure 3. Teapot of Yixing clay and encased in pewter with Yang Pengli's seal inside impressed on a clay square. Made about 1820-40. Given by Thomas Watters in 1888 (BM reg. no. 1888.9-13.8)

foil decoration at the base of the spout and a round teapot with overhead handle. Their dating is the subject of debate as the site was in use for a long period before the late Ming. The earliest and consequently most important whole Yixing *zisha* ware is a teapot with overhead handle recovered in 1966 from the tomb of the eunuch Wu Jing at Majiashan, outside Zhonghuamen in Nanjing. It is datable to the 12th year of Jiajing (A.D. 1533) on the basis of an epitaph from the same tomb. Accidental spots of glaze on the surface of the tea pot confirm protective saggars were not used to encase the ceramics at this point. Various features relate this piece to contemporary Ming metalwork such as the bracketed fitting around the spout, square lobed overhead handle and lotus bud finial on the lid. This teapot, now in the Nanjing City Museum, is not signed and is rather large measuring 17.7 cm, later teapots were considerably smaller.

With the exception of workers at Dehua in Fujian and Shiwan in Guangdong very few Chinese potters have ever signed their work. Yixing wares are thus almost unique as they are frequently signed by the potter, decorator and inscriber. Names are carved into or are impressed with a

seal onto the leather hard clay before firing. According to Chinese scholars the four most famous potters working in the Jiajing (1522-1566) and early Wanli (1573-1600) periods at Yixing were Dong Han, Zhao Liang, Yuan Chang, Li Maolin and Shi Peng. By the late Wanli period, three master potters had emerged - Shi Dabin, Li Zhongfan and Xu Yuchuan. Of these Shi Dabin, son of the aforementioned Shi Peng, was the most famous.

Four teapots signed by Shi Dabin have been excavated in China from late Ming tombs. The earliest teapot is incised on the base *Shi Dabin zhi* (made by Shi Dabin) in a single row in regular script. It was unearthed from the tomb of Lu Weizhen (1543-1610) in 1987 in Miaopu village, Pantuo county, Zhangpu, a town in the far south of Fujian province below Xiamen. Lu was a successful scholar-bureaucrat whose official postings included being a minister of the Department of Regulation and Revenue. The flanges on the lid of the teapot are suggestive of an ancient bronze ritual vessel called a *dui* which has cabriole legs. Other artifacts unearthed from this tomb include an epitaph, silver belts, blue and white small jars and an ink slab.

Similarly modelled after a metalwork prototype, a hexagonal *zisha* teapot was also made by Shi Dabin and is signed in regular script on the base *Dabin*. In 1968, it was excavated at a tomb belonging to a man with the surname Cao in Dinggouzhen, Jiangdu (north east of Yangzhou) in



Figure 4. Polychrome enamelled Yixing pot showing four figures engaged in scholastic activities. In these roundels we see a scholar-official seated at a desk with poised brush and another wearing a robe festooned in longevity characters, surrounded by wine jars, holding a scroll. Given by Sir A.W. Franks, before 1880 (BM reg. no. OA F.2434)

Jiangsu province approximately 100 km as the crow flies from Yixing together with a brick land tenure deed dated 44th year of Wanli (A.D. 1616). The teapot is now in the Yangzhou Provincial Museum.

The third Yixing teapot, again with metalwork features, is signed with two characters *Dabin* under the handle but above the leg. Made of a paste with rocky inclusions, it is decorated on the lid with four *ruyi* cloud motifs while chubby legs are reminiscent of those found on metalwork incense burners. It was excavated from the tomb of Hua Hanyi, grandson of the imperial tutor Hua Cha of the Hanlin Academy of the Ming court in 1984 at Xiaotangfen, Ganluxian, in Wuxi, Jiangsu Province just on the other side of Lake Tai from Yixing. The tomb was dated to the second year of Chongzhen (A.D. 1629).

Again with metalwork features, and a short spout, a round teapot with overhead handle is inscribed on the side with a five-character phrase *Yi yin yang hao ren* meaning "through drinking one cultivates one's spirit" and it is signed below with two characters *Dabin*. Excavated further afield from Yixing in the tomb of the scholar-official Yang Rugui in Lingzhou county, Yan'an, Shaanxi province. All Shi Dabin wares excavated to date have coarse stoneware bodies, plain surfaces with minimum ornamentation, curved short spout and engraved marks in regular script. There are many other Shi Dabin marked pieces in collections in, for

example, the Palace Museum in Beijing or the Shanghai Museum, not all of which can be genuine.

In 1644, the last Ming emperor, Chongzhen committed suicide on Coal Hill, overlooking the Forbidden City. Manchu troops invaded and a new dynasty was established under the title Qing. Until the Kangxi era (1662-1722), in the Jiangnan region which includes Yixing, there was considerable political chaos. This may help to explain our lack of information about potters in the mid 17th century at Yixing. However, Chen Mingyuan flourished in the latter half of the 17th and early 18th century. He has been referred to as the most gifted Yixing potter after Shi Dabin. He was lauded for his technical excellence and for his pieces modelled in naturalistic styles. Groups of nuts and fruits, lotus roots and pea pods were fashioned in clay as trinkets for a scholar's table. Examples closely resembling the original fruit in texture and weight are in the Flagstaff House Museum and in the Shanghai Museum. Some potters engraved their teapots with their own names in regular script such as Shi Dabin but by the late Ming and Qing, signatures also



Figure 5. A large export ewer with openwork decoration formerly in the Dresden collection marked N62. In 1876 it was displayed at the Bethnal Green Museum. Given by Sir A.W. Franks (BM reg. no. OA F.934)

included seal impressions. A teapot, made of buff-coloured clay with sandy inclusions, and modelled with angular sides, is marked with a seal impression which reads *Chen Mingyuan zhi* on the base. Although it has been in the British Museum since 1876, its authenticity as being by Chen Mingyuan is doubted. Firstly because of its ill-fitting lid, secondly the lid, spout and handle do not line up, thirdly its rectangular seal is not typical of Chen Mingyuan. However, Chen is known to have made teapots in geometric as well as naturalistic shapes.

During the Qing, Yixing wares bore the signatures of the decorators as well as the seals of the potter. Production of Yixing is closely linked to the tastes and preoccupations of Ming and Qing intellectuals. Collaboration between the artist potter and scholar official over decoration and design is seen to advantage in a teapot dated 1815, which bears the seals of a leading potter Yang Pengnian (Pengnian), the inscriber Pinjia (Guo Lin) and commissioner/ designer Chen Hongshou (1768-1822) also known as Chen Mansheng (Amantuoshi). It is in the Flagstaff House Museum. Chen came from Hangzhou in Zhejiang - a poet, seal carver, calligrapher and painter of high repute he served as magistrate at Liyang, part of Yixing from 1811 to 1817. While employed there he designed 18 teapots which were made by established artisans including Yang Pengnian, Yang's family and Shao Erquan. These teapots were decorated with Chen's calligraphy. He was responsible for a revival of Shi Dabin and other Ming potters styles and is credited with reviving the whole industry at Yixing in the early 19th century. Thousands of teapots were designed by and made under Chen's supervision, such as a teapot inspired by bamboo from a tomb dated 1803, or an example in the Shanghai Museum with the mark "Manshang", modelled after a gourd in beige clay.

During the late Qing period, from the Daoguang era (1821-1850), a new vogue was created for casing clay teapots in pewter, engraving the metal surface with calligraphy and designs which reflect a strong influence of small format paintings, then adding jade knobs, spouts and handles. This teapot (fig.3) was made by Yang Pengli, most probably a close male relative of the more famous Yang Pengnian. It bears his seal mark stamped on a little square of clay added to the interior of the pot. It is an exceptionally fine example with a poem on one side engraved by Fu Sheng, a well-known pewter teapot engraver, and with swallows and a tree on the other. It was collected by the missionary Thomas Watters who presented it to the British Museum in 1888. Another teapot encased in pewter with jade knob, handle and spout is inscribed by Bulang and it is dated Jichou Year of Daoguang A.D.1829. On one side are chrysanthemums representing Autumn and on the other

side an archaic inscription.

Shapes of Yixing tea wares vary immensely but may be loosely classed into three main groups: (1) plain (2) naturalistic or segmented and (3) imitation of other materials. Many of the plain teapots are decorated with inscriptions such as a poem on the base of a British Museum teapot which translates "with one's heart at ease and days relaxed, Among the flowers smiling and drinking". Many forms are inspired by nature. For instance, a water dropper also in the Museum is modelled using contrasting coloured clays to recreate the pale seeds of a lotus pod and its darker coloured casing. Chen Mingyuan style peanuts and beans decorate the outer casing with other *trompe l'oeil* natural elements. Its spout is a curved lotus stalk. A further example inspired by the natural world is a cylindrical teapot with an eight-lobed outer wall, pierced with a bamboo motif and with a handle and spout in the form of bamboo. It may be compared to enamel decorated porcelain dating to the first half of the 18th century. The third group are shapes imitating other materials, for example, teapots modelled after Tibetan metalwork such as a monk's cap ewer at the Flagstaff House Museum. Although this example is signed by the Ming master Shi Dabin and dated 1597, ceramic ewers in this form were made on into the Qing period.

Yixing potters decorated tea wares with auspicious themes popular among the literati. For example, the carp emerging from the waves being transformed into a dragon, is a metaphor for the successful candidate in the imperial examination system emerging from obscurity to success and power. Bats applied to teapots in contrasting coloured clays are a symbol of blessings as the word *fu*, meaning bat, sounds the same as the word *fu* meaning blessings. A comparatively small group of Yixing tea wares are decorated in overglaze enamels, either painted with scenes or with imitation *guan*, *ge* and *jun* glazes. The quality of these wares varies enormously, such as a fine 18th century pot decorated with four roundels containing four figures, some engaged in scholastic activities and some with large wine pots (fig.4). One of these is probably the celebrated drunken poet-genius Li Bai who lived during the Tang period (618-906). He died, when in his cups, he lent out of a boat to embrace the reflection of the moon and drowned. Lower quality enamelled wares, made in the 19th century and often decorated with fierce-looking dragons were destined for sale in Southeast Asia.

Numerous rivers and tributaries connect Yixing with bustling coastal ports, inland cities and trading towns on the Grand Canal used to ship Yixing tea wares all over China and on to Southeast Asia and Europe. Yixing tea wares first appeared in the West when large scale consignments of tea were transported from China to Europe by the

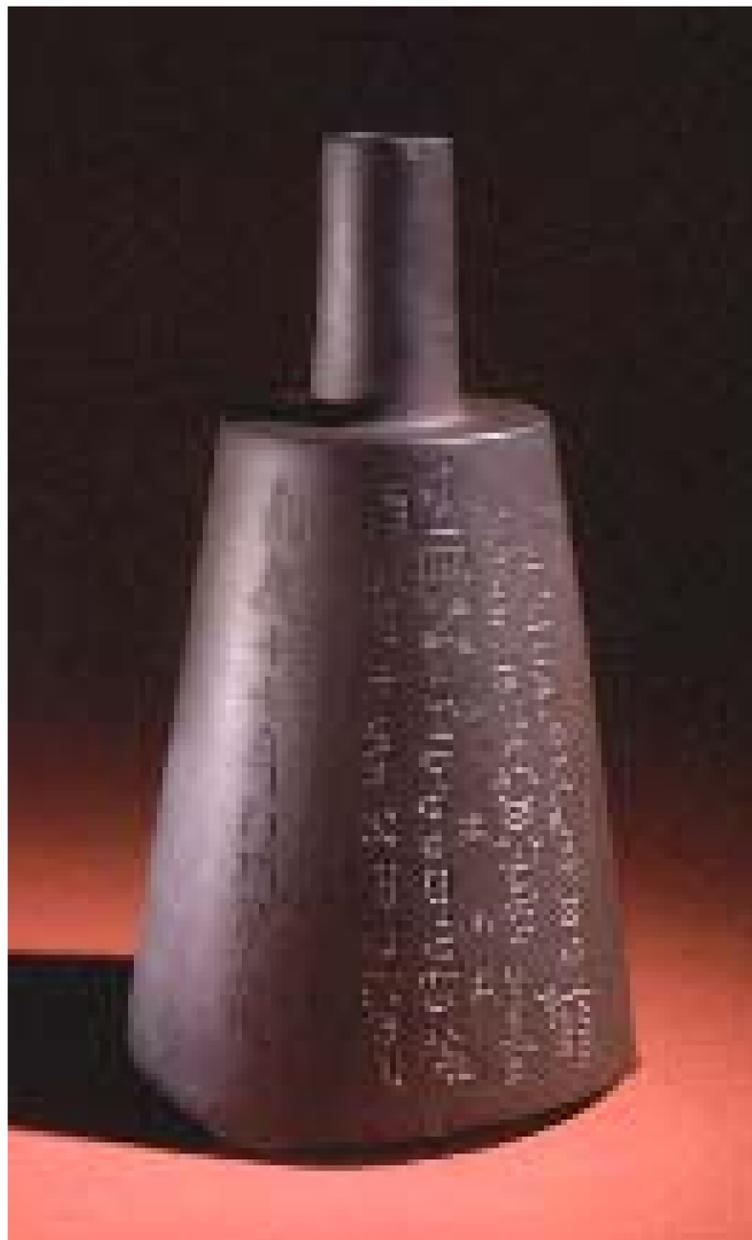


Figure 6. Modelled after an Eastern Zhou bronze bell of the 4th century B.C. complete with inscriptions in ancient form. It is dated 17th year of Jiaping (A.D. 1812), marked with its place of manufacture Tingzhou, Western Fujian province and signed Yi Bingzhou. (BM reg.no OA 1910.6-15.1)

East India companies. Shipping lists record Yixing wares as part of shipments in the late 1670s and 1680s. Philip Allen has shown that the first reference in a European language to Yixing teapots occurs in Philippe Sylvestre Dufour's *Traites nouveaux et curieux du café, du thé et du chocolat* republished in Lyons in 1685. Dufour writes "Chinese infusion teapots are made of a red clay with impressed designs which they claim are better than any others". Still life oil paintings of the late 17th century similarly record Yixing wares set among silverware, glass and porcelain.

Yixing teapots made for export to Europe are generally made from orange red clay with pronounced surface decoration, either appliqué or with openwork designs. European export wares rarely bear potters' signatures and are frequently ornamented with gold or silver mounts which were added in Europe. A further source for dating Yixing export wares are the inventories of early European royal collections. Arthur Lane noted that the catalogue of Queen Mary II's collection, compiled in 1696-7, of the ceramics at Kensington Palace records an Yixing teapot described as "a red tea-pott with a guilt chane and staple". Augustus the Strong of Saxony and Poland had an inventory of his collection compiled between 1717 and 1721. A large ewer (fig.5) with openwork decoration was bought in the mid 19th century from the Dresden collection when surplus pieces were being sold off. In 1876 it was displayed at the Bethnal Green Museum and was catalogued by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks as "Coffee-pot of large size. Red Chinese stoneware (*boccaro*); it is six sided, and ornamented with panels of openwork representing fir, prunus and magnolia; the spout ornamented with the head of a dragon, of which the tail forms the handle; on the cover a fox". Inside the lid is a Dresden mark N62. It is now in the British Museum.

Besides European printed style manuals, paintings and inventories, Yixing export wares are also datable by comparison to those recovered from the wrecked cargoes of East Indiamen - ships engaged in the tea trade - journeying between China and Holland. Six complete Yixing teapots together with their seals were excavated from the hold of the *Oosterland* - a Dutch craft which sank in Table Bay, off the South African coast on its homeward voyage in 1697. The shards of at least 40 other teapots, typically made of red-orange clay with applied prunus and other motifs have been discovered there also. The *Geldermalsen*, a Dutch merchant ship was wrecked on an uncharted reef in 1752 on her return journey to Holland from India, Java and China. Just eight Yixing stonewares were among her 150,000 piece cargo of mostly glazed blue and white porcelain, tea and gold bars. Unlike the porcelains, these are unglazed and they survive the ravages of the sea less well.

Teapots with the mark *gongju* meaning "tribute bureau" were made from the early 17th to late 19th century. Many of these pots were destined for export to Thailand. Thai export Yixing are generally characterised by their smooth, rounded shapes, glossy polished surfaces and the frequent use of metal rings. Siamese collectors bought such Yixing wares for fabulous prices and craftsmen in Bangkok polished the wares for weeks on end to achieve this burnished sheen and added the metal mounts round the spout, lid and mouth.

Imitations of Yixing wares in Europe were being made in Holland by the second half of the 17th century. A British Museum teapot, made by Ary de Milde (1638-1708) copies an Yixing design comparable to a teapot recovered from the *Oosterland* c.1697 closely. Philip Allen has noted that the first unequivocal reference to the deliberate faking of Yixing wares occurs in 1679 when Ary de Milde and Samuel van Eenhoorn were ordered to supply "counterfeit East India Teapots". Imitations were also made by the alchemist-chemist Johann Friedrich Böttger at Meissen whose first red porcelains went on display at the Leipzig fair in 1710. The Elers brothers in Staffordshire made "red Chinese porcelain", as did John Astbury, and later in the 19th century Wedgwood. By this stage they took on classical shapes and decoration and looked totally western.

Imitations of Yixing wares were not, however, exclusive to Europe. Indeed red and purple tea wares, utilitarian vessels and miscellaneous collectables were made in the Yixing mode at other ceramic manufacturing centres in China. For example an object (fig.6) in the British Museum, modelled after an Eastern Zhou bronze bell of the 4th century B.C., complete with inscriptions in ancient form, is dated 17th year of Jiaping (A.D.1812) and is marked with its place of manufacture Tingzhou, located in Western Fujian province. It also bears the signature *Yi Bingzhou*, either that of the potter or decorator. An orange-red stoneware bottle dating to the Kangxi period (1662-1722) now in the British Museum was probably made in Sichuan or Jiangsu. During the 19th and 20th centuries production of *zisha* wares spread to companies in Shanghai, Wuxi, Tianjin and Hangzhou. Craftsmen bought in undecorated pots from Yixing and then decorated them in their own style. Most of the teapots of this era continue the decorative styles of the 19th century.

After the fall of the Qing dynasty, political turmoil disrupted production at Yixing. Terese Bartholomew has noted that in the early 1920s Yixing potters were awarded gold medals at international exhibitions in Panama, London, Paris and Chicago. Yet because of the Sino-Japanese war, production at Yixing came to a standstill in the 1930s. This state of affairs, that is the disruption of production at Yixing, continued during the build up to Liberation in 1949 and indeed lasted until 1954. In 1954 the *zisha* production group of the Shushan workshop, consisting of 59 potters, was set up funded by the Tangdu Pottery cooperative. After the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the Yixing workshops expanded. Old masters recruited young artisans. Mass-produced products of the 1960s were stamped *Zhongguo Yixing* (China, Yixing) and the individual identities of the potters unrecorded. In the 1970s, the tradition of signing work was resumed. Contemporary potters



Figure 7. The base of a duan ni beige clay teapot with overhead handle. It is dated September 1993 its inscription is by Yiming (Fan Jianjun). It is also signed by the potter Cao Wanfen with seals Wanfen and Yangxian Wanfen zhitao. Given by Dr. K.S. Lo (BM reg. no. OA 1995.2-27.27)

have added new colours, shapes and styles to the traditional repertoire.

Today master craftsman can keep customers waiting for up to two years for a commissioned pot. The late Dr K.S. Lo was certainly responsible to a large degree for the renewed enthusiasm for collecting Yixing wares outside mainland China. Yixing wares are graded into three official classes. According to Peter Wain, there are 20 senior craftsmen and 50 to 60 deputy craftsmen and the next grade down require ten years experience before reaching deputy craftsmen status. There are also coarse, commercially mass-produced wares. Interestingly, now as in the past, there are many female potters at Yixing. One of the most innovative of these is the female artist Zhou Dingfang (born in 1965). She was initially apprenticed to the potter Xu Xiutang best known for his sculptures in Yixing clay. Sculptural qualities in her own work, as well as her sense of humour, lend a uniqueness to her teawares which is much appreciated by collectors today. A dark-brown and orange-red clay teapot is signed *Zhou Dingfang* and is dated 1993. The teapot is wrapped in clay which imitates textile and just the spout and handle peak through.

Associations between artists of the Jiangnan region and

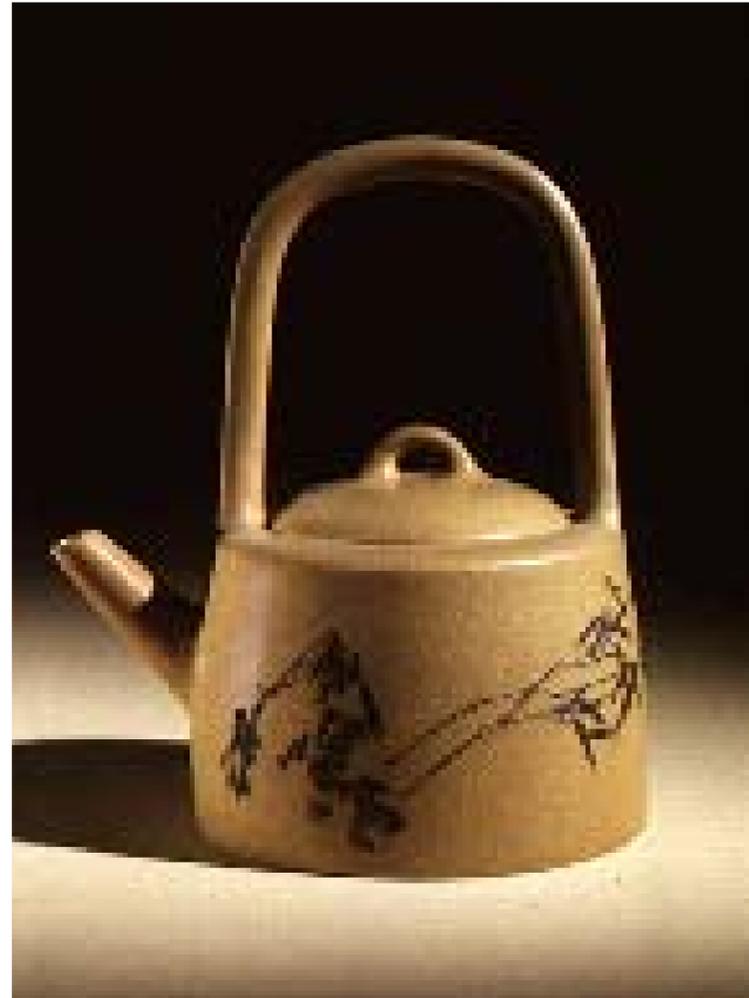


Figure 8. A side view of the same teapot by Cao Wanfen, decorated with a painting by Zhu Qizhan - the Shanghai artist and centenarian who died in 1996. Given by Dr. K.S. Lo (BM reg. no. OA 1995.2-27.27)

potters of Yixing began as we have seen in the Ming period and this traditional association persists today. The base of a *duan ni* beige clay teapot with overhead handle (fig. 7) is dated September 1993 its inscription is by Yiming (Fan Jianjun). It is also signed by the potter Cao Wanfen with seals Wanfen and Yangxian Wanfen zhitao. Cao Wanfen (born in 1940) is another female potter born into a family of Yixing craftsmen, she has worked in the Yixing industry since 1955. The teapot is decorated with a painting by Zhu Qizhan - the Shanghai artist and centenarian who died in 1996 (fig.8). One can stylistically compare his beautiful ink and colour horizontal scroll entitled "Plum blossoms" in the Zhanyuantang collection, Hong Kong, painted in 1990 with this design.

Here we have discussed Yixing's location in the heart of the fertile area south of the Yangtze river which has been

the centre of economic and cultural activities for the past five hundred years. We looked at the important change in the preparation of tea which gave rise to the teapot in the early Ming. We focussed on the unique connections between artisan-potter and scholar-bureaucrat, between producer and patron. This link is evidenced by the signing of the pots which leads us to an understanding of the individual makers. We talked about the physical production - hand-building and firing. Noting Yixing teawares mythical origins we chronologically surveyed the evidence for dating Yixing from archaeological evidence, major artists work, stylistic analysis of decoration and form. Yixing teawares had a major impact on European ceramics, inspiring imitations from the moment that they first arrived with consignments of tea in the 17th century. In dating this group we rely on printed sources, oil paintings, shipwrecks and inventories. Copies were not confined to Holland, England and Germany but were made internally in China in, for example, Fujian and Shanghai. Production has periodically been interrupted by political turmoil, particularly in the 20th century, but today there is a thriving commercial industry at Yixing as well as a group of contemporary artist-potters who continue to work with scholars in the Jiangnan region.

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