Crafting Sustainable Value through ‘Relational Making’: A Case Study – The Porcelain Town of Jingdezhen

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The paper presents a case study on craft and its sustainable value in the porcelain town of Jingdezhen, China. Based on a typology of five values pertaining to craft developed in our previous research, this case study investigates an emerging model of making – a collaboration between local artisans and contemporary creatives – in Jingdezhen and its values and priorities through a four-stage participatory research approach. It is found that this emerging model of making brought a successful revival of traditional porcelain craft to the town while also resulting in tensions and contradictions in values and priorities. Informed by the co-creation workshop and experimental project, we propose that building effective working relations among craft makers, contemporary creatives and place/context will be critical in overcoming current tensions in porcelain production and in creating shared values. Through engaging with literature in the field, we conclude with a concept of ‘relational making’ to support contemporary craft practices. Emerging models of craft production in China can be strengthened by ‘relational making’ leading to new, more sustainable directions.

*Keywords: craft; making; sustainable value; relational making, Jingdezhen*

1 Introduction

In China, many crafts are undergoing significant resurgence and revitalization due to the state’s *Intangible Cultural Heritage* initiatives and the promotion of cultural and creative industries (ICH China, 2017; EU SME Centre, 2014). As we found in our earlier research, craft’s multiple values are not recognized and sustained at a balanced state in China. This means that the economic benefit of craft is often overvalued while the other aspects of craft’s value are to a variable degree underestimated (Zhan and Walker, 2018). Our previous research also suggests that crafts in China are highly commercialized and strongly influenced by cosmopolitanism and consumerism. Different from most craft practices in the UK, they often come under the category of ‘industrial craft’ – that is, large-scale production that is broken down into many steps, each of which contains its own craft specialism. In porcelain crafts, for example, these steps include material sourcing, shape forming, decorating and firing.

Over the past decade, there has been an increasing number of contemporary creatives (artists and designers) from all over the country and beyond who contribute to traditional
craft communities. They started to live and work in the community and introduced very contemporary ideas and avant-garde approaches. The craft processes which used to be done by groups of local artisans now involve a collaboration with these incoming creatives. As a result, a new model of craft making is emerging from the collaboration between these two rather different groups of people.

Given this, we are especially interested in how traditional modes of ceramic production, which constitute a craft ecology, are being affected by this new model of making. It could mean, for instance, that the distinctiveness of traditional modes becomes lost and the products become more homogenized. Porcelain crafts in Jingdezhen, Central China, is a recognized case that exemplifies how these new influences are changing traditional ways of craft production. This research, therefore, asks,

- How are traditional modes of ceramic production within a traditional craft ecology being affected by this emerging new model of making that include the influence of incoming creatives?
- How might design contribute to protecting the intrinsic value of traditional local artisan practices through creative intervention?

To answer these questions, we focused on porcelain crafts in Jingdezhen as our case study.

The components of this paper include a clarification of how we understand craft and its value. This is followed by a description of the case study in Jingdezhen and its findings, which illustrate how value is being created through the emerging new forms of collaborative making in Jingdezhen. We also discuss the tensions and imbalances that are being revealed among three areas of craft making, namely: craft as an artistic endeavour; craft as a resource for the creative economy, and craft as an important element of China’s artisanal heritage. Despite these tensions, however, our findings demonstrate that through these creative collaborations, new, more holistic notions of value are being created. The research concludes with our concept of ‘relational making’ for the revival and sustainment of traditional crafts in China.

2 Craft, making and sustainable value
Craft is often characterized in terms of its: ecological attributes; connection to localization; exemplification of systemic thinking and its relationship to authentic notions of being (Zhan and Walker, 2017, p.2920). The word “making” is widely used in a Western context and often used interchangeably with craft. “Making” literally means “the process of making or producing something” (OED). “Making” as a topic of discourse and a field of research became increasingly popular with the rise of the Maker Culture and Maker Movement in the UK and US in recent decades (Burke, 2014). It serves as a reaction to the de-valuing of physical exploration and the growing sense of disconnection with the physical world in modernity (Martinez, 2013). An essential characteristic of the Maker Movement is the “do-it-yourself (or do-it-with-others) mindset that brings together individuals around a range of activities” (Peppler and Bender, 2013, p.23). “Making” also has a sociological dimension that recognizes the importance of community building and the collaboration of people. Langlands (2017, p.17) interprets craft (craeft in the Anglo-Saxon text) as skills in terms of the physical, mental skill and spiritual forms. This reflects an ideological root of the Maker Culture in ancient Western origins that regards craft as a complex practice of “knowing and thinking”.

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However, according to the ideological basis of UNESCO’s Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, craft also represents a manifestation of traditionally communal and cultural knowledge, practices and values grounded in context and place (ICH, UNESCO). As reflected in contemporary craft practices in the UK, craft is more characterized by its engagement with and innovation in materiality and aesthetics (e.g. Make: Shift conferences and Collect exhibitions, Crafts Council). In the word “making”, it often places more emphasis on the aspect of “knowing and thinking” that is often cut off from its context. As Langlands comments, understanding craft in its historical and geographic context, and regarding it as Intangible Cultural Heritage will not “lock down craft practices” into their past, instead it can “help give a sense of way of taking it forward in the future” (Interview with Langlands, February 2019).

Craft in the Chinese context is mostly addressed in relation to heritage, culture, community and fine art while lacking an understanding of seeing it as an epistemic way of “knowing and thinking” (Zhan, 2018). Lacking this understanding of craft is a significant omission. However, neglecting craft’s relation to geographic, traditional and cultural context also makes the understanding of craft/making single-sided. Therefore, craft is not fully equated to “making” in Western context, although the terms are used interchangeably. In our previous research, craft was viewed through a systemic lens to be a comprehensive ecology that includes richer meaning than that contained in “making”. Craft also has comprehensive values that sustain its ecology.

According to that research, craft contains five values: environmental, economic, social, local-cultural, and spiritual, as presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five Values of Craft in Relation to Sustainability</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Extrinsic</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental value</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eco-friendly materials, production processes, renewable resources-labour</td>
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<tr>
<td>Own consumption, increasing income, commercial use</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Intrinsic</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local-cultural value</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local distinctiveness, self-identified culture instead of cosmopolitan culture, changing cultural tradition instead of the static culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spiritual value</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs, faith, sense of being, self-fulfilment through making</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Values of Craft in Relation to Sustainability (Source: Zhan and Walker, 2018, p.5)*

Considering the increasingly recognized notions of holistic sustainability and the complex causes of wicked-problems, we can assume that neglect of any type of values will eventually make craft unsustainable. Some crafts in China are found not to be being revitalized and developed in a healthy fashion. It implies that the economic and social value of some crafts are significant but their local-cultural and spiritual values are at risk; some crafts’ local-cultural and spiritual values are retained in practice, but the poor financial situation of these crafts renders their local-cultural and spiritual values unsustainable (Zhan and Walker, 2018, P.17).

Within the system of “industry craft” in China that is strongly influenced by a cosmopolitan culture, it is worth exploring how to balance these values to realize a sustainable state. Built on these theoretical underpinnings, a value-centred perspective was developed to guide through the research into the new model of craft production in Jingdezhen.
3 The Case Study: The Porcelain Town of Jingdezhen

Like Delft in The Netherlands and Stoke in England, Jingdezhen is China’s centre of ceramic production and is widely known as the ‘capital of Chinese porcelain’. High-quality ceramics have been made here since the 10th century (Jingdezhen Archive) and it was the centre of production of the distinctive blue and white ‘Willow Pattern’ that was exported to Europe in high quantities during the 17th and 18th centuries. In the 20th century, with investment by the Chinese government, ceramics production was increased via large, state-run, ceramics factories. In the 1990s, these factories were dissolved and ceramic production was continued by a host of smaller, privately run workshops and studios, which attracted artists and designers from around the world. This case study, conducted with various makers in Jingdezhen, looks at the current and emerging model of ceramics production and evaluates it in terms of its values and priorities.

4 Methodology and implementation

4.1 Methodology

Due to the explorative nature of this research, a case study was chosen to investigate values of contemporary craft practice in its real-life settings (Yin, 2004). We are design researchers working in craft, because design has a close relationship and fits well with the “learning by doing” model of craft and its creative nature (Zhan, 2019). In this research, we use design as a method of knowledge generation and intervention. Crafts in China are community-embedded activities and are usually promoted as a field for social welfare and poverty alleviation (e.g. New Channel program of Tong community). In recent years, design research in Western society has also turned to a social dimension where a more “socially-driven” form of design has been constructed through a range of activities and interventions. (e.g. Design Research for Change project). Meanwhile, informed by the collaborative nature of craft communities in China, a participatory co-design approach is employed through a social and cultural lens to investigate craft production and help co-create shared value through intervention.

Therefore, the case was studied through a participatory research approach (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013). Aiming to answer the questions, the research was devised in four stages (Table 2). In the first stage of a scoping study conducted in May and December 2017, ethnographic approaches were used to understand the current state of porcelain production and the issues facing the porcelain community. A co-creation approach was employed in the later three stages conducted in November 2018 (Stages 2-4 in Table 2).
4.2 Conducting the 4 Research Stages and Data Collection

Data was collected through multiple methods of ethnography and co-design. In the first stage of the scoping study, ethnographic methods (Salvador et al., 1999), in the form of semi-structured interviews and participant observations, were used with fifteen interviewees (i.e. artisans, artists, designers, researchers and members of support organizations). These methods were also accompanied by field notes and comments.

Sense-making (Klein et al., 2006) was used to get to know how different makers (i.e. artisans, artists and designers) understand the value of craft and its relationship with sustainability. This was conducted through contextual interviews in the workspaces of eleven makers (i.e. 3 artisans, 4 artists and 4 designers), where materials, tools and environmental settings were used as prompts to trigger a comprehensive dialogue around the value of their work (Figure 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Results</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Scoping study</strong></td>
<td>To understand the current state of crafts in the community in order to identify problems and opportunities.</td>
<td>• Maps of makers and the place. • An emerging model of making identified • Tensions in different directions of porcelain production.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interviews, observations</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2 Sense-making activity</strong></td>
<td>To make sense of sustainability, value and crafts to participants, and gain their visions of craft’s value and sustainability.</td>
<td>• Value perception of makers. • Protocols for the co-creation workshop.</td>
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<td>Contextual interviews with artisans, designers and artists</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3 A co-creation workshop</strong></td>
<td>To test the value typology developed from previous research, and co-design a situated strategy for sustaining the value of porcelain crafts through optimized collaboration.</td>
<td>• A proposed model for co-creating a shared value among makers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conducted with 25 participants supported by Co-design methods and tools</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4 An experimental project</strong></td>
<td>To test the propositions of optimized collaboration gained from the co-creation workshop in order to develop strategies to implement the optimized collaboration.</td>
<td>• Concepts of ‘relational making’ for moving craft towards a sustainable future through collaboration.</td>
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<td>Conducted with an invited group of local artisans and six creatives</td>
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Table 2. The stages of the field research
A co-creation workshop (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2011) was conducted with twenty participants as an act of collective creativity (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). The goal of this was to co-design a situated collaboration proposition to protect the intrinsic value of craft (Figure 2). The workshop was conducted with tools adapted from various resources (Mazzarella, 2018, etc.). The data from the workshop were then developed into an initial proposition in terms of ‘collaboration through immersive making’.

As an act of both generation and validation, an experimental practice-based project was employed to test the proposed model of collaboration gained from the co-creation workshop. The experiment was conducted with an invited group of artists, designers and local artisans. The group was subdivided into two teams according to participants’ interests. Each team was made up of one designer, one artist and several local artisans. Team 1 (Figure 3a) developed their making project through a strong-tie collaboration with two fixed local artisans, whereas Team 2 (Figure 3b) developed their project through a weak-tie collaboration with artisans to whom they turned when they needed. Team 1 made a series of ceramic vases and Team 2 made ceramic lighting. The goals, contents and form of the making project for both teams originated from the participants’ current working schedules and plans and were built on their collective agreement. Participant observation, conversation, and filed notes were used to collect data during the two-week experiment (Figure 4).
The field data were collected with audio-recording, field notes, notes on given templates as well as photos. After a synthetic processing of the data, they were then thematically analyzed with the aid of mapping and visualization, from which several findings emerged. These findings will be presented and discussed below.

5 Crafting value through collaborative making in Jingdezhen

The porcelain town of Jingdezhen, the case for this present research, is located to the southeast of the Yangtze River Delta (YRD), which is a highly developed and industrialized region of China (Figure 5). Jingdezhen has been producing porcelain and ceramics for over 2,000 years (Dillon 1992).

5.1 Craft revival in Jingdezhen

Porcelain production in Jingdezhen has long been developed into a sophisticated division of skills. However, these complex making processes became industrialized during the era of state-owned factories from the 1950s to the 1990s (Fang, 2015). Since the middle of 1990s when the state-owned factories were shut down, the centralized mass production in large
state-owned factories has been deconstructed and autonomously rebuilt into numerous small specialist workshops by the artisan workers scattered around the old-factory sites and villages (Figure 6).

Due to the flexibility and compatibility of the model of small batch production, the traditional skills have been retrieved and revived in these workshops through reiterative experiments (Interview with Fang, December 2017). The highly skilled artisans and their workshops have then attracted many artists and creatives. Nearly three Thousand people from larger Chinese cities and other countries have moved to Jingdezhen (April 2017, JCFCAA). These, together with local masters and artisans, have formed a new and collaborative community in the historical town. Considering that the two types of people are completely different, and seeing how they work with each other and have brought a revival of Jingdezhen’s ceramic industry on such a scale really amazed us.

As the town’s structural texture shows (Figure 6), the rational geometric lines intertwine with the organic networks formed by the natural land-water borders, and various clusters of workshops, markets and museums are scattered across the landscape, seemingly without any pre-planning. Jingdezhen’s urban layout offers various scales of cooperation for a variety of makers in the town’s industrial spectrum - either within the workshop clusters or across many different clusters. It often needs to pass through four or five different specialist workshops for a piece of porcelain to be finished. The re-configurated industrial settings have provided artists, designers and local artisans with a flexible and dynamic space where daily life blends with various work routines, and where tradition meets modernity. This map signifies that the town now stands at the intersection of cosmopolitan and local, modern and traditional, and is facing paradoxical challenges. Now, there are tensions and an imbalanced state of value perception in this collaborative making. This will be presented and discussed below.

Figure 6. Community map of Jingdezhen © Xiaofang Zhan.
5.2 Makers and their value perception in porcelain making

According to the scoping study, porcelain makers in Jingdezhen fall into four different types: artisans/masters, traditional artists, contemporary artists and ceramic designers (Figure 7).

Different makers have different value perceptions and priorities. Throughout the sense-making interviews, porcelain makers unpacked the concept of value and sustainability within their context. Data from sense-making interviews were analyzed by using a priori themes in terms of five values resulting from our previous research (introduced in Section 3). This led to the identification of subthemes, which were then prioritized according to the frequency of data and are presented in Table 3.
Combining the finding from the sense-making interviews (Table 3) and the data regarding value identification from the co-creation workshop (Figure 8), the value perception of these four types of makers were finally identified and are presented in Figure 9. As the figure shows, craft’s value relating to local culture and spirituality are perceived as the highest, with the value relating to society the lowest; and porcelain makers were almost unaware of the environmental issue of craft except for the one designer who acknowledged it. It also suggests that the intrinsic value of craft in terms of local-cultural and spiritual are well recognized and perceived by the majority of the porcelain makers. However, craft’s social value needs to be made more visible, and there is an urgent need for environmental literacy.
5.3 Tensions and imbalances among the three areas of craft making

Porcelain crafts produced in contemporary Jingdezhen cover diverse areas of interests ranging from commercial products to design items and from heritage artifacts to contemporary sculptures. This broad spectrum involves diverse artisans, artists, ceramicists and designers. According to various data from interviews and the different landscapes of porcelain work in the markets, workshops and galleries, three major directions in how makers value craft in their practices were identified:

Craft as artistic endeavour: this direction placed porcelain as constructing arts and novel design ideas led by artists and young avant-garde designers. It includes contemporary sculptures, collectable art pieces, design items. Figure 10 show a representative piece.

Craft as a resource for the creative economy: this direction regards craft heritage and craftsmanship as a cultural resource for an economy often led by designers. It includes middle and low-end commercial products, and middle and high-end cultural and creative products, as shown in Figure 11.
Craft as artisanal heritage: this direction of ceramic work often reflects a high level of skills, traditional materials’ context and meaning, and is a mark of the making process. Most of this type of work is either in a traditional style including everyday use and decorative objects, or modern objects that emphasize the aesthetics of everyday life and simplicity. This direction is often led by master artisans and young ceramic designers or ceramicists. Figure 12 is an illustration of this direction.

These three directions accurately reflect the makers’ different interests and value positions as reflected in Figure 9. Many times, these directions come into conflict with each other, and if any one prevails, the value of the other one or two would be threatened. This will be analyzed below.

On the one hand, if craft is viewed as a resource/asset to generate economic profit, then the artisanal heritage would be at risk. This is because the skills and artisanal knowledge that reflect traditional craftsmanship would be gradually diminished by the increasing demand for the work of mediocre artisans, as the quote states:

*High-quality products require artisans to invest more time in the making, which also means you need pay them quite a lot of money. Designers need to consider economic factors, so designers turn to artisans who charge less and finish it faster.*
The direction of commercial products doesn’t need highly-skilled artisans and craftsmanship. This direction is expanding, so the number of artisans with average-level skills is increasing whereas the number of master artisans is decreasing (Interview with a ceramicist, December 2017).

On the other hand, if the artistic endeavour of craft is emphasized by artists, the traditional skills and knowledge of the artisanal heritage would still not be valued in this community. There is a widely known phenomenon in Chinese ceramic circles that the price and perceived value of a porcelain craft lies mainly in the artistic endeavour made by the artist or the creative ideas by designer. As one informant says:

A vase painted by a master artist is sold at a high price, but he just needs to pay much less money to the artisans or the technical masters, compared to the price of the vase. Artists don’t actually rely on artisanal knowledge as much as before, because you can just order a batch of very common greenware or plates and paint onto them. Even though it involves substantial work by artisans, the artistry and design creativity dominate the market value of the work. Therefore, many artists and designers have little interest in craftsmanship.

However, there is a group of makers (mainly artisans and young ceramic designers) who are interested in an artisanal way of making. Their work often reflects a high level of skills, material contexts and meaning, but their work often faces economic pressures and sacrifices in ideas and design, as these two representative quotes states:

Everyday use porcelain is not competitive in market…there are many similar products on Taobao [a Chinese shopping platform giant] that are much cheaper. Though they are not handmade, they look even better. So, it is hard for us to sustain. I still think we should carry on with this, though moving away from producing traditional artifacts to making artwork or contemporary design items might change our financial situation (Interview with ceramicist Mr. Han, November 2018).

Artisans can only do their work with the methods they have learned. Many times, designers came up with some new ideas and patterns, but artisans couldn’t actualize them, and had little interest in trying new ways even though I encourage them to do so and said I would help them. And designers couldn’t make them due to the limitation of their skills. Therefore, designers had to give up or compromise their ideas to fit with the artisans’ ways of making (Interview with ceramicist Mr. Liu, November 2018).

These young ceramicists have to compromise their artistic endeavour to meet the artisans’ increasingly declining skills. Yet, the decline in skills is caused by the very consequence of diminishing interest in artisanal heritage, which is driven by the increasing emphasis over the last few years on artistry, novelty and economics.

The developing directions of valuing craft merely as artistic endeavour or economic resource is diminishing the value of artisanal heritage. However, sticking to artisanal heritage would make artisans and designers suffer from economic unviability and compromise of their artistry. Therefore, there are strong tensions among these three directions of porcelain production. Central to the tensions is that artisanship and artisans are not valued as before since the directions of ‘craft as artistic endeavour’ and ‘craft as a resource for creative economy’ started to prevail, as a result of which collaboration was lost.
5.4 Co-creating a more holistic notion of value through collaborative relationships

As Figure 9 shows, craft’s intrinsic value in terms of local-cultural and spiritual value are well-recognized by the majority of makers. However, in contrast to this finding, the tensions discussed above uncover a turn to artistry and economics, and also imply an anticipated detriment to the intrinsic value of craft and its sustainability. In order to address the divergence and imbalance in values, we conducted a co-creation workshop with various makers and people from support organizations. Rather than waiting for external agents of governmental policy or market force, participants proposed to activate a more inclusive and equitable model of collaboration to generate a balanced and shared value among artists, designers and artisans.

Building on the past experience of collaboration, participants proposed an optimized model of collaboration in which artists, designers and local artisans work together in an open, local, convivial and inclusive space to co-create a shared culture and value through negotiation. According to this proposal, artisans who used to work in a sense of ‘order production’ or ‘on-demand’ model with artists and designers now equally engage in the whole process while artists and designers also take part in every step of the making processes alongside the artisans.

In order to test this proposed model, we conducted an experimental practice-based project with an invited group of artisans, artists and designers. The group was subdivided into two teams according to participants’ interests. One team already had a close relationship and retained this model of intimacy throughout the project, while the other team started with a relatively looser relationship and subsequently failed to build the expected model of collaboration. Through the experiment, important factors for addressing the tensions and creating a shared value in the collaboration are identified:

**Building a relationship between people and place through immersive making to strengthen craft’s local-cultural and environmental values**

Through involvement of all the participants in every process of making in our experimental project, a deep perception and awareness of the local culture and place was fostered, although Team 2 worked in a ‘weak-tie’ fashion with the local artisans. Working in the original environment generated a deep sense of authenticity and locality. All the participants expressed that engaging in every step of the processes allowed them to look closely at the history and culture of the ceramic industry, and starting with the raw materials made them have a better understanding of the artisans’ work. This in turn nurtured a strong sense of environmental stewardship:

*We were surrounded by clay, porcelain and tools every day, working beside the river and hearing water gurgling and birds twittering. We had never processed clay by ourselves. Engaging in all the processes helps us understand how the clay is sourced and where it is sourced. This brought us close to the site where this material originated, from which we had a stronger sense of the environment, being part of a place and being part of its history (designer, Team 2).*

*I think artisans have a natural relation to the environment and place in which they work. We learned a lot from them in term of environmental awareness. They are not unaware of environmental issues. They actually understand it better and deeper than us (artist, Team 1).*

**Blurring space between life and work to create craft’s spiritual value**

The increasing separation of life and work among the makers driven by efficiency-oriented production greatly impacted their quality of life and well-being. For artisans, this is especially
Throughout history, artisans in Jingdezhen shared the role of half-farmer and half-ceramic maker, and their ceramic work was accompanied by their daily farming routine. An artisan in our experiment commented:

*I used to work in my workshop which was also part of my house. It didn’t distance me from my life and made me comfortable. I discussed details with artists who lived in my house. It is interesting that what attracted them most is things from my living room and dining with our family. We enjoyed conversations over a cup of tea in my house. Now I find the same feeling. I think the way we work together in the [experimental] project is relaxing and helpful for us to enjoy both life and work (artisan Team 1).*

In the villages of Jingdezhen, there are many workshops/studios functioning not only as workplaces and stores, but also as homes and living spaces. Through these multi-functional spaces, the connections between everyday life, work routine and business livelihood grow. Makers move across different spaces swiftly and flexibly in a site-specific physical space, along with tourists and customers. Designer Wu says:

*Customers come and what they see is not only the beautifully packaged ceramic piece in stores, but also how these products are made, what processes it involves, who made them, what the environment and makers’ lives are like…These indeed give people a sense of authenticity by which a deep spiritual value of a piece of porcelain is added and internalized.*

**Building relationships between designers, artists and artisans through a dialogical negotiation to create craft’s social value**

How to blend the different types of knowledge and mindsets of designers, artists and artisans in a collaborative design/making process is challenging. While the proposed way of negotiation by engaging the designer, artist and artisan in the same workshop worked throughout the experiment in Team 1, it didn’t work in Team 2 even though they also worked together in the same space. The most important reason for the difference, according to observations, is that Team 2 failed to build a space for deeply engaged dialogue among themselves. Dialogue played an important role in integrating these different types of knowledge into a shared outcome by asking what is technically reasonable, economically viable and what satisfies a particular ‘aesthetic need’. Master artisan Zhan in Team 1 explains:

*We discussed while we were making. I think this is the best way. We often came up later with new ideas that actually changed the initial draft they’d designed, because the draft was very limited. We got lots of inspirations when we started to get our hands on the clay, and what we actually wanted just popped up in the dialogue during the process. I don’t think it can be fully designed beforehand in the draft and actualized as such. I enjoyed the dialogue and we will continue working together in the future.*

In Team 1’s collaboration, the designer gets to know the improvisational nature of the artisan better; the artist discovers the artisan’s hidden intuition of beauty; and the artisan accepts more up-to-date ideas and aesthetics from the designer and artist. However, Team 2 failed to develop a shared understanding of each other’s knowledge. They worked more in the way of business consultation by asking each other a series of prepared and anticipatory questions, which lacks the quality of a situated negotiation.

By developing a shared understanding through situated dialogues, close social relationships among these different makers are bolstered, rather than through business relations. The accumulation of these close social relationships among makers in turn builds up a greater cohesion in the community. In so doing, craft’s social value is created.
Building relations between tradition and modernity through situated design and respectful dialogue to co-create sustainable value

Artisans in Jingdezhen are more rooted in local tradition whereas artists and designers come more from a modern context. They differ in their thinking, knowledge and methodology. Team 1 developed site-specific tools to communicate and design together by presenting together in the workshop. As the last quote by Master artisan Zhan above states, designers’ and artists’ conventional design and drawing techniques don’t work when these different people communicate. The designer in Team 1 gave up their drafts half way and adapted to a way of dialogue aided by non-detailed drawings and onsite materials and examples. The designer and artists in Team 1 reported that the artisan understood their idea very well and gave many suggestions that inspired the ultimate outcome. However, Team 2 stuck to meticulous and detailed drafts and became ‘frustrated’, as the designer reported, when they found the drafts hadn’t been realized by the artisans precisely. Here is representative quote from the designer in Team 1:

*When we found our accurate drawings didn’t work and make sense for the artisan, we turned to using some common words and descriptions we’d learned from artisans before, then some drawings - which don’t need to be very precise. The artisan then instantly got what we wanted…*(designer, Team 1).

In this dialogically situated co-design process, respect is vital to gaining empathy and mutual understanding, as the artist in Team 1 reflects:

*I think the most important is empathy and respect. Before, when I found artisans could not understand my drafts and concepts, I usually thought it might be the artisans’ inability to accept modern thinking and ideas, so we needed to help them to change their thinking. Now I realize I am wrong, artisans think with materials and their body, which is more authentic and creative. What we need to do is to learn their language and try to chat with them, and tell them what we think is beautiful… Then, you will find that they understand you and accept your ideas instinctively* (artist, Team 1).

6 Conclusions - The concept of ‘relational making’

According to our findings, building effective working relations among craft makers, contemporary creatives and place/context will be critical in overcoming current tensions in porcelain production and in creating shared value. Sennett (2009) criticizes the fact that innovation in capitalist production acts as “a form of individuation and separation”, while craft production is closely built on past knowledge and experience within interdependent networks. These networks, as Ingold (2013) argues, are woven through a process of bringing together multiple fields in terms of makers, materials and other non-human elements (including environment). In the process, each field reciprocally communicates and responds to the others. Our findings from Jingdezhen are consistent with these ideas. Our research, especially the final experimental stage, shows the intimacy generated from respectful dialogues and convivial conversations, which arose from an immersive experience in the community environment and its everyday life and culture. These ideas are also consistent with the key concepts of design for sustainability (Zhan, 2017). Both emphasize an interdependence and connectedness among people, environment, society and culture. The new is built upon the old, and innovation upon tradition. Artisans who are rooted in tradition and creatives who represent modernity can work together harmoniously in an open and inclusive space.
that combines daily life and work routines. This is not a utopian escape from the current (post-) industrial system, it has been an everyday experience in Jingdezhen over the last decade, as evidenced in our experimental project. Unfortunately, today, these productive relations are under stress because artistic innovation and economic priorities are beginning to eclipse traditional artisanal craft processes. This is especially ironic because the craft knowledge and culture embedded in place are the foundations for the new artistic and designer innovations that are capable of generating new and added value to traditional craft.

However, appreciating the value of traditional craft knowledge, as the experimental stage of our research shows, requires a respectful dialogue with artisans and a deep immersion in the place where this knowledge and artisanal skills have been nurtured.

These findings, which are generally supported by the literature in the field, also resonate with the conclusions that Eyferth draws in his research about the papermaking handcrafts in China. Eyferth (2009) holds that craft knowledge and the ability of makers can only function collaboratively among makers in certain societies and in particular geographic places; once the natural and social relations break, the craft knowledge becomes invalid. This helps explain why Jingdezhen’s traditional ceramic production could be successfully revived in such a short period (1990s-2010s). Despite major systemic changes due to state factory closures, the geographic and social relations of the ceramic practices were fully broken and were able to survive into the post-state-owned factory period.

These findings reinforce understandings of craft and craft knowledge as ecological and social rather than individualistic. Craft knowledge is built in a particular ecology in which particular people and materials constantly respond to each other. This contributes to a sense of place as well as a sense of distinctiveness (Walker et al., 2018). These understandings led us to see contemporary craft practices as a form of ‘relational making’, as opposed to an individual endeavour, which is often the case in Western society. By ‘relational’, we do not mean the kinship that is constructed through descendancy centered on lineage, even though historically such lineage was an important aspect of China’s traditional crafts (e.g. Fei, 1992; Li, 2017). The ‘relational’ idea we employ here refers to the inter-reliance and connections among artisans, contemporary creatives and place. These interdependencies and connections can only be built in a specific space where situated and respectful dialogues can occur.

This paper has discussed value imbalances and tensions within an emerging model of craft making in Jingdezhen that brings together traditional artisans with contemporary creatives. It has proposed an approach we have termed ‘relational making’ to address these challenges. Our findings suggest that engaging in ‘relational making’ can be helpful in generating shared and sustainable value amongst disparate people within a divided production system. We believe it has great potential to weave together contemporary and traditional elements into an innovative and creative production system of ‘industrial craft’.

The increasing natural and social crises in recent years have demonstrated that Western-style production-oriented approaches are incapable of tackling the increasingly wicked problems caused by these forms of production, and new directions must take
into consideration what are fitting to place and context. Thus, future approaches will not be a one-size-fits-all approach (Sheehan, 2011, p.70). As we have mentioned, we understand craft/making not only as a practice that manifests traditional, communal and contextual knowledge, but also as a way of ‘knowing and thinking’. Adamson (2010) suggests that, apart from being seen as a field of making, craft can also be understood as an idea that can contribute to theory building. Emerging models of craft production in China can be supported and strengthened by ‘relational making’ leading to new, more sustainable directions. For these reasons, the concept of ‘relational making’ is worthy of further exploration.

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8 References

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