



CHINESE
CULTURE

CRAFTS

GUO QIUHUI
WANG LIDAN

 China Intercontinental Press

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Contents

■ PREFACE	6
-----------	---

■ CRAFT CULTURE	14
-----------------	----

Chinese Contemporary Arts and Crafts Went through a Traditional-to-Modern Transformation	16
--	----

The Development of Chinese Contemporary Arts & Crafts, a Course Brimming with Opportunities and Explorations	33
--	----

Chinese Contemporary Handcrafts in the View of the Intangible Cultural Heritages	48
--	----

Sages' Creations: Traditional Chinese Crafts and Their Tales	59
--	----

■ UTENSILS	72
------------	----

Ceramics	74
----------	----

Bronze Vessels	93
----------------	----

Lacquer Ware	107
--------------	-----

■ COSTUME	120
-----------	-----

Fabrics	122
---------	-----

Embroidery	137
------------	-----

Printing and dyeing	151
---------------------	-----

■ DISPLAY	162
-----------	-----

Furniture	164
-----------	-----

Enameled glassware inlaid with gold and silver	177
--	-----

Bamboo carving, wood carving, ivory and horn carving	203
--	-----

■ **DECORATION** ————— 230

Jadeware ————— 232

New Year Pictures ————— 244

Paper-cut ————— 256

■ **FOLK ARTS** ————— 264

Folk toys ————— 266

Kites ————— 274

Puppet ————— 282

Shadow Play ————— 292

■ **COMMERCE** ————— 302

Shop signs and huangzi ————— 304

Package ————— 312

■ **EXISTING TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP** ————— 322

Folk Tools ————— 324

Fiber arts ————— 342

Bamboo crafts ————— 349

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-------------------	----

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----------	----

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----------------	----

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------------------	-----

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---------------------	-----

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-----------	-----

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Jadeware _____ 232

New Year Pictures _____ 244

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Puppet _____ 282

Shadow Play _____ 292

■ **COMMERCE** _____ 302

Shop signs and huangzi _____ 304

Package _____ 312

■ **EXISTING TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP** _____ 322

Folk Tools _____ 324

Fiber arts _____ 342

Bamboo crafts _____ 349

Preface

By Hang Jian

Crafts depend on skills, as the weather relies on seasons, the earth on the weather, and the material on appearance. Traditional Chinese arts and crafts have won good reputations in the international community in the history of material culture. Since Zhang Qian's diplomatic mission to the West (?-114 BC) in the Han Dynasty and the gradual advent of the Silk Road, China's traditional arts and crafts have been continually exported to the Central Asia, the Western Asia, the Middle East, Europe and other regions across the world. Chinese craftsmen in the bygone ages often lived on their craftsmanship when civil war or foreign invasion broke out, and they inadvertently served as cultural popularizers. In addition, arts and crafts often have a close relation with China's traditional philosophy. Around the first century A.D., ideologists in ancient China used



Chengyun embroidery on yellow gauze of the Han Dynasty. Since the Han Dynasty, Chinese silk had been disseminated westward and had become famous all over the world through the Silk Road.

Pointed-bottom painted pottery jar with two ears and spiral patterns, a type of water scoop, Neolithic Maja Kiln Culture. The design feature of pointed bottom and two ears makes it easier to draw and lift water: the two ears are right below the jar shoulder such that the mouth of the jar faces down when it is empty and automatically turns upward when filled with water due to gravity. The pointed bottom also facilitates its placement into soil.



to describe or interpret their thoughts about national governance and people's life by resorting to crafts and craftsmanship as metaphors.

All this has much to do with China's unique geographical location and its long and continuous farming culture.

Mainland China has a long coastline, but its civilization was originated in the hinterland, i.e., the Central China, where the Xia, Shang and Western Zhou dynasties, the three earliest regimes in China, were established one after another. For ethnic groups inhabiting in plains and mountainous areas, farming is the most significant way for subsistence. It is the life and artistic style in this agricultural society that defined the characteristics of traditional Chinese handicrafts. Craftsmanship has been developed in people's life and production activities. Originally, all varieties of crafts were made for practical purpose, so they were practical, simple, user-friendly, and adaptive to agricultural progress. Even royal crafts and scholar crafts, the pinnacle of crafts, retained the practical and simple features. They have a natural decorative style, with landscape, animals and plants in a natural economy as the subjects of their patterns and ornaments. We hardly find some weird and ferocious elements in them. Instead, they present cheerful and optimistic spirit.

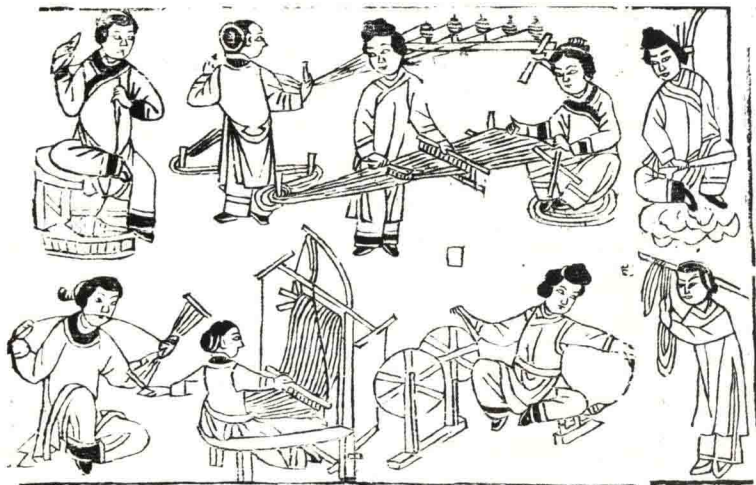
In China's traditional moral philosophy prevails the maxim "Excessive attention to

trivialities saps the will.” What it denounces is “exquisite but useless skills and products” and the overdevelopment of unpractical skills. Such thought unconsciously influences China’s craft to develop towards functionalism in thousands of years and it causes manual skills to develop the most in the agricultural society without any waste of social resources. This also makes it somewhat conservative. When technology accumulation reaches a certain level, it will limit and delay promotion of social and scientific progresses.

Generally, however, China’s traditional arts and crafts are laudable. They are rich cultural heritages left to us, containing people’s creation and wisdom in life.

China’s traditional arts and crafts are a manifestation of wisdom, which is presented from the following perspectives.

The first is “valuing human being itself and exploiting goods,” namely, valuing individual life and controlling artificial objects. It emphasizes that all technologies shall be based on human, that is what we call “people oriented” today, which is critical for development of China’s traditional craftsmanship. Someone may question that, as technologies are used by men, it is sure and no wonder that they are people oriented. However, Europe went through a tortuous route in terms of understanding of such simple issue. After the industrial Revolution in Great Britain, mass



Spinning & Weaving Painting, made in Fengxiang, Shaanxi Province in the mid-Qing Dynasty. By the late Ming Dynasty, when capitalism sprout began to emerge in China, the textile industry had operated on the basis of social division of labor, and had taken shape to a certain extent but not yet to the point of qualitative change.

production of machines reduced costs and brought cheaper products, making numerous people praise machine-based production and cheer for achievements of industrial revolution. However, soon after, they found that products manufactured by machines are always manufactured in a rough and same way and therefore they were dissatisfied with such products and considered that it obliterated personality and use of the same rough product by people meant obsession with life style; on the other hand, from the point of view of manufacturer, in the course of mass production of the whole industrial society, tasks along the assembly line were divided in more pieces, human became a part of machine, and unlike traditional hand labor which could make you touch natural materials and work while thinking, there is no fun in the whole course. With the pace of agricultural economy, there is a kind of rural natural fun. Consequently, in nineteenth century, there were utopian socialists such as William Morris (1834-1896) and idealists of design in Europe.

From the very beginning, products including traditional Chinese crafts were manufactured based on human needs. The crafts industry already took shape to a certain extent at the earlier stage of machine-based production, especially in the late Ming Dynasty when capitalism sprouted. At that time, in Shengze



Changxin Palace Lamp of the Western Han Dynasty, derived its name from the fact that it was once placed in Changxin Palace of Empress Dowager Dou, and is now kept in Hebei Museum. It's an elegantly shaped ingenious design with a maid holding the lamp with one hand and the other hand supposed to shield the lamp from the wind, which is in fact siphon used to collect lampblack, preventing air pollution while presenting aesthetic value. It is 48cm high, with illuminated area consistent with the range of sight when sitting on the floor, a typical sitting posture in the Han Dynasty. The lampshade is rotatable, enabling illuminated area and light intensity adjustment.

Town, Songjiang (now in Wujiang, Jiangsu), weaving industry was highly developed, quite a few families had 5-10 looms and employed workers to operate them, and there was clear division of labor between processes. However, this production mode close to mass capitalist production didn't run from quantitative development to qualitative development. Unlike the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain, it didn't significantly improve outputs, generate the most surplus value and input such value to reproduction thus to cause revolutionary change of the weaving industry. Employers in weaving industry in Ming Dynasty who were inextricably linked to the countryside re-invested their earnings from weaving industry to agricultural production or family building, such as house building, land purchase, getting married and having children, which not only naturally included backwardness of agricultural economy but also reflected that Chinese traditional society valued nature of human's life and didn't push development of machine-based production to the highest level. It is closely related to such technology thoughts as "value own self and use things" and "people oriented."

The second is "attaining practical use and benefiting people," namely, emphasizing practical use and people's livelihood. During the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1736-1795), western missionaries or foreign ambassadors came to China and brought along with gifts most of which were playthings such as mechanical striking clock. It can be seen that most of products manufactured in the West were not entirely for practical purpose and for human's benefits. Products produced in ancient China always emphasized their functions. Guan Zhong (725-645 BC) who was an ideologist in the Spring and Autumn period once said: "excellent craftsmen in the ancient time didn't use their wisdom to manufacture playthings. Therefore, law-abiding people never produce useless things." This means that, the smart craftsmen in the ancient time didn't waste their wisdom to make useless playthings and they followed such rule and didn't go against it. Mo Zi (about 468-376 BC) in the Warring States time also proposed the idea that we should do what benefit us and shouldn't do what offer no benefit to us. Though it seems simple today, it was of great significance at that time. From this, in the feudal society of a history of thousands years, "exquisite but useless skills and products" in Chinese vocabularies didn't become the mainstream of the society and production of objects which emphasized functionality, was related to national economy and people's livelihood, and kept human care was exactly the mainstream of China's traditional craftsmanship.

The third is "considering different conditions and appropriately using the advantages," which

discusses the relationship between crafts and specific materials and technologies. For this, there are various examples: such as, how to use different characteristics and textures of wood to deal with different structure in case of furniture making, how to use natural texture of stone to model in case of inkstone manufacturing, and how to use ingenious color of jade to produce things giving full play to characters of materials and reflecting functionality in case of jade carving. In such examples, different technologies are used according to different materials. At the macro level, traditional Chinese crafts attach great importance to materials and technical conditions and products are designed based on requirements for function. Li Yu (1610-1680), a famous litterateur in late Ming and early Qing dynasties, mentioned in his book *Some Notes on Leisure Time* that sound appropriateness and suitability were essential for landscape architecture, which was very important. It decides that, under the background of farming society, Chinese people didn't produce any articles going against the farming society and arts and crafts in different periods were basically harmonious with life style at that time. Design of lamps in Han Dynasty is just one prominent example in terms of traditional crafts. The representative one – Changxin Palace Lamp uses water to filter smoke and dust and keep tight, uses flue to discharge smoke, and use rotational structure to adjust light, showing extraordinary ingenuity.

The fourth is “learning from nature,” which emphasizes creative inspiration comes from nature



Fish-shaped Brass Lock, produced during the former Republic of China period, a wisely-conceived design with a vivid form featuring the lock handle held in the mouth of the fish while the other end linked to the fish tail. A fish-shaped lock is symbolic as fish does not close its eyes even when asleep.

and human shall keep a harmonious relationship with nature. In the past, “creation” was often considered as a commonly-used term describing learning from the nature in terms of painting. Actually, it runs in every detail of traditional Chinese crafts, it means that we shall learn from nature and get inspired from nature and it requires that artificial objects shall be harmonious with nature. Especially in ancient China, for example, the saw invented by the skillful craftsman – Lu Ban (about 507-444 BC) was inspired by toothed plant leaf in nature according to legend; Zhuge Liang (181-234) in the Three Kingdoms period combined machinery and bionic shape and invented the trolley which called “wooden ox” to transport provisions and fodders via Shu road. There were numerous examples in the ancient time and even some astro-observation instruments such as Houfeng Seismograph invented by Zhang Heng (78-139) in the Eastern Han Dynasty were manufactured based on shapes related to nature. The lacquering technology treatise in the Ming Dynasty – *Records of Painters and Lacquers* clearly proposes that we shall learn from nature, lacquerware shall be shaped in a form of human’s body and ornamentation shall be determined based on Yin and Yang. Many articles of luxury in the period of Emperor Qianlong were chinaware imitating nature. More examples can be found in folk articles, such as fish dish, sachet, moulage and door lock, whose imitation not only has function but also includes unique symbolism of folk culture in China.

The fifth is “using advanced technology while reflecting moral value.” It means that technology goes together with ideological factors, that is, manufacturing activities like specific functional and technical operations shall advance together with metaphysical theory. This view came into being since the pre-Qin period, Taoist thoughts exerted greatest impact and Confucian also had similar thoughts such as “writings are for conveying truth.” Though in China’s history there is sometimes imbalance between idea and approach and the thought that idea is put above approach is spread widely, spirituality doesn’t overwhelm practicability from beginning to end in daily life of the folks.

The sixth is “balancing outward grace and solid worth,” namely, appearance matches with essence. It emphasizes unity of content and form, and function and decoration, which can be found in many examples concerning China’s traditional crafts. Decorative art is an important aspect of overall development of human’s culture. Emphasis on unity of content and form, as well as function and decoration can help avoid formalism or the tendency that function is merely stressed, which is exactly the result from impact of Confucian thought of “balancing outward grace and solid worth. It