

## **The Ceramics Generations: The Path of Taiwanese Ceramic Development**

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### **Abstract**

When one talks about the development of local ceramics, s/he usually refers to the China-Japan (China here refers to the Republic of China, also known as Taiwan) ceramic exhibition in 1981 that was a significant milestone for the island. Before this event, the ceramic environment was highly influenced by the legacy style due to the Japanese colonization and the Chinese style which ceramicists brought with them as they flew from China. Only a minority of artists who were exposed to the West began developing their own unique style.

After 1980, the island became a more pluralistic environment with more oversea returnees indulging themselves into art education and injecting western influences, which took local contemporary ceramics to another level. The exhibition will display different generations of ceramic artworks, inviting viewers to explore the different dimensions of local ceramics.

In the path of Taiwan's contemporary ceramics development, there are different explorations of expression towards the understanding, making and experimenting of ceramic materials. There are not only the aspects of inherited traditions and contemporary influences from the West, but it also takes references from the context of contemporary and visual arts.

When one talks about the development of Taiwan ceramics, it usually refers to the *Chunichi Ceramics Exhibition* (中日現代陶藝家交流展) in 1981 as an important turning point. Before that time, the ceramics in Taiwan was mainly under the influence of Japan and artists who brought in the Chinese style from overseas; only a minority of artists, who have had the chance to be influenced by modern ceramics from the West, began to create unique artworks. In the 1980s, the society became more open and diverse. The new ceramic phase embarked in Taiwan due to the influences of western contemporary ceramics and the flourish of ceramic education; scholars, who have studied abroad, also have returned home and devoted themselves to art education.

There are various discussions and debates on the definition of contemporary ceramics in Taiwan and around the world. So far there is no solid answer to this question, one can only say that through the change of time and environment, the scope of contemporary ceramics have dramatically evolved; from the simple interaction between clay, fire and handwork, to the field expansion of ceramics, and from material experimentation to the internal manifestation of spirituality. In short, contemporary ceramics today is more diverse as ever. This paper examines the development of contemporary ceramics in Taiwan. It looks into the functional traditions and modern ceramics from the perspectives of ceramic history. In response to the expanding field of contemporary ceramic practice, it takes on the exhibition in 2016, *Infinite Forms: The Contemporary Ceramics in Taiwan*, as an example to focus on the artists' contemplation on materials, production and knowledge. In the book *Art in the Making: Artists and their Materials from the Studio to Crowdsourcing*, Glenn Adamson and Julia Bryan-Wilson claims that the materials and process behind these artworks are also a way to understand the social-economic context of today. In other words, to understand contemporary ceramics, one needs not only to discuss the evolvement of techniques, forms, materials, making methodologies, but also consider the impact of the economy and society, which eventually will create a significant impact to the motives, attitudes, uniqueness, and object value in ceramic practice.

## From Traditional Ceramics to Contemporary Ceramics

Ceramic art is one of the oldest types of art known in history, and is much intertwined with our daily lives. One can easily spot the traces of crafts in Taiwan from daily objects, such as bowls, plates, cups, pots, bottles, jars and many more. These objects not only reflect the life of the Taiwanese people, but also is the foundation of ceramic development. Located in the East of Asia, where frequent cultural exchanges within this region have existed since ancient times, Taiwan has created gorgeous ceramic art works. As an island, Taiwan has more advantage for exchange with its neighboring nations, which allowed the fusion of different cultures to emerge in ceramic art. As of today, Taiwanese ceramics has come to a brand new state, building on the foundation of both oriental and multi-cultural spirits to find its own voice.

Looking into the history of the contemporary ceramics development in Taiwan, the key period of transformation from functionality to non-functionality arose in the mid-1950s due to the boom of decorative ceramics (藝術陶瓷) or so called vintage reproduction ceramics (仿古陶瓷). Decorative ceramics/vintage reproduction ceramics are ceramic objects that incorporate the form and taste of the Guan ware (官窯) that originated from ancient China. Initially, most of the decorative ceramics were produced by the people who have migrated from China to Taiwan. By the 1960s, decorative ceramics became one of the most important ceramic productions in Taiwan.

In the 70s, the trend of ideas and innovation in functional ceramics emerged. Taiwan became aware of the existence of contemporary ceramics practice due to the influences by Japan and the West, which can be discovered in the changes of form and functional designs that bear the concept of the makers.

The establishment of ceramics began in the 70s, which also resulted in the rise of the ceramic education in Taiwan. Wu Rang-nung (吳讓農), for example, was the very first ceramic artist who established his own ceramic studio. Chiu Huan-tang (邱煥堂), who originally was a English-teaching professor, was exposed to ceramics during his studies in the U.S. He established the "Tao Ran Ceramics Studio" (陶然陶舍), and introduced Western contemporary ceramics to Taiwan. As an educator, Chiu emphasized on innovative forms and ideas in ceramics. Lin Pau-chia (林葆家) founded his studio "Tao Lin" (陶林) in 1974 and started a ceramic program that opened its doors to the public. Towards the end of the 70s, ceramicist such as Wu, Lin and Chiu, cultivated the following generations who continued the development

of ceramics through their own studio/classrooms. The first generation of ceramic artists was the main force behind the development of contemporary ceramics in Taiwan.

In 1981, the *Chunichi Ceramics Exhibition* blew the minds of the local artists. When faced with the sophisticated artworks from Japan, the Taiwanese ceramists, who dubbed themselves as the inheritors of the traditional Chinese ceramics, realized how behind they really were for the first time. The shock for them was beyond belief. People with breadth of vision even arranged a forum to profoundly discuss the impacts of this exhibition. They proposed concepts for improvement in practice, such as to focus on the selfness and era, the need to surpass practice that mimics the past and the significance of innovation. Back then, the cultural environment in Taiwan has just transitioned from the spirit of “Locality Embrace, Reality Awareness,” that originated from the Taiwan Nativist Literature controversy, in the 70s to the critical-realism tradition of The Taiwan New Literature movement, which occurred during the Japanese ruling period. The Taiwanese society was in turmoil: rapid economic developments, the lift of martial laws and the gradual establishment of a democratic society all constituted a background for the dramatic development of contemporary art practice.

Wu Rang-nung signed his works and broke the tradition that ceramics artists should remain anonymous. Wu’s works, which revealed his personal characteristics, was shown in his solo exhibition at the National Museum of History and played an important role in defining the position of ceramic art in the art world. Fan Zhen-jin (范振金), Sun Chao (孫超) and Wang Xiu-gong (王修功) all contributed to the exploration of glaze painting; Cai Rong-you (蔡榮祐) dedicated himself to the unique glazing effects on pottery; Li Mao-zong (李茂宗) made a significant breakthrough by creating non-functional artworks that challenged the traditional perceptive of pottery; Yang Yuan-tai (楊元太) and Chiu Huan-tang (邱煥堂) focused on the development of pure sculpture; Winnie Yang (楊文霓) extended her work from traditional vessel forms. Some of these ceramic pioneers have enabled their practice to stem from tradition; others were directly influenced by the modern ceramics from the West.

The ceramics in Taiwan became more diverse starting from the 80s. By the 90s, the transformation of functional ceramics and the development in sculptural ceramic practice had matured. At that time, ceramic art was affected by the installation art trend in contemporary art; therefore, you can discover art installations composed of

ceramic sculptures and the use of mix media in various works. In a society that has gradually opened its doors to freedom and diversity you can also find artworks that explores in political criticism, social awareness and locality.

### **The Expansion of the Ceramic Field**

The exploration of materials has been one of the key interests in the contemporary ceramic practice, yet the artist's internal exploration through clay has inspired artists to experiment with the possibilities in ceramics. As a result, we can come to a realization that creating art from perspectives of emphasizing clay or seeing clay as a choice of material are two very different attitudes which will lead to distinctive results. After the 90s, the mainstream promotion of ceramic education shifted from private studios to academia. Educators who studied abroad, such as Chang Ching-yuan (張清淵) who studied in the U.S., Liou Chen-chou (劉鎮洲) who studied in Japan, Liao Jui-chang (廖瑞章) who studied in Australia and more, returned to Taiwan and started their teaching careers. Ceramic practice is then allocated in the departments of fine arts, sculpture, craft and design, and applied arts. These department names indicate the context of ceramic art development in Taiwan, moreover extending the relative spectrum of ceramics. It reflects upon the international ceramic environment, for instance, the modern ceramics movement of the U.K. and the U.S., Japanese modern craft, applied arts definition proposal in Europe, etc. Ceramic practice is filled with diversity and debates, the collaborative yet counterbalancing concepts and materials results in creating a status possible for ceramic experimentations.

The 2016 exhibition, *Infinite Forms: The Contemporary Ceramics in Taiwan*, contextualized the complicated and ever-changing development of the Taiwanese contemporary ceramics. Taiwan's ceramic art field was influenced with the contemporary schools of thoughts at a later period, therefore, ceramic artists have higher thresholds to surpass as well as the overcoming the tradition and the techniques in ceramics. In recent years, the contemporary ceramic environment around the world have become more diversified, in which sculptural forms, conceptual ceramics, ceramic art that combines mix media and technology arts and so on, have become a popular trend.

#### **1. Speculating craft, design and space from a functional perspective**

The Arts and Crafts Movement in U.K. and the Mingei Movement in Japan both reflects back on the age of the mechanical reproduction, which summons the

traditional value to re-emphasize the spirit of current usage and aesthetics in our daily lives. These ideas are all built on the foundation of functional ceramics that reveals the charm of clay in our home space.

## 2. Discussing the greatness, smallness and surface exquisiteness from a sculptural perspective

The volumes of ceramic sculptures are the ultimate integration between art and craft. The greatness and smallness, roughness and fineness are aspects which challenges the spiritual/visual limits and pinnacles in practice.

## 3. Exploring ceramic material, form and concept

Whether it is the probing and surveying of ceramic media and materials, the experimentation of “Ceramix” (mix media ceramics), the shifting and apposition of the three and two dimensional forms or the deconstruction and reconstruction of object representation, these infinite explorations are all filled with the artists' interest in the field of ceramics.

## 4. Expression of internal/external, spiritual and terrain evoked by ceramic materials, which main purpose is to unearth the voice hidden deep within

In retrospect, the ceramics today is fused with cultural ideologies and interpretations; it is similar to the relationships like teaware with tea culture and tableware with food culture. The migration from the ceramic form explorations to infusing cultural spirits, new spirits and meanings are generated. Moreover, in the field of contemporary ceramic practice, interaction between intense labor and material, the representation of intuitive aesthetics, the importance of material and cross material experiments, cultural identity, pottery philosophy, ceramic painting, symbols and technique, the discussion on the purity of art practice and the connection with current social culture, along with the integration with digital art has influenced the various aspects in contemporary ceramics. As a result, under the influence of these diverse aspects opens up a new realm for contemporary ceramics to thrive.

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