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尼西黑陶: A STUDY OF TIBETAN BLACK POTTERY

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SPRING 2011

TO LU YUAN AND SAM...

...for a program that lets students explore new ways of learning;

TO THE NIXI POTTERS...

...for reminding me that clay makes me happy;

TO THE WORLD...

...for being so ridiculously interesting;

TO MY PARENTS...

...for teaching me to learn.

谢谢

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the contemporary production of traditional crafts through a close study of Tibetan black pottery. By considering the traditional process, materials, and techniques of Nixi pottery alongside contemporary changes in markets, resource availability, and production methods, this paper suggests possible directions for the development of traditional crafts. Ultimately, the paper challenges traditional distinctions between “arts” and “crafts,” suggesting the inherent mobility of crafts as their makers respond to changes in the social, political, and economic contexts of production.

I. INTRODUCTION

Scholars, philosophers, and artists have long since debated the meaning and significance of the word, “art.” The topic has been expounded on by classic figures such as Aristotle and Plato, as well as more contemporary leaders like Mao Zedong and Pat Buchanan. Modern students, teachers, and enthusiasts have not shied away from the debate, either, which leads many to conclude that, “To conjure up a universal definition of art to which all objects, whether they be literature, painting, sculpture, must conform is frightening.”¹ This impossible task is only complicated when the goal becomes the creation of a definition that excludes similar forms of visual or creative works that might more closely resemble a craft, which is intimately related to art.

When looking at published definitions of art and craft, there appears to be a distinction between the two. The distinction may be a scholarly interpretation of the relationship between art and craft, rendering it less relevant to the physical products that may be classified as one of the other, but it is, nonetheless, a viable way to differentiate between the two. According to

¹ Leslie Elizabeth Kreiner, “Toward a Definition of Art,” *Art Education* 43, no. 3(1993): 7-11.

several respected dictionaries, the difference is in the attitude that the producer brings to the production. *Craft* is defined as “an occupation or trade requiring manual dexterity”² or “...an activity involving skill in making things by hand...”,³ whereas *art* is defined by “creative imagination”⁴ and “works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power...”.⁵ These dictionaries suggest that a craft is a production or a process but that an art is the product of creativity and imagination.

Historically, crafts are representative of more primitive, utilitarian, and tactile wares. These often include pottery, textiles, and wood carvings, among other things. Art, which is often paired with the modifier *fine*, is considered to be more refined and sophisticated. These artifacts are generally appreciated for their intrinsic beauty and would include drawings, paintings, and sculpture. As Sally Markowitz writes in her article, “The Distinction between Art and Craft,” art is attributed a complexity, worth, and value that is denied to artifacts placed in the category of craft. She also writes that, “once classified as craft, a work has trouble counting not only as great art, but as any sort of art at all.”⁶ In other words, the art or craft classification can stagnate discussions of contemporary artifacts that may not adhere to the original considerations that defined their earlier status as either art or craft.

I suggest that the timeless classification of production processes as either art or craft is not productive. Arts and crafts are the product of their social, political, and economic contexts of production; changing these contexts means changing the product. In other words, just because a production method formerly yielded a craft does not mean that it will *only* yield a

² “Craft,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 25 May 2011.

³ “Craft,” Oxford Online Dictionary, 25 May 2011.

⁴ “Art,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 25 May 2011.

⁵ “Art,” Oxford Online Dictionary, 25 May 2011.

⁶ Sally J. Markowitz, “The Distinction Between Art and Craft,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 28 no. 1 (1994): 55-70.

craft. This is particularly evident when considering the contemporary production of traditional crafts, such as Tibetan black pottery. As I discuss below, the *craft* of black pottery is slowly transitioning into an art as the Tibetan potters respond to contemporary social, political, and economic influences.

II. VILLAGE BACKGROUND

Nixi is a small Tibetan village situated in the northwestern region of Yunnan province. The village is home to 160-170 families,⁷ and this small size means that people who live in Nixi know the extended families of everyone including their neighbors, the local monk, and that other person who lives down the road. Most families live in the valley, which is a steep descent down the side of the mountain from the mountain pass (Fig. 1). In the valley, traditional Tibetan compounds are scattered among fields and pastures where the women tend crops and livestock. Some people are transitioning out of the valley to live near the main road that cuts across the mountain above the village, although these tend to be younger families who are engaged in service jobs staffing the restaurants and convenience stores that developed in response to increasing automobile traffic across the mountain.⁸

Though the town is just 30 kilometers northwest of the famed paradisiacal town of Shangri-La, travelling to Nixi can be a bit of a trek. Road construction, narrow mountain passes, and traffic can extend the theoretically short jaunt into a multi-hour journey. As a result, there are generally few visitors who arrive in Nixi with the intention of seeing or studying the black pottery. Visitors most commonly arrive in Nixi by accident, having either stopped for a meal or been denied passage by an all-too-common traffic jam on their way to or from Shangri-La.

⁷ Jaxipicu, Personal Interview, 1 May 2011.

⁸ Junhua Guo, Personal Interview, 4 May 2011.

III. INTRODUCTION TO BLACK POTTERY

The most defining characteristic of Nixi is its pottery, with over fifty percent of Nixi families directly involved in the production of pottery.⁹ Though black pottery is also produced in other Tibetan villages, Nixi is best known among them because of its quality materials and craftsmanship.¹⁰ Nixi men have passed the craft to countless generations of sons, nephews, and grandsons,¹¹ preserving the traditional production methods of the craft for over 2000 years.¹² Despite these thousands of years of history and teaching, however, very few specifics are known about the historical production of black pottery. What is known about the history of black pottery has either been passed orally from generation to generation or extrapolated from close inspection of pottery shards found in the area. Because of this, there is far more extensive documentation on pottery from the past two generations than from the past two thousand years.

Black pottery earns its name from the deep that is produced from the unique firing process. The clay, which is a low-fire red earthenware, turns black on the surface and retains this color throughout its lifetime, even though the inner clay that was not exposed to the open flame remains a rusty brown color. The pieces are never glazed and rarely painted, as the black finish is both functional and elegant. The Nixi pots are traditionally very utilitarian, with popular forms including fire pots for use as primitive heaters, yak butter tea pots, large cauldrons for cooking rice and stew, and pitchers (Fig. 2-3). Because the pieces are hand-built,

⁹ Kesang, Personal Interview, 8 May 2011.

¹⁰ Ganling Zhang, Personal Interview, 16 May 2011.

¹¹ Women do not make pottery because they are busy with other things. They are generally charged with the task of tending the fields and livestock, as well as traditional homemaking chores like cooking and cleaning. Others justify women's abstention because of the physical difficulty associated with pottery production. Kesang, Personal Interview, 25 April 2011.

¹² The Mountain Institute, *Nixi Tibetan Black Clay*, brochure. Date unknown.

they are generally fairly sturdy, which increases the functionality and durability of the wares, many of which are passed down through generations.

Recently, interest in black pottery and Tibetan culture has fueled both government and non-government projects related to documentation and preservation of this craft for further study by future generations. That said, the future of Nixi pottery is very much unknown, largely due to the current social, political, and economic changes the village is facing. Before discussing these changes at greater length, however, I will first expand on the techniques that define the production of black pottery.

IV. BLACK POTTERY PRODUCTION

Although documentation on historical production of black pottery is usually limited to an estimated date of appearance,¹³ most human and written sources assert that contemporary artisans employ the same methods as their ancestors when working with clay.¹⁴ Artisans dig clay from the surrounding hills, carve their own tools from a variety of local woods, rely on traditional symbols for decoration, and pit fire the clay in a fairly uncontrolled environment. These techniques and activities are carried through generations with pride, as they are responsible for the essence of the craft.

THE CLAY

The clay is the most essential element of Nixi pottery. The clay body, which is a low-fire earthenware, is red in color until the firing, at which point the clay turns the characteristic rich

¹³ The Mountain Institute, *Nixi Tibetan Black Clay*, brochure. Date unknown.

This information is not necessarily consistent with all the published and understood numbers, all accounts that I have seen estimate the appearance of Nixi pottery to have been between 2,000 and 4,000 years ago.

¹⁴ Ganling Zhang and Jie Gu, *Nixi Tutao*, (Kunming: Yunnan People's Press, 2009).

black of Nixi pottery. This is the defining element of Nixi pottery and led to the coinage of the term, “black pottery,”¹⁵ which is the widely accepted name for the type of pottery created in the Nixi valley.

The Nixi clay literally comes from the bowels of the surrounding mountains. As one potter said when describing the necessity to live in Nixi to create pottery, “This clay is special, you can’t get it in other places.”¹⁶ This statement could not have been more accurate. The composition of the soil is different in other regions, which means that the clay dug and mixed in Nixi is unlike the clay dug and mixed in any other part of the world. That said, potters do not merely saunter over to the mountain to pull out some clay and then sit down to create a piece. Instead, the clay preparation process is one of difficult manual labor; it can take several hours to mix one batch of clay.¹⁷

The dry clay body is the product of three different substances, all of which are gathered from the hills that surround Nixi.¹⁸ The first element is a coarse red clay that can be scooped from the ground with one’s hands. This gives the clay its characteristic red color and is responsible for the plasticity of the clay. The second component is white sand. This clay is also easily retrieved from the hills surrounding Nixi, and the fine grain complements the coarseness of the red clay. This component gives the clay body the structural integrity to withstand the heat of the firing. Both of these components must be sifted through the fine mesh of wooden baskets to eliminate rocks, grass, and other debris before they can be mixed with the third component of the clay body.¹⁹

¹⁵Chinese: 黑陶. Pinyin: Hei(1)tao(2)

¹⁶ Jaxipicu, Personal Interview, 1 May 2011.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ganling Zhang and Jie Gu, *Nixi Tutao*, (Kunming: Yunnan People’s Press, 2009): 13-14.

¹⁹ Ibid., 16-17.

The final element, quartz, is as difficult to prepare as it is important to the clay.²⁰ This element is chipped from reserves throughout Nixi. The quartz is then heated above an open flame until it turns a gray or black color, at which point the stone is cooled in a bucket of water. After cooling, the quartz is pulverized; the resulting powder holds the clay together in firing. Without the quartz, the clay would easily crack during the firing process.

Each of these three elements is essential to the overall integrity of the clay body, although they are generally combined in seemingly imprecise manner. The coarse red clay and the white sand are combined in an approximate one-to-one ratio before being mixed with a rather minimal amount of the second white clay. The volumes are not measured, as the potters use sight and touch to evaluate the texture of the dry clay and gauge the ratio of the three clays.

Once mixed, the clay must be moistened so it will begin to resemble a pliable, plastic clay body. The potters begin by creating a mound of the dry clay on a slightly curved metal sheet; the metal protects the clay from infiltration by other dirt but provides a generous workspace for the physical labor that will ensue. The potters then create a well in the middle of the clay mound, which increases the surface area of the clay and speeds absorption when water is added (Fig. 4). After letting the dry clay absorb the water, the potters use metal hoes to break up the wet clumps and more thoroughly distribute the moisture (Fig. 5). The potters add small quantities of water over the course of this process, assessing their progress both visually and tactilely to achieve the necessary consistency. Once the correct consistency has been reached, the potters pile the clay into generous lumps, which are wrapped in plastic for storage.

Depending on the quantity of clay being made and the physical condition of the potters, the mixing process can take the better part of an hour or two. Though mixing the clay is a time

²⁰ Zhang and Gu, 16.

and labor intensive process, it creates a strong connection between the potter and the clay. This intimacy is also present in other aspects of the production process.

THE TECHNIQUES

The other most defining characteristic of Nixi pottery is the way in which potters form their wares. Instead of using a potter's wheel, Nixi potters work entirely by hand. They use a banding wheel (which recently replaced wooden platforms with slightly rounded bottoms to facilitate spinning) to maintain symmetry. The banding wheel aside, the Nixi potters' techniques are entirely reliant on a collection of handmade tools. These tools define the three general types of activities that take place when making a pot: Building, manipulating, and decorating. I will first discuss these techniques before discussing the features and construction of the tools.

Potters commonly build the body of a vessel with slabs, as this quickly adds size to the piece and provides a consistent thickness that can later be manipulated with other hand-building techniques. Using special tools, potters patiently yet relentlessly pound logs of clay into thin slabs that range in thickness from 3-8 millimeters (Fig. 6). These slabs are cut to the desired dimensions and rid of uneven edges before being connected to bases and to form a cylinder; the cylinder becomes the foundation of both simple and complex forms. This technique can be used with all different sizes of wares, from a small tea pot that fits in the palm of the hand to a large firepot that has to be carried by several people.

Though slab building is most common when initially creating the form of a vessel, coil construction is often used to augment size and shape in a more controlled manner. In coil construction, potters roll coils of varying thickness and use their hands to attach the coils to

each other or to slabs. Coils build the size of a pot more gradually, but careful attention has to be given to the attachment and thinning of the coils so they do not compromise the physical integrity of the pot.

Slab building and coil construction methods are enabled by a third technique, paddling, which is the most characteristic element of clay construction in Nixi. Water is rarely used to seal the seams created by slab building and coil construction because it threatens to dissolve the clay, so Nixi potters have developed another way to close seams, alter shapes, and increase the physical integrity of their handbuilt pots. Using handcarved tools that resemble spatulas, the Nixi potters tap the outside of the clay, while supporting the form from the inside, to seal seams (Fig. 7). This technique produces the characteristic tapping sound that one could consider the heartbeat of Nixi pottery.

The second group of techniques can be broadly classified as methods of manipulating the shape of the form created by the building techniques. The most important technique in this category is also paddling, as potters can transform a simple cylinder into a gracefully curved vase or generously bulbous pot through patient and intentional paddling (Fig. 8). Supporting their work from the inside with either a hand or a special tool, potters tap the outside of the clay with directional hits that actually move the clay.²¹ This is a difficult technique to master, as the paddling quickly throws off the symmetry of a piece and can easily cause the clay to crack. Upon mastery, however, Nixi potters wield their wooden spatulas with a confidence and finesse that is shared only with other craftspeople who have conquered a similarly difficult task.

Another common manipulation technique is mold-making. Molds in Nixi are quite simple and have the single purpose of helping potters achieve spherical and circular forms. Bowls of all sizes can be seen scattered around studios. When used in tandem with large slabs

²¹ Note that these taps are different from the constructional taps used to seal seams.

of clay, bowls provide a symmetrical foundation to which other slabs or coils can be added to obtain the desired form. This also allows consistency across the forms a potter makes, as pots are almost guaranteed to be of comparable size when built from the same foundation. There are also other uses as well, as the circular rims of bowls assist in the construction of well-fitted lids and circular bases of cylinders or vases. Other, less unique hand-building methods, such as darting and pinching, are also occasionally used to manipulate the form created by slab building and coil construction.

The final category of techniques is decoration. Though decoration has become more extravagant in recent years, the tools and techniques used to decorate pieces have been consistent for generations. Before decorating a piece, potters will smooth the outside of the form with a deer skin chamois. This thin piece of leather gives the clay a bit of a sheen and creates a more compressed surface into which other decorations are carved. Potters traditionally use their fingernails to carve simple bands, lines, and dashes around the base of a pot before adding more complicated designs, many of which are inspired by the eight auspicious symbols of Tibetan Buddhism.²² These designs are carved into the surface of the pot with simple line drawings with a variety of hand-carved wooden tools (Fig. 9). Plastic is often smoothed on the surface of the clay before carving so that the final product is smoother and lacks the crumbles and rough edges that often accompany carving. Before plastic was widely available, potters used thin cloth to protect their pieces (Fig. 10).

Another decorative element of black pottery is the inlay of porcelain shards. These additions, which are reclaimed from discarded porcelain and painstakingly carved into circular or petal shapes measuring about one centimeter in diameter, are placed in circular, diamond,

²² The eight auspicious symbols are the endless knot, the parasol, the fish, the conch shell, the lotus flower, the victory banner, the wheel, and the treasure vase.

and linear arrangements on the outside of pots. They are carefully paddled into the surface of the still-wet clay (Fig. 11) before being smoothed over with the deerskin chamois to make the porcelain flush with the red earthenware clay. The clay is then cleaned off the face of the porcelain shards once the pot has dried for several days. This is a particularly unique technique that is only possible because of the low-firing that involves minimal shrinkage of the clay form. In other types of firings, the clay gets so hot and shrinks as such a rate that static inlaid elements would either pop off the face of the clay or cause the clay to crack during the firing process.

A final technique that is often used to decorate pots, especially firepots and yak butter tea pots, are dragon heads. These heads are built up in relief form on the outside surface of the pot and are believed to bring luck and protection to the owner. To construct the relief, potters first attach triangular slabs to the outside of the pot and later add details with small coils and carving. This type of decoration was less popular in the past when pieces were purely utilitarian, as they complicated both production and use of the pot.

Though these techniques are varied in their execution, all of them are essential to what it means to make black pottery. Some are for building, some are for manipulation, and some are for decoration. The techniques complement each other, and all of them rely on carefully carved tools that have been used for generations to achieve the characteristic Nixi shapes and designs.

THE TOOLS

All of the aforementioned techniques are closely related to the handmade tools that have defined Nixi pottery for generations. Tool-making expertise, as with other elements of the craft, is passed from father to son, and many individuals take great pride in crafting their own

tools.²³ When making tools, craftsmen choose between the wood of three different trees that are found in the Nixi valley. The woods have different characteristics, so some are better for larger and more powerful tools while others are more appropriate for smaller and more delicate tools. When holding and using the tools, one can easily feel differences between the density, texture, and vivacity of the three types of wood. A fair amount of thought and care goes into the creation of these tools, which means the craft is as much about the tools as it is about the clay.

The most frequently used tool is the wooden paddle. Paddles come in different sizes and shapes, some of which have a very boxy rectangular head that is heavy and excellent for coarse construction, whereas others have very narrow triangular heads that taper to a fine point (Fig. 12). Regardless of the ultimate use of the tool, the spatulas all begin the same way: they are whittled from a thin block of wood according to the grain of the selected piece of wood. To make the characteristic spade-like shape, the maker first uses a finetooth saw to cut two notches perpendicular to the grain of the wood about one quarter of the way up the block. These notches act as barriers that allow the carver to strip away the wood from the remaining three quarters of the block with a chisel, gradually achieving a rough but narrow handle that intersects with a square or rectangular face (Fig. 13). The hard angles of the handle and face are then smoothed out first with the chisel and then with sandpaper (Fig. 14). When making these tools, the potter will often pause to test the balance and feel of the tool in his hand; the craft is reliant on the interaction between the potter, the paddle, and the clay, so the tool must *feel* right.

²³ Junhua Guo, Personal Interview, 30 April 2011.

There are also several other tools that are important to Nixi pottery, although none share the variety and utility of the wooden paddle. One such tool is a mallet.²⁴ This tool is made from the joint of a tree branch with a tree trunk; the joint is stripped of bark and whittled into a shape that rather resembles a bent arm. The thinner branch of the tree becomes the handle, while the trunk is carved into a cone-shape and becomes the head of the mallet. The acute angle between the handle and the head means that a potter can hold the handle and pound clay with either the round, flat base of the cone or the side of the mallet. This tool is commonly used in the first steps of slap production, as it is large and easily moves the clay around.

There is also a pair of tools that helps potters maintain the inner form of a pot while paddling the outside. When pressed against the inside of the form directly opposite the exterior paddling, these tools prevent the vessel from collapsing upon itself. Although these tools are carved from a single piece of wood, they have two parts: the first is a rounded head and the second is a handle. The most commonly used version of this tool closely resembles a mushroom. The potter holds what seems to be the stem of the mushroom while pressing the head of the mushroom against the interior curve of a pot. The other version could be described as a ball-on-stick. The rounded piece is fairly small and is at the end of a long and narrow arm, which allows potters to access the insides of pots with narrow openings. When used in tandem with the paddling technique, these tools allow potters to preserve the integrity of the vessel while thinning the walls and developing the shape.

A handful of other tools that is also very important to Nixi potters. Wooden knives, made in a very similar way as the wooden paddles, are surprisingly sharp and slice through wet clay with incredible ease. These tools are essential when dramatically changing the shape of a pot, such as when darting the cylindrical shape of the yak butter tea pot, as the tool allows

²⁴ China Intangible Cultural Heritage, *Nixi Pottery booklet*. Date unknown.

potters to cleanly cut the clay vessel. Carving tools are related to the wooden paddles and are generally fairly small in size, closely resembling flattened paintbrushes or small sticks. These tools, the forms of which have been around for thousands of years, inform the themes and decorations that potters carve into completed pieces. They are also made with a variety of woods selected for their different qualities. The most unique decorative tool is the bamboo pipe, which potters use to create circular designs on the wet clay. Though bamboo pipes are the traditional way to achieve these designs, small glass bottles and plastic pen bodies are also currently used.

Beyond these fairly traditional tools, the potters also make use of other potentially useful tools they might find or desire. As they are craftspeople, the first goal is a quality product, and tools are the means through which that product is achieved. In other words, there is a willingness to introduce other tools as needed. The potters certainly have a connection to their tools, however, as the tools are ultimately what allow the potters to produce their pieces.

TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS IN ACTION

To better explain the unity between the tools and techniques of the Nixi potters, I will briefly discuss the step-by-step process through which one of the simplest and most representative pots of black pottery, the yak butter tea canister, is made (Fig. 15).

Before construction begins, the potter wedges a modest-sized ball of clay. This process, which is similar to kneading bread, eliminates the air bubbles in the clay, increases the plasticity of the clay, and prepares the clay for use. After wedging, the potter separates out a fist-sized ball of clay. Using the mallet, he pounds this clay into an elliptical patty that is about half a centimeter thick. This becomes the base of the pot and is set aside on a wooden bat.

The potter then separates a softball-sized ball of clay from the already prepared lump. Rolling this between his hands and on the table, the potter produces a long, narrow “snake”. Using either a large wooden paddle or the mallet, he pounds the clay until it becomes a long, narrow slab that is about half a centimeter thick. The potter wets the paddle as needed to prevent sticking and is careful to achieve as consistent a thickness as possible. Next, using a wooden knife, the potter trims the edges of the flattened slab so it becomes a rectangle. He carefully lifts the rectangular slab and inverts it on the base so the two slabs are perpendicular and the edges of rectangular slab match up to form an oblong cylinder. The base extends past the cylinder to ensure that the seam can be adequately sealed.

To adhere the walls of the cylinder to the base, the potter first paddles at the base seam while holding the paddle to form an acute angle with the walls of the cylinder. This pushes the clay of the cylinder down into the base and begins to form a seam. The potter slowly spins the banding wheel to give equal attention to all angles of the piece, continuing this process with additional force as the seam becomes stronger. Eventually the paddle cuts through the clay of the base to the bat, and the excess clay is removed. At that point, the potter changes the angle of the paddle so that it is parallel to the walls of the cylinder. He paddles around the piece, paying close attention to the seam of the cylinder while always supporting the piece from the inside.

Once the seams are adequately sealed, the potter makes an incision on one of the ends of the oblong cylinder. The incision begins at the lip of the cylinder and extends at a 45 degree angle towards the tip of the ellipse, ending several centimeters from the base. The potter then folds the flap out while pushing the back piece in; these two pieces eventually overlap to form a shoe-like shape. When the proper shape is obtained, the potter cuts off the excess clay from the flap and paddles the seam smooth. The potter then wraps a small coil around the mouth of the

jar, which he paddles to create a short neck. The uneven lip of the neck is trimmed with a knife and smoothed with small wooden paddles. At this point, the basic form of the piece had been completed.

All that remain are the spout, handle, and decorations. To make the spout, the potter rolls a small piece of clay that tapers at the ends. He attaches this to the right-hand side of the vessel when looking directly at the nose. Using his fingers, the potter attaches the new coil to the lip of the pot and gradually pinches the coil into a spout shape until the spout is flush with the top of the pot. The potter finalizes the seams and paddles the body of the pot, accentuating the neck, perfecting the curve of the nose, and ensuring the symmetry of the pot.

The next step is to build a handle. The potter adds water to a small ball of clay, using wooden tools to mix the two in a chopping motion. When the clay is wet enough (it becomes extremely pliable and very sticky), the potter flattens it into a flared rectangular shape. This becomes the handle and is attached to the fairly vertical side of the pot, directly opposite the nose. The handle is flush with the lip of the pot and extends about three-quarters of the way down the side of the pot. Using small wooden tools, the potter ensures the integrity of the seams and shapes the handle, which roughly resembles a question mark. After the handle is attached, the potter smooths the entire pot with a wet chamois. Covering his thumbnail with the chamois, he carves bands around the mouth of the pot and down the sides of the handle, adding dashes and other decorative elements as desired.

Finally, the potter wraps the base of the pot in plastic so it does not dry too quickly and sets the pot aside. After several hours, he retrieves the pot and pounds on the underside of the bat to release the pot from its wooden platform. Using the ball-and-stick tool to support the

inside of the pot, the potter rounds the corners of the bottom to create a more fluid and unified form. The pot is allowed to dry for several days before it is fired.

THE FIRING

The firing process of the Nixi potters is practically synonymous with black pottery. A piece is ready to be fired after it has dried for several days, been burnished to a smooth red, and dried for several more days.²⁵ Potters allow pieces to accumulate before organizing a firing and often combine their pots with the pots of others to divide the work of tending the fire. Like clay mixing, the firing process seems fairly imprecise to the untrained eye. Because the potters are so intimately connected with the craft, they can accurately sense the temperature of the fire and readiness of the clay at different steps of the process.

The firing process can be broken down into a few different steps.²⁶ During the first step, which roughly translates into “cooking,” dried pots are placed in a circular arrangement around a fire. At this point, the pots are not in direct contact with the fire and are rather given a chance to warm up before the fire becomes more intense. This is an important step of the process because it allows the moisture of the greenware (unfired clay) to fully evaporate before the temperature increases; without this gradual increase in temperature, the greenware could more easily crack during the firing process.

The second and third steps are most characteristic of the firing process. The second step translates into English to mean, “to finish raw clay by firing.”²⁷ At this point, the fire is built up to completely cover the pots. Long logs are arranged in a tipi-like structure around the pots.

²⁵ Due to the short amount of time I spent in the village, I was unable to watch a firing. The information presented here was gathered through conversation and reference to other print resources, all of which are included in the bibliography.

²⁶ Zhang and Gu, 31-35.

²⁷ “Hongshao,” Nciku.com, 25 May 2011.

The previously small flames are stoked into a roaring fire, which is maintained for about an hour.

Once the fire has reached temperature, earth and sawdust are thrown onto the pots to extinguish the fire. This is the final step is smoking. The pots smolder underneath the sawdust for several hours. This process creates carbon, which is absorbed by the pots, changing their color from a rusty brown to a soft black.²⁸ Once the pots have cooled they are extracted from the burnt ash to be cleaned, burnished, and packed for transport to. The ash remains are left to reintegrate into the soil, and the potters return to their studios to repeat the process over again.

The firing process is particularly unique because it is a very low temperature firing. Most earthenware clays are fired to at least Cone 04, which is over 1000 degrees Celsius.²⁹ The Nixi pots, however, only reach a temperature of about 200 degrees Celsius. This means that the pots never even turn the red-hot color of burning coals and are far from their point of vitrification, which has been tested to be about 1000 degrees Celsius.³⁰ Though clay experts might say that the clay should be fired to a higher temperature to increase its ability to hold water and sustain high heats, the traditional process has yielded successful and functional pottery for thousands of years, and any changes from this process challenge the unique symbiotic relationship between the clay, the fire, and the function that define the craft.

V. CURRENT INFLUENCES IN NIXI

Even though Nixi potters still create their pots in a way that is consistent with traditional modes of production, the craft is at the nexus of a number of different social,

²⁸ Email Communication with Kathy Erteman.

²⁹ Bellevue College, "Firing Temperatures and Cone Equivalents," Web. 26 May 2011.

³⁰ Email Communication with Kathy Erteman.

political, and economic factors that are slowly changing the face of Nixi pottery. The future is very much unknown as a result of these changes; some potters adapt their wares to meet the demands of the changes while others resist the changes and maintain their traditional ways. Some might say that these changes are ushering in a positive transition from craft to art, while others might argue that the changes are challenging the rich history of traditional production. It is counterproductive to dismiss these changes as “all good” or “all bad” without closely considering the forces responsible for these changes. This, in turn, will allow a more accurate assessment of the impact these changes will have on Nixi pottery in the long run.

TOURISM

One of the largest changes in the northwestern region of Yunnan province is a recent spike in both national and international tourism. The Chinese government first recognized northwestern Yunnan Province as a tourist destination in the early 1990s.³¹ Since then, tourism has been on the rise. Tourists flock to Shangri-La to take in the colorful culture of the Tibetan minority group, and their travels often cause them to pass through Nixi on their way to other more glamorous destinations. Though visitors generally stumble upon Nixi by mistake, there is an increasing number of people who know of the town and craft, perhaps due in part to recent recognition by popular guidebooks like Lonely Planet's *China's Southwest*.³² Regardless of whether visitors to the region find themselves in Nixi, the tourism culture has had several noticeable effects on the production of pottery.

As tourist-friendly establishments pop up in places like Shangri-La, business owners are aware of the image they project to their patrons. Décor is often catered to reflect the ethnic

³¹ Jim Goodman, *Yunnan: China South of the Clouds*, (Hong Kong: Odyssey Books and Guides, 2009): 208.

³² Damian Harper, Tienlon Ho, Thomas Huhti, Korina Miller, and Elis Quinn, *China's Southwest*. (London: Lonely Planet, 2007): 293.

flare of the Tibetan minority, which means that Nixi pottery has a very functional role in the decoration of local haunts. Black clay hot pots sit outside restaurants on benches waiting for visitors to order a meal, while cafés and bars fend off the cold with Nixi firepots filled to the brim with red-hot coals (Fig. 16). Candlesticks made of the characteristic pottery of the Tibetan minority also light dim corners of restaurants and cafés. Even larger, business-oriented hotels incorporate pottery into their décor, as evidenced by the strong presence of the pottery in the classy hotels like The Shangri-La outside of the Old Town. These provide a new source of business for the Nixi potters, who can produce their wares on a slightly larger, slightly more professional scale.

There are several stores in Shangri-La that cater their goods to the tourist who may be interested in buying Nixi pottery. The oldest of these stores is in the southeastern part of Old Town. The store, whose bilingual sign displays the name, *Tibetan Clay Nixi Family* in English, is owned by a former Nixi resident who stocks the store with wares produced by his family members and well known potters from the village (Fig. 17). The store is a partial split level, with several stairs that lead the visitor from a modest entryway to a more expansive display room in back. Several bare bulbs light the room, which has the feel of a slightly-unkept antique shop due to the clutter, grunginess, and apparent boredom of the owner. Shelves line the walls of both the entryway and the display room and are filled with pots of fairly traditional forms and designs.

The owner stocks many large lidded pots that Nixi families use to make their famous chicken stew; these range from 30-50 cm in diameter. There are also a number of hot pots for sale, many of which are covered with a thin film of dust rarely disturbed by fingerprints or other evidence of interest in the wares. These two larger types of pots are the most numerous,

although there is also a generous collection of traditional fire pots, yak butter tea pots, tea canisters, and ash trays. Though this store stocks quality pottery and the owner proudly discussed the foreigners who come to look at the pieces, the store is not regularly open, and one must sometimes call the store owner directly to arrange a time, in Chinese, to arrange a visit.

In contrast to this slightly ho-hum establishment is Black Pottery Coffee, a small coffee shop located in the southeast part of Old Town. The bright and Western-friendly café was recently opened by a former Nixi resident and her American husband. The couple stocks the shop with goods produced by the woman's brother and uncle (Fig. 18) and occasionally takes groups to Nixi to "see the village life."³³

According to the owner of the café, tourists often express an interest in learning about the black pottery but are reluctant to buy pieces because of the hassle of transporting fragile goods back home. Because of this, the owner finds that she generally sells pieces that are sturdier and more compact, though these pieces are not necessarily the most representative forms of black pottery. She generally stocks small pigeon pots, miniature tea canisters and small figurines, which complement some of the larger, more traditional tea pots and cooking vessels she also sells. The owner also emphasizes the utility and durability of traditional Nixi pottery and seems to lament the transition from functional to decorative pots.

The adaptations that potters have made to accommodate the interests of potential consumers are not restricted to the wares sold at Black Pottery Coffee. These kinds of changes are also evident in the wares sold at a different type of shop run by an American woman. This shop, called the Shangri-La Handicraft Center, is elegantly designed and features high quality, handmade products of representative minority groups from the surrounding area. The

³³ Kesang, Personal Interview, 8 May 2011.

Handicraft Center aims to be a resource for both craftspeople and consumers, acting as the go-between in a mutually beneficial exchange of money and goods. Because of this, the shop operates under the premise of handicraft preservation and tries to inform consumers of the historical and contemporary production of local crafts.

The Nixi black pottery is included in this collection of goods, and visitors to the store are immediately greeted by a large case displaying a generous collection of Nixi pottery (Fig. 19). The store owner does not have personal ties to Nixi but rather relies on the staff of the store to find goods to sell in the store. The pots sold at the Handicraft Center are all fairly small. Miniature versions of larger pieces, candlesticks, and jewelry, none of which are particularly traditional forms, sell quite well.³⁴ To accompany the pieces sold in the store, the Handicraft Center also developed a short informative card on the history and production of black pottery. This illustrates the extent to which the center's patrons are interested in and aware of the influence their consumption has on the local economies and cultures.

If tourists are less interested in purchasing wares from a store, they can always make the trek to Nixi. These people arrive either on tour buses or in individual cars and generally spend their time touring the workshops on the side of the main road (Fig. 20). This practice has increased in popularity over the past five years, which enterprising businesspeople use to their advantage. There are several restaurants that serve traditional Nixi fare in Nixi pottery, and visitors can purchase Nixi wares from a number of small stores along the side of the road. In 2009, a workshop called *Thangdui Studio* opened on the side of the road, boasting a small show room and a studio in the same complex. Visitors to the studio can watch the potters at work and then buy their pottery. Lately, as a consequence of increased eco-tourism initiatives in the

³⁴ Carter Malik, Personal Interview, 8 May 2011.

area, there have also been more visitors who stay overnight in the village to study and live with the potters.

These four venues offer very different insights into the current markets available to Nixi potters. At *Tibetan Clay Nixi Family*, the largely traditional wares do not attract very much business. This is a place for pottery junkies who are interested in representative pieces and don't expect much conversation or enthusiasm. On the other hand, the products at both Black Pottery Coffee and the Shangri-La Handicraft Center are more suited to the aesthetics of both domestic and foreign tourists, which means these places generally do more business. The visits to Nixi are certainly the most engaged of the options, and there is potential for this to follow in the footsteps of sustainable tourism, as visitors to Nixi leave the village with a better understanding of the contemporary realities of the craft. All of these venues reflect some of the changes Nixi potters must consider when producing their pots, which will be discussed in further depth, below.

GOVERNMENT REGULATIONS

A second category of influences felt in Nixi fall under the category of government regulations. Despite the old adage that, "the mountains are high and the emperor is far away,"³⁵ Nixi is at the cusp of feeling the effects of a new government policy aimed at environmental protection. A number of informants mentioned that the government is going to begin restricting the amount of wood that people can harvest in the area.³⁶ It is not clear if this policy would only apply to the Nixi valley or if it would be implemented more broadly across the

³⁵ This proverb, which is often heard in the Southwestern province of the country, alludes to the belief that, in times past, more removed regions of the country were outside the influence of the emperor and would not be influenced by policies or regulations passed in the capital city.

³⁶ Carter Malik, Personal Interview, 24 April 2011. Kesang, Personal Interview, 30 April 2011. Junhua Guo, Personal Interview, 30 April 2011. Kathy Erteman, Personal Interview, 10 May 2011.

province or the country. The timeline of this policy is also unclear. That said, this could be a very real concern to Nixi residents and their allies. Restrictions on wood harvest would not only jeopardize the production of black pottery, which depends on lumber for firing, but could also change the daily lives of residents in this Tibetan village.

DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

A final example of current changing influences in Nixi is in the realm of development. Nixi pottery is an excellent example of a traditional handicraft that has been the focus of a number of different development initiatives. The groups involved in development programs in Nixi are both governmental and non-governmental in their design, but both have the apparent goal of handicraft preservation and development. These development initiatives have had a number of effects on contemporary production of pottery in Nixi, which I will discuss in the next section.

Government Initiatives

The government's initiatives in Nixi are fairly straightforward. The Chinese government recently recognized Nixi as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage site. Besides the posting of several plaques throughout the town (Fig. 21), this recognition also included the printing of a full-color brochure about the tools, materials, techniques, and history that define the craft. The brochure is somewhat sparse and has very little English, but it does give visitors to the town a nice take-away and is significantly better than having no literature about this unique craft.³⁷

³⁷ While I was in Nixi, I saw this brochure displayed in one of the workshops. It was later replaced with a brochure printed by The Mountain Institute, although I was not able to find out why this switch took place.

In 2009, the government followed up with Nixi by funding the research and publication of a full-color, 167-page book about Nixi pottery, titled *Nixi Tutao* (Nixi Clay). The government invited a group of researchers, including a professor from Jingdezhen Ceramics Institute and the director of an international artists' workshop with locations in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Beijing, and Jingdezhen, to spend about three weeks in Nixi researching the craft, interviewing artisans, and photographing every step of production.³⁸ According to one of the researchers, the government approached this publication with the explicit goal of cultural preservation. In other words the government had recognized Nixi as a special place with a special craft that is worth preserving.

The book, which took six months to finalize after the initial research was completed, is a through presentation of the historical and contemporary manifestations of this traditional craft. Information is presented through biographies of individual craftspeople, documentation of the step-by-step construction of common forms, discussions of the day-to-day activities of Nixi residents, and extensive photographs that document everything from ancient shards to the firing process. Unfortunately, only 1000 copies of the book were printed, so it can be difficult to find.³⁹ The book is not advertised very well, either, so even some people working on the business side of black pottery in Shangri-La had never heard of the book. Overall, however, this book is an excellent resources and a good example of a country deciding to recognize and preserve its national treasures.

³⁸ Ganling Zhang, Personal Interview, 16 May 2011.

³⁹ I was generously gifted a copy of the book by the artists I worked with in Nixi.

Non-Government Initiatives

Though the government's publication of *Nixi Tutao* represents domestic interest in cultural preservation, the most exhaustive projects in Nixi were the results of international organizations. The most significant project to date is a joint endeavor initiated by The Mountain Institute (TMI) and Aid to Artisans (ATA), two international NGOs that sponsor development programs throughout the world. TMI runs programs in the Andes, the Appalachians, and the Himalayans to "empower[] communities in the world's great mountain system through education, conservation, and sustainable development."⁴⁰ Under the category of the Himalayans, one particular initiative focuses on development in the Tibetan Plateau.⁴¹

The goal of the Tibet Plateau Development Program (TPDP) is discussed at length in the Final Performance Report submitted to USAID.⁴² In this document, the stated goal of the TPDP is to, "Strengthen Tibetan communities' capacity for meeting their socioeconomic needs, while conserving the environment and preserving their cultural heritage."⁴³ This goal is divided into three objectives. The first is increased and expanded incomes for rural communities,⁴⁴ the second is environmental conservation and resource management,⁴⁵ and the third is cultural preservation, with a particular focus on "culturally significant sites and artifacts, texts, and oral traditions."⁴⁶ The *Nixi Artisan Initiative*, as TMI refers to the project in Nixi, falls under this

⁴⁰ The Mountain Institute, "The Mountain Institute" TMI, 2011. Web.

⁴¹ I recently heard of the closing of the China office of TMI, which has yet to be confirmed directly by the program. Personal communication, Kathy Erteman.

⁴² Not dated, but probably from 2009 or 2010.

⁴³ Christopher La Due and Robert Davis, "Tibet Plateau Development Program: Final Performance Report," Submitted by *The Mountain Institute* to USAID. Date unknown. Web. Page 5.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 5. Excerpt. Full reads: "Expanded sustainable income generating opportunities for improved livelihoods in targeted rural communities through strengthened capacity of local Tibetan community organizations to plan, implement, and monitor development activities."

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 5. Excerpt. Full text reads: Improved environmental conservation and natural resource management through increased adoption of sustainable rangeland management and livestock development techniques."

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 5. Excerpt. Full text reads: "Increased capacity of Tibetans to preserve their unique cultural heritage through preservation, restoration or conservation of culturally significant sites and artifacts, texts, and oral

third category of cultural preservation⁴⁷ and used the combined forces of TMI, ATA, and USAID to accomplish its objective, ultimately winning the 2009 “US Department of State Citizen Exchange” Award.⁴⁸

ATA, which partnered with TMI in the Nixi Artisan Initiative, aims to, “create economic opportunities for artisan groups around the world where livelihoods, communities, and craft traditions are marginal or at risk.”⁴⁹ To this end, ATA identifies communities with strong handicraft cultures and researches ways to connect the traditional handicrafts with new markets. These strategies include teaching artisans about design, technique innovation, pricing, and packaging to appeal to a broader, international market.⁵⁰ These strategies, which were developed and applied to small communities worldwide, were essential components of the Nixi project. Though the specific details of the partnership between TMI and ATA are somewhat unclear,⁵¹ the two organizations collaborated in the development of a plan for development in Nixi.

The actual plan in Nixi encompassed a number of different initiatives, the collection of which is too broad for the scope of this paper. According to the Final Report, these initiatives included, but were not limited to, product innovation, credit access, English language training, a study tour, bilingual brochures, packaging and shipping options, and new market initiatives.

traditions; support for traditional artists; and creation of income generating opportunities for Tibetan artisans.”

⁴⁷ The Mountain Institute, “The Mountain Institute,” TMI, 2011. Web.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Aid to Artisans, “Aid to Artisans,” ATA, 2011. Web.

⁵⁰ Aid to Artisans, *Aid to Artisans Powerpoint*. Supplied through personal communication with Cindy Lang of ATA.

⁵¹ Staffing concerns at ATA meant the organization was not able to provide any specific documents regarding the Nixi program. The information that I am working with, with the exception of a powerpoint provided by Cindy Lang, is from the ATA website. TMI was also somewhat unreceptive to my inquiries for more information. After several emails with the CEO of the organization, communication ceased and I did not receive any information beyond that which is available online.

Interestingly, I only saw evidence of a few of these projects in the field.⁵² This discussion will focus those initiatives that seem to have the most lasting effects on the village.⁵³

One of the key initiatives that had a fairly large impact on the Nixi potters was a ten-day visit by a professional foreign potter. In 2007, ATA located Kathy Erteman, a potter based in New York, and invited her to study contemporary production in Nixi by evaluating current techniques, and compiling suggestions for further development.⁵⁴ According to Erteman and some of the local potters, the visit was success.

Erteman also played a fairly significant role in two other elements of the initiative: a cultural exchange tour to Jingdezhen and, later, to the United States. Using personal contacts and funding from USAID, Erteman designed a tour to Jingdezhen in June 2010 that introduced 17 Nixi potters to new techniques, aesthetics, and markets.⁵⁵ Together with firing experts from places like The Pottery Workshop, the Nixi potters conducted firing tests using electric kilns to evaluate the possibility of changing their firing method.⁵⁶ They also demonstrated their production techniques at a weekly market, had an exhibition of their work, and sold a number of pieces.⁵⁷ By visiting various tourist sites in Jingdezhen and discussing their work with other

⁵² Through this I mean to say that development is extremely complicated, researchers have to ask the right questions, and sometimes the recipients of projects are not as enthusiastic as the initiators. I do not know why I did not hear directly from the Nixi potters about the new kiln, which illustrates the intrinsic challenges of evaluating the effects of development work.

⁵³ This is a subjective evaluation made through careful consideration of the information I was able to gather in the field. This is by no means the only type of evaluation that should be done to gauge the overall effects of development initiatives in Nixi.

⁵⁴ Kathy Erteman, Personal Interview, 10 May 2011.

⁵⁵ The potters were initially hesitant to go to Jingdezhen, but it turned out that this was due to concerns about funding. Once the potters were assured that the trip would be free, many were interested in going. Kathy Erteman, Personal Interview, 10 May 2011.

⁵⁶ This is a fairly complicated topic, as the firing process is intrinsically linked to the production of black pottery. Changes to the firing method, as discussed in the content of this paper, can unintentionally change the appearance and durability of finished pieces.

⁵⁷ Joey, Personal Interview, 16 May 2011.

artists and professionals, the Nixi potters were exposed to new ways of thinking about their clay.

This spirit of cultural exchange was also present throughout the three-week U.S. tour that Erteman organized for three of the Nixi potters later in the summer of 2010.⁵⁸ The potters, together with Erteman, translators, and representatives from TMI and ATA, visited studios and workshops throughout the country. A sale at Greenwich House Pottery, in New York, was particularly successful, and the potters were floored by the amount of money they could make off of a single piece.⁵⁹ The potters also saw traditional Native American pieces and were impressed with the similarities between the two approaches to clay. According to Erteman, the Native American transition to a modern market is an excellent example of what can be done to preserve Nixi pottery, and the positive response of the Nixi potters to the aesthetics and success of the Native American pottery suggests that the path of the Native Americans may be viable in Nixi. The three Nixi potters who visited the United States were extremely enthusiastic about their experience and, upon returning to Nixi, shared pictures and stories with their families and other potters to broaden collective knowledge about other clay techniques.

Overall, TMI and ATA approached the question of cultural and handicraft preservation in Nixi from a variety of angles. By focusing on markets, materials, and techniques, they were able to propose a number of concrete suggestions for development. These, in combination with other initiatives like a new Chinese-English brochure on the pottery and a brief language instruction class for business owners, addressed a number of different features of the reality of pottery in Nixi and have had some lasting effects on pottery production.

⁵⁸ Unfortunately, challenges in getting passports and obtaining sufficient funding limited the number of potters who could travel to the United States. Kathy Erteman, Personal Interview, 10 May 2011.

⁵⁹ Kathy Erteman, Personal Interview, 10 May 2011.

Together, the development projects, government regulations, and increases in tourism represent social, political, and economic changes that are affecting Nixi. It is difficult to gauge the extent of the influences or the nature of the changes, but as I suggest below, the Nixi potters are adapting their wares to these changes, which seems to be causing the craft to transition into an art.

VI. EFFECTS OF CURRENT INFLUENCES IN NIXI

Objectively evaluating the nature of change is a difficult, if not impossible, task. The same goes when thinking about the relative costs and benefits of effects that some of these social, political, and economic considerations have on Nixi. That said, some discussion of the tangible outcomes of these changes is necessary. With this in mind, I will address a few thematic changes I have seen in Nixi and relate them, as best as possible, to the root causes of increased tourism, new government regulations, and international development projects.

CHANGING AESTHETICS

As previously discussed, the factor that influences the aesthetics of the pots most is tourism. Tourism brings in the most consumers, so potters are logically interested in conforming their pieces to the needs and desires of their visiting customers. Overall, this means that Nixi ware is transitioning from the traditional functional ware into new types of functional, or even purely decorative, pieces. One clear example of this is the size of wares traditionally produced. In the past, pieces were a functional size for the form. Now, however, potters are making smaller versions of traditional pieces and developing new, smaller forms that are more

practical for tourists to purchase. Other decorative pieces, like small clay animals and vases, are also commonly seen on the shelves of Nixi pottery shops (Fig. 22).

Some of the developing forms are clearly inspired by an increasingly foreign audience. One artisan, who has a business deal with a U.S. potter and exports his pieces to a store in New York, completes his orders by looking at a detailed and extensive book of designs that the U.S. store wants to stock. This book has pictures and descriptions of a variety of different pieces, some of which are obviously foreign (Fig. 23). One example is Christmas ornaments. One page of the book is filled with English and Chinese descriptions of the use, dimensions, and shapes of the ornaments so that the Tibetan potter can conform to the Western aesthetic and form. Another page does the same for napkin ring holders. When asked why he makes such Western pieces, the potter jokingly responded, "You Americans like these things!".⁶⁰

Other pieces, like intricately carved candle holders, are the result of foreign influence. This foreign influence is not necessarily a bad thing, as the potters are still using traditional techniques and materials; this merely represents a change in market that could have the consequence of sustaining the financial viability of this traditional craft.

Ultimately, the potters are just trying new things. Instead of relying on images from their memories, as they did in the past, some use reference books that have pictures of traditional Tibetan or Chinese symbols. The practice of using image references is fairly Western and illustrates one of the effects that the cultural exchange trip may have had on the aesthetic in Nixi. Potters also reference their own pieces when they are investigating new designs. One afternoon, in attempt to make a vase similar to a new design he had explored several weeks prior, a potter constantly referenced the finished piece; he was not familiar with the design and could not remember how to replicate the new design (Fig. 24). This represents a change in

⁶⁰ Jaxipicu, Personal Interview, 1 May 2011.

approach to the clay: potters are no longer merely drawing upon that which has been done before, but they are bringing new ideas and creativity to their pieces. In a way, they are beginning to think like artists instead of craftspeople.

These changes bring some challenges, however, as potters have to learn how to adapt new techniques to the clay. This is particularly well illustrated by a pot for sale at Black Pottery Coffee. The pot was a slim cylindrical vase, about thirty centimeters in height. The outside was carved with traditional line designs, but there was also a rather sizeable built-up dragon. The owner of the coffee shop pointed out the lopsided lip of the pot and suggested that maybe the clay dragon had been so heavy that it made the pot warp slightly in the firing process.⁶¹ This is an excellent example of a new technique that has not yet been perfected: the potters are exploring new techniques and, in the process, are pushing the limits of the clay body. With time, a balance will be reached, but until then it is definitely a process of discovery.

TENSIONS

There are definitely tensions developing as the older, more traditional markets and aesthetics give way to newer, more modern markets and aesthetics. According to the owner of Black Pottery Coffee, there is not a lot of social interaction between people who work mainly at the crossroad and those who work in individual studios in the valley.⁶² The distinction is that those who work at the crossroad are generally involved in more economically sustainable businesses and sell more pieces; the location means that passing visitors are more likely to stop to buy roadside wares than those produced down in the valley.

⁶¹ Kesang, Personal Interview, 8 May 2011.

⁶² Kesang, Personal Interview, 25 April 2011. Kathy Erteman, Personal Interview, 10 May 2011.

This tension seems to have been deepened by some of the recent development initiatives in the area. For example, TMI often references one of the studios at the crossroad by name but does not generally give as much information about the potters working out of their homes. The brochure developed by TMI about Nixi pottery also focuses on the studio founded by a prominent village figure, even though there are many other studios and household potters in the village.⁶³ This distinction is also clear when looking at the potters who went on the various cultural exchange tours, especially the one to the United States. The potters who went to the United States generally had better access to educational and monetary resources and had a more public presence in the village. The smaller scale potters, especially those located in their homes, tended to benefit less from the outside initiatives in Nixi.

The owner of Black Pottery Coffee vaguely alluded to this increasing division, commenting that, “some people have a presence, and they will get the help.”⁶⁴ The problem is that those who already have a presence generally have greater access to resources, whereas those with a lesser presence will continue to be shut out of the benefits of development. This represents one of the common questions of development initiatives, wherein those who design the programs must distinguish between shyness and apparent disinterest so that the benefits of development work are adequately distributed throughout a community.

Another more obvious tension developed in response to the question of building a kiln in the village. Because of environmental concerns related to wood consumption, there was an initiative to build a kiln for the village.⁶⁵ TMI discusses this endeavor at length in the Final Performance Report the organization submitted to USAID, toting the positive effects their cultural preservation efforts had on environmental protection in the area.

⁶³ The Mountain Institute, *Nixi Tibetan Black Clay*, brochure. Date unknown.

⁶⁴ Kesang, Personal Interview, 8 May 2011.

⁶⁵ La Due and Davis, 53.

That said, there were tensions associated with this project. Most of the tensions surrounded the question of sustainability: What kind of kiln, if any, is sustainable for the area? Some potters in Nixi were instantly enamored by the prospect of an electrical kiln,⁶⁶ but potters from Jingdezhen and the United States worried that this type of project would not be sustainable.⁶⁷ As the director of The Pottery Workshop said, “An electrical kiln is all well-and-good until it breaks. Then what? Where do they get cones? Where do they get shelves?”⁶⁸ The electric kiln also changed the look of the pottery; an oxidation firing, as opposed to a reduction firing, meant the pots did not turn the traditional soft black but rather remained a rusty brown.⁶⁹ The pots later shivered, which compromises the utility and beauty of the piece. The kiln question illustrates one of the ideological concerns of development: to what extent does a change in a central component of the production process change the craft, itself?⁷⁰

PRIDE IN THE CRAFT

A final, and indubitably positive, effect of these influences is that the Nixi potters have an elevated pride in their craft. The potters are responding to the increased attention they receive from visitors, the government, and international organizations. Professor Zhang, one of the authors of *Nixi Tutaο*, said that the potters were eager to be interviewed for the book and were excited that the government and outside experts had an interest in their craft.⁷¹ The potters who visited the United States were eager to share photos and stories with visitors and

⁶⁶ Kathy Erteman, Personal Interview, 10 May 2011.

⁶⁷ Ibid., Eric Kao, Personal Interview, 16 May 2011.

⁶⁸ Eric Kao, Personal Interview, 16 May 2011

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ I learned after leaving Nixi that TMI built a kiln before the project terminated in 2009. According to TMI literature, this kiln, which was built after a visit to a local pottery center, does not compromise the black color of Nixi pottery. I did not see the kiln myself or hear anyone talk about the kiln, but that does not necessarily mean that it is not in use. More research needs to be done on this topic.

⁷¹ Ganling Zhang, Personal interview, 16 May 2011

proudly displayed pieces they had purchased in the United States.⁷² As a result of these various changes, pottery is becoming a “glamorous” craft in the valley.⁷³ Potters can make decent livelihoods and participate in a generations-old tradition. The investment that younger generations have in the craft bodes well for the future. Though youth still leave the village to work or study, there is a healthy population of younger craftsmen who will likely carry the traditional craft into a modern world.

VII. THE FUTURE OF THE CRAFT

In a personal interview, one of the authors of the *Nixi Tutao* said that Nixi is at a crossroads. According to the author, the craft can either be protected and promoted in its traditional production, or it can be changed.⁷⁴ This is a difficult binary to work with, as the same influences that could be purported to dilute the traditional craft have also made the craft more sustainable in the current market. Because of this, it seems as though Nixi has already passed the crossroads. Instead of collectively choosing one path or the other, however, individuals have gone both directions. The crossroads was not divisive but rather developmental: some potters are certainly staying true to the traditional techniques, materials, and designs, while others are becoming more creative in their approach to clay.

One must only look to Jingdezhen, the porcelain capital of China, to see that multiple approaches to and attitudes about clay can be incorporated into a single place. Jingdezhen has been the center of porcelain since the Yuan Dynasty, which means that there has been no shortage of opportunities for change in the original Jingdezhen aesthetic. Trade introduced motifs from all over the world, new resources meant new ways to develop colorants and glazes,

⁷² Jaxipicu, Personal Interview, 1 May 2011.

⁷³ Kathy Erteman, Personal Interview, 10 May 2011.

⁷⁴ Ganling Zhang, Personal interview, 16 May 2011.

and new technology encouraged the development of new firing methods. These changes were all taken up into the whole that we now consider Chinese porcelain, even though those who lived contemporary to these changes may have considered them destructive and divisive.

These types changes are not only historical, as modern Jingdezhen is home to a burgeoning community of artists who bring ingenuity and creativity to their pieces. Young graduates from the local ceramics institutes number in the thousands every year, and they bring new ideas to the art market.⁷⁵ Organizations like The Pottery Workshop draw international artists to Jingdezhen, which creates opportunities for direct exchange in ideas about production techniques, materials, and aesthetics. Chinese artists and Western artists, both professional and student, learn from and with each other.

It must be noted that this exchange of ideas does not threaten the established traditional production; the old ways have not died out. There are still people who make pieces in the tradition of the ancient wares and work with a team of craftspeople to complete the various steps required to make a pot. Those craftspeople, who focus on traditional methods of production, now work in the same city as artists, who approach the clay with a new creativity and imagination (Fig. 25-26).

The same dynamic between craftspeople and artists can be seen in Nixi, which suggests that the classification of a production process as either craft or art is not sufficient. Although there is a distinction between art and craft, the two are not mutually exclusive; just because one set of materials and methods produces a craft does not mean that the same set of materials and methods cannot produce an art.

Nixi pottery has undergone great changes that have caused it to transition from a merely traditional production method to one of modern creativity and ingenuity. Tourism

⁷⁵ Patrick Coughlin, Personal Interview, 16 May 2011.

brings new markets to Nixi, so the Nixi potters have developed ways to incorporate new designs and forms with their traditional production methods. The same can be said of the cultural exchange tours to Jingdezhen and the United States, when the potters were exposed to new approaches to clay and production. These new ideas are not taking away from the Nixi pottery tradition but are rather broadening production and making the craft more sustainable.

In other words, the Nixi potters are not stuck in a static mode of production. They are exploring the capabilities of the materials they work with, and they are discovering the limits of their craft. The creativity and ingenuity associated with Nixi pottery places it in a new category: no longer is the black pottery of the Tibetan plateau merely a craft, but it is also an art. Nixi potters, previously considered simple craftspeople, now approach their clay with the attitude and creativity of modern artists.

APPENDIX A: PHOTOS

Note: All photos were taken by the author with prior permission from the subjects.



Figure 1: *View of the Nixi valley from the mountain road.*



Figure 2: Yak Butter Tea Pots.



Figure 3: A collection of traditional black pottery pieces.



Figure 4: Potters add water to the dry clay.



Figure 5: Potters mix water into the clay with a metal hoe.



Figure 6: A potter thins a slab of clay with a mallet tool.



Figure 7: A potter seals the seam of a slab recently attached to the rounded base of a firepot.



Figure 8: A potter supports the clay with a finger while sealing the top of a bottle form with a paddle.



Figure 9: Careful attention is given to the decorative features of the pot.



Figure 10: A potter protects the clay with a layer of plastic while carving designs on the side of a rooster pot.



Figure 11: A potter porcelain pieces into the clay while supporting the form from the inside.



Figure 12: A chisel is used to thin and smooth the handle of a paddle.



Figure 13: Sandpaper gives wooden tools their smoothness.



Figure 14: A collection of wooden tools waiting to be sharpened and reformed.



Figure 15: Two yak butter tea canisters made by the author with instruction from practiced potters.



Figure 16: Black pottery firepots keep away the chill at restaurants in Shangri-La.



Figure 17: Smaller, decorative forms, like these animals, are increasingly common.



Figure 18: The display area of the Tibetan Clay Nixi Family store in Shangri-La.



Figure 19: Pottery display at Black Pottery Coffee in Shangri-La.



Figure 20: Black pottery display at the Shangri-La Handicraft Center.



Figure 21: A black pottery workshop on the side of the main road that passes above Nixi.



Figure 22: Certificates and awards are displayed in the showroom of Tangdui Studio, Nixi.



Figure 23: A potter consults a piece for consistency in form and design.



Figure 24: This reference book helps potters create unfamiliar forms, like napkin ring holders.



Figure 25: Potters in Jingdezhen still use traditional production methods.



Figure 26: Young potters in Jingdezhen are the products of cultural exchange and new ideas.

APPENDIX B: METHODOLOGY

I gathered the majority of my information through observation. Over the course of my eight days in Nixi, I spent over forty hours observing the production of a variety of both traditional and untraditional pottery wares, and I learned a great deal about traditional forms, the production process, and standard techniques. Observation was the most important while I was in Jingdezhen, as I visited various production areas and watched interactions between foreigners and locals, students and professionals, and innovators and traditionalists over the course of the week I spent in the city. Because pottery is a very visual subject, I was able to learn a lot from a number of places, including museums, about the craft.

I also conducted a number of interviews, both formal and informal, over the course of the month. I did not use translators when working with Chinese-speaking informants, but rather prepared vocabulary lists and developed questions before the interviews. My subjects were extremely happy to slow down and repeat things, catering their responses to my Chinese language level. Sometimes I wondered if answers were over-simplified to accommodate my language ability, but I think that information was generally fairly accurate. I did use a translator for one interview in Jingdezhen, although he assisted mostly with the translation of key words from Chinese to English so I could understand my informant's responses; the rest of the interview was in Chinese. In Nixi, most of my informants spoke Chinese, although some spoke only Tibetan, in which case one of the other villagers present would translate into Chinese. Overall, I was extremely pleased with my ability to operate in Chinese over the course of this project, and I developed a fairly specialized vocabulary.

I also kept a detailed log of my activities and progress. In one word document I recorded my activities, my thoughts about my progress, and a to-do list on daily basis. In another word

document I typed detailed accounts of my interviews and observations. I found that this strategy helped me remember information and build off of themes and ideas I discovered in previous days. This kept me organized and focused over the four weeks of independent study and travel and meant that I was thinking about my ISP every day.

If I could go back, there are a couple of things about my methods that I might do differently. First, I would probably try to do more background research on my destinations before I arrived. After returning from Nixi I discovered a fair amount of information that would have been nice to have seen before I went into the field. That said, by entering the field without much background information allowed me to draw my own conclusions about the things I saw, which ultimately worked just fine. Another thing I would try to work on is my reluctance to formally interview people. At the beginning of the project I was very shy about asking people for interviews, as I did not want to inconvenience anyone. As the project progressed I became more comfortable asking people questions and discovered that people often enjoy talking about topics they are passionate about. Though my research could have yielded more thorough results had I done more prior research and initiated more interviews, I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to discover these areas for improvement myself; I learned a lot in the field by just “having a go” at the whole thing.

APPENDIX C: ITINERARY AND TRAVEL

Over the course of the ISP I travelled across the country by plane, train, and car to a variety of different places. My travel was fairly extensive because of my desire to go to Jingdezhen, and my transportation costs were by far the largest expenditure of the trip. For inter-city travel, I generally chose the cheapest mode of transportation possible; actual prices

were consistently higher (by 20-100 RMB) than rates published online. For intra-city transportation I relied on public transportation (metro and buses) and used some cabs (particularly while in Jingdezhen). I also walked a lot, which was a great way to see different parts of the areas I was in. Despite the amount of travel I had over the course of the month, I did not encounter any transportation-related hitches; everything was easy to arrange and connected smoothly.

April 28-30	Zhongdian International Youth Hostel, 30 RMB/night Minibus Zhongdian-Nixi: 20 RMB
April 30-May 7	Nixi Homestay, 60 RMB/day Minibus Nixi to Zhongdian: 20 RMB
May 7-8	Zhongdian International Youth Hostel: 30 RMB/night Overnight bus to Kunming: 205 RMB
May 9-11:	Kunming Dorms: 25 RMB/night Plane to Shanghai: 1300 RMB
May 11-14:	Shanghai Blue Mountain Youth Hostel: 45-55 RMB/night Overnight bus to Jingdezhen: 200 RMB
May 15- 22:	Jingdezhen International Youth Hostel: 35 RMB/night Train to Kunming: 642 RMB
May 24-28:	Kunming Dorms: 25 RMB/night

APPENDIX D: CONTACTS

Over the course of my project, I found that people and personal connections were what made my research interesting, enjoyable, and productive. By following up with people, keeping track of their contact information, and always asking for help when I thought someone who could be helpful, I found that I was able to accomplish a lot of things with my project. Below are some of the people who were available to me as resources. I had personal interactions with all but a couple of them.

Name	Location	Assets	Contact info
Da Dakpa	Zhongdian/ Shangri-La	Connected to Nixi potter; Tibetan; speaks English; knows a lot of people	13988778781 dkelden@hotmail.com
Xiao Dakpa	Zhongdian/ Shangri-La	Tibetan; Knows a lot of people; speaks English; definitely wants to be helpful	13988786856
Carter Malik	Zhongdian/ Shangri-La	Knows potters and fair trade information; genuine interest in crafts	13601257471 Cartermalik1@yahoo.com
Christine Shives	Zhongdian/ Shangri-La	Knows the community; American	15925467097 christineshives@yahoo.com
Kailah Weiss- Weinberg	Zhongdian/ Shangri-La	Knows the community; from Wisconsin; knows Katrina who is friends with Rachael Edwards; knows an artist in Beijing (follow up!)	15284558097 Kailah.w.w@gmail.com www.etti.org.cn
Gelie	Zhongdian/ Shangri-La	Works at Cultural Center- knows the community; speaks English?; connection to the arts—Thangka Painting	13988743312
Lobsang Warqual	Zhongdian/ Shangri-La	Knows English; lives in the community; has family in MN; knows Nixi potter in town	13038603208
Guo Junhua	Nixi	Lives in Nixi; knows the craft; knows people in the town; host family	13988727968
Kesang	Zhongdian/ Shangri-La	Knows English; grew up in Nixi; has family in Nixi; knows a lot about black pottery; owns Black Pottery Coffee;	Black Pottery Coffee

		husband is American (Rus)	
Kathy Erteman	New York	American; knows the potters; knows the project; knows the difficulties of working in the language, with Chinese people; told me she's always available for information!	info@kathyerteman.com
Sunnuo	Shangri-la (mostly)	Speaks English/Chinese; knows the Nixi potters; works for TMI; eager to meet; Shangri-la (tricky)	Sunnuo2@sina.com
Maggie (?)	Jingdezhen	Coordinates programs at The Pottery Workshop; eager to introduce me to TPW; speaks English	Infojdz@potteryworkshop.com.cn 13319371193
Bob Davis	U.S.	CEO of The Mountain Institute	bdavis@mountain.org
Jackson Li	Jingdezhen	Runs Sanbao; speaks English; knows the pottery scene	chinaxchange@hotmail.com 07988497505
Wenyng (Wendy) Li	Jingdezhen	Works at Sanbao; speaks English; knows the area and the pottery scene	Wenyng2002@hotmail.com 13907983391
Eric Kao	Jingdezhen	Director of The Pottery Workshop; Chinese American; knows the area; worked with Nixi potters and Kathy	eric@potteryworkshop.com.cn 1530 7089 143
Caroline Cheng	Jingdezhen	In-and-out of Jingdezhen; Deputy Director of TPW	None available
The Pottery Workshop	Jingdezhen	Just generally a really great, foreign-friendly resource in Jingdezhen	The Sculpture Factory
Professor Zhang	Jingdezhen	Professor at Jingdezhen Ceramics Institute; went to Nixi to research the Nixi pottery book; eager to talk to a student, especially in Chinese; does not speak English	None available (contacted through hostel owner)
Youth hostel Owner	Jingdezhen	Speaks some English; knows pottery stuff; knows people in Jingdezhen (Professor Zhang is a colleague)	
Joey	Jingdezhen	Chinese; Went to school in the U.S.; speaks English; potter (has a studio); toured with the Nixi potters	15575872718

APPENDIX E: PERSONAL ACCOUNT

I began the ISP process extremely reluctantly. I had never traveled independently in a foreign country before, so I was worried that I would be overwhelmed with the whole experience. Though I had studied Chinese in my college for two years before the intensive language program in Kunming, I was fairly unsure of my abilities to communicate effectively by myself. These two realities meant that I was scared out of my mind when I finally went to the minibus corral in Zhongdian to negotiate a ride to Nixi; I had no idea what I was getting myself into and longed for the security and peace of mind of a month of language study.

My desire to be in Kunming studying Chinese disappeared after the first day, however. I was graciously met by a group of potters when I got off the bus in Nixi, I was welcomed into a Tibetan home, and my interests in pottery were quickly met with enthusiasm from the people with whom I interacted. I found myself loving every day and (almost) every aspect of independent travel. I discovered in myself an initiative and sense of adventure that I had not anticipated, and this made the execution of my project far more pleasant than I had anticipated it to be.

The fact that I got to spend almost three weeks studying pottery also made the project extremely enjoyable. I love clay, pottery, and all things associated with clay and pottery, so I could not have been more thrilled than to have had the opportunity to hang out with potters while studying their craft. Just like the Nixi potters who traveled to Jingdezhen and the U.S., discovered new ways of approaching clay, which could have unforeseen influences on the body of work I will be creating for my senior thesis.

There were occasional bumps along the road, but there was nothing earth-shattering that made me reconsider my decision to do an ISP. As expected, there were some language

mishaps, but I was generally able to convey my thoughts to Chinese-speakers, and I was perpetually impressed by my ability to actually have a casual conversation with an artisan in Nixi or a shopkeeper in Jingdezhen. Some of the travel experiences, such as the 33-hour train ride from Jingdezhen to Kunming, were speckled with frustrations (like a small child who thought it would be fun to hit me with hangers and rip pages out of my novel), but none of these took away from the overall enjoyment I had throughout the several weeks of my ISP period. For someone who didn't think she could do an ISP, I would say that is a success.

Overall, the ISP was unexpectedly wonderful. When I left Nixi, I felt extremely sad. In the context of the village I had discovered interesting things about myself and tested my personal boundaries. I met incredibly kind people and felt like I had the opportunity to actually build relationships with Chinese people, which I had not yet felt before. I had a glimpse of a world in which I could live, and for the first time I considered pursuing opportunities that would allow me to continue to independent research after graduating from college. Though I am not convinced that the life of a field researcher is for me, I have proven to myself that I can do it, which is far more than I knew when I got off the plane in Kunming four months ago.

APPENDIX F: FUTURE ISP TOPICS

- The role of development in small towns. Who initiates development projects? Who benefits from development projects? How are the outcomes of development projects evaluated? Nixi or another small village could be a case study for this question.
- Comparative study of Tibetan pottery and the pottery of other minority groups. (This could also be done with other handicrafts.)
- Study of the business models of handicraft stores in Shangri-La. How do these compare to the business models of other shops? What is the customer base? How do the wares compare to other shops? Are the stores profitable?
- The impact of road construction on small village towns.
- Flight of youth from villages. Where do they go? Why? Do they come back?
- Close study of the actual effects of TMI's initiatives in Nixi.

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