



Yixing, The Father of Tea

By Wu De (Aaron Fisher)

There is perhaps no art form that has married itself to tea and tea culture more passionately than the Purple-sand teapots from Yixing, the “Pottery City”. The teapots made in Yixing often capture all the elegance and simplicity of the tea ceremony, while at the same time hinting ever so slightly at the transcendence it can inspire. When artists master the craft, Yixing teapots can encourage us to find the harmony we are seeking when we sit for tea, as they bring with them the spirit of the Earth, the art of tea and the simplicity of true living. The best teapots are the ones where the decoration is so subtle, beckoning almost, as one holds them in the palm.

There is no ceramic art in the world quite like Yixing Purple-sand teapots, for they aren’t just pieces of art meant to sit on the shelf and be admired. The beauty of tea art is only expressed properly as a living art. The pots want to be used. They develop a soft, silky sheen over time the more they find themselves in the company of good leaves and water—becoming more and more beautiful as they are used. In fact, finding a way to balance the elegance and function of a teapot is what

mastery of Yixing art is all about. It is not enough that an Yixing teapot be inspiring to look at, for it must also improve our tea as well as summon a second glance even when it sits on a shelf amongst others. Furthermore, the art of Yixing isn’t just about the sense of sight; it involves all the senses. We evaluate and appreciate these teapots by touching them, feeling their texture and form; we even ding them to hear the sound they make. Thus, the space around and between the teapots becomes just as important to the composition of the piece—the balance between the button and lid, the mouth, spout, the handle and base are all important features when crafting an Yixing teapot.

Like the favorite analogy of our eldest teacher Lao Tzu, the usefulness of the teapot also lies in its space—the tea flows *through* it, just as the Dao flows through us when we are clean and pure. And then, when we brew our teas, the improvement in aroma and flavor will help us judge our friendship with any given pot. Because of this combination of function and design, Yixing teapots have achieved a legacy of their own, finding a central place in the story of tea.

During most of the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE) tea was boiled in cauldrons with other ingredients and then ladled out. The tea itself was compressed into cakes that were then ground into powder before being thrown into the cauldron. Later, Lu Yu promoted the drinking of just the pure Leaf, calling the liquor mixed with fruits or flowers “gutter water.”

In the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279 CE) the real art of tea would begin in the monasteries, as the monks sought to refine their peacefulness and connection to tea, by crafting bowls, whisks, grinders and other implements that lent tea preparation an artistic expression like never before. For the first time, the tea ceremony was being expressed aesthetically, attracting more people over time.

During these two dynasties, tea would find its way to the royal court and beyond to the literati, who of course took to the new art with all the verve that such artists, authors and scholars could bring to a passion that incorporated their daily habits and deepest inspirations both. They, too, wanted to express the peace and serenity they had found on the mountain while visiting the monastery, to recapture it in some measure each day while they were at home. They wrote poems, calligraphy, books, painted pictures and of course made ceramics, like Song bowls to hold their beautifully whisked teas.

In the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644 CE) the emperor would ban the use of powdered teas and all the art surrounding it would slowly die in China, though it was fortunately preserved, adapted and further explored in Japan. Instead, he promoted the use of whole-leaf teas, like the ancestors of long ago. All of the artistic intention was shifted towards this new form of tea preparation. Even before that, the town of Yixing, which was then called Yan Xian, was a pottery town, making all kinds of cheap household items for commoners, like jugs, plates, etc. It would very soon change to the teapot capital of the world, though.

According to an ancient legend, there was a monk named Ding Shu who walked through the town shouting, “Honor and Virtue for sale!” They say that all the villagers laughed at him, thinking him mad until a few weeks later when he changed his pitch to, “Riches for sale!” Some people then followed him and he led them to the iron-rich deposits of clay ore that would make the town famous for all the centuries to come.

During the reign of the Ming Emperor Zheng De (1505 – 1521 CE), Yixing teapots were elevated into an art form. Historians often attribute these changes to the now-legendary figure of Gong Chuan. Not much is

known about Gong Chuan, as he was but the humble servant of a government officer. There are many versions of his story, though, and most of them involve some kind of trip where he accompanied his master to a neighboring city. In his free time, he visited the Jin Sha Temple and drank tea with a monk there. The monk was an artist and had crafted all his teaware himself. Gong Chuan was amazed at the elegance and serenity expressed in the work and asked the monk to teach him. Over the coming years, Gong Chuan would return whenever he got the chance and try his hand at making the rustic teapots, using only his hand and a wooden spoon to form them. He had a natural affinity for clay, and soon started producing excellent teapots that were not only beautiful, but produced better tea. He gifted one to his master, who was also a tea lover. As his master shared tea with friends and family, they would all ask where he got the special teapot. In no time, all the government officials, artists and scholars in the town were feverishly collecting Gong Chuan’s teapots. He became famous, quickly earning enough to support himself. His master gladly released him from service and he devoted the rest of his life to making teapots that expressed his understanding of Cha Dao. From that point on, the art of Purple-sand teapots evolved and grew, spreading throughout China and beyond.

A big part of what makes Yixing teaware so special is the clay itself. The Chinese were master potters long before many countries, having developed stoneware and porcelain many centuries earlier. The clay used in Yixing teapots is mined from the local Yellow Dragon, Zhao Zuang, Shao Mei Yao and Hu Fu mountains and their surroundings, for it, too, is a stoneware. Because the clay is naturally lead-free, it can be used for food and drink even after the initial firing, without the need for a glaze. Without glaze, the clay remains porous and sand-like.

“Zisha” or “Purple-sand” clay is composed of quartz, isinglass, kaolinite, mica, hematite, iron and several other trace elements. It is fired at a temperature of around 1100 -1800 degrees, and the quartz and isinglass create what potters call a “double pore structure”, which ultimately was the ring that sealed its marriage to tea. Examination under a microscope allows one to see the deep chambers of pores that actually run from inside to outside in an Yixing teapot. Because of that, the oils in the tea are absorbed into the teapot itself and over time the pot gets “seasoned”, as tea lovers say. In other words, it absorbs the fragrance and depth of all the teas it has met in its time. Also, these pours allow the pot to breathe.



Qing Dynasty *zisha zhu lun zu*



Qing Dynasty *zhuni*

The composite structure of Yixing clay makes it resistant to radical temperature changes, so that teapots can be covered with boiling water even in the cold of winter; and what could be a more elegant image than winter-plums covered in a light snow, perhaps pine-covered mountains in the distance beyond a frozen pond, as seen over the rim of a steaming Yixing pot?

After the clay is mined it looks like a block of stone, with a flaky consistency. It is then allowed to rest in the air for weeks or even years, called “corrosion”, as it breaks down into small soy bean sized pebbles. These small chunks are then ground into sand and allowed to ferment in water for a period. The duration depends on the ore and the master overseeing the process, though most of the old masters I’ve met seemed to have a “the longer the better” philosophy when it comes to airing/storing the ore. More water and sifting produce smoother clay, whereas leaving more sand creates textured clay that is often more porous when fired. Sifters of various sizes are used to create these different textures. Then, after the clay is slabbed it is pounded with a large wooden mallet, sometimes blending colors in this way, until the putty is of the desired color and consistency.

The variety of colors in Yixing relate to where in the strata the ore was mined, how long it was allowed to ferment in air over time, as well as the firing temperature. Hotter temperatures will often produce darker purple or reddish-maroon colors depending on the clay. Traditionally, the clay was categorized as purple (*zheni*), red (*hongni*), green (*liuni*), black (*heini*) or brown/yellow (*huangni*). Some scholars and Yixing collectors, however, suggest that the clays should be classified by what mountain they were mined from, rather than the color. This is because there have really been several different systems presented by different authors through time, each one separating the clays in slightly different ways.

In recent years, there has been an addition of a greater variety of colors, mostly due to natural or man-made additives, like iron for example. Unfortunately, as the original ore has become more difficult to find, synthetic pots as well as those constructed with clay from other regions have both begun to be produced in larger quantities.

One kind of red clay pots, especially antique ones, are the most expensive because this ore is virtually non-existent in its natural form anymore. Furthermore, the greater shrinkage and more delicate consistency of these “*Zhuni*” pots make the success rate lower, as many won’t match their lid or get broken in the process. All *Zhuni* pots are at least in part blended with some other kind of clay to increase their stability.

Yixing clay has almost perfect plasticity, and can be molded or cast without being sticky or difficult to work. However, due to the fact that it isn’t naturally soft, it is rarely ever wheel-thrown. In fact, a unique tradition of handbuilding ceramics has arisen in Yixing, including the characteristic techniques many authors translate as “luting” and “padding”. This practice of building Yixing pots by hand has also led, over the years, to the creation of numerous unique tools, crafted from horn, wood, bamboo and even stone, and often by the artists themselves.

Furthering its connection to tea and teapots, Yixing clay has one of the lowest shrinkage rates of any clay, on average ten to twenty-five percent from production to firing, depending on the type of clay, the processing and the temperature of the kiln. This allows for the perfect fit of the lid and pot, as well as the porous texture that makes them so great for brewing tea. Moreover, the quartz and other metallic elements in the clay itself lend it a natural, simple color. The great potter Gao Zhuang once said that what he loved most about Yixing art was that the appearance couldn’t show its value, but rather its nature.

The Earth couldn’t have dreamed of a clay more suited for tea, for Yixing clay comes from deep mines, bringing that spirit and joy with it to the tea ceremony. One of the brightest masters in the Pottery City today, Ke Tao Chung says, “the art of Purple-Sand teaware is used to express the feelings the craftsman has for the Earth, and then to transcend them, so that people can feel the softness and freedom revealed in the Earth.” I also have found such artistic, spiritual and even elemental grandeur in holding my Yixing pots—they are wise and kind, and the way they improve our tea, by absorbing its essence and power and bringing it to all our future sessions, is nothing shy of miraculous.

They say that a Ming Emperor liked to leave the palace incognito and wander the cities, going to tea-houses and other places to share in the conversations of the times. On one such excursion, dressed as a humble peasant, the emperor was walking down a quiet street. Through the window he saw an old farmer preparing tea. The ceremony looked so harmonious and pleasant, the emperor couldn’t resist and knocked lightly at the door. He politely asked the farmer if he could join him and the farmer smilingly acquiesced. The liquor was dark and deep, amazing the emperor. For several hours they sat in calm joy, content to just relax, basking in the peace the dark tea inspired. When the time came to leave, the emperor asked the farmer where he got such



Qing Dynasty *zhuni*
famous poetry



Qing Dynasty *duanni yao bian zhu lun zu*
Heart Sutra carved around the pot

amazing tea from. The farmer replied, “I’m sorry sir, I am but a poor farmer and can’t afford any tea at all; I have only this old Yixing pot used by my father and his father before him.” Holding the empty pot up for the emperor’s inspection, he saw that the pot was seasoned enough to create such deep liquor with just water alone. The next day, the emperor sent a bag of gold coins to the farmer’s house and arranged a caravan to leave for Yixing the very next day.

Over the years, the art of Yixing would evolve, incorporating all the other art forms in the Middle Kingdom. Since most artists, of any kind, were also tea lovers, pots soon had calligraphy, painting, seal-carving and even poetry on their sides as ornamentation. Some of the most sought after teapots were ones made by famous potters and artists together, one creating the pot and the other painting it or carving the calligraphy.

Eventually, two main styles would develop based on the differences in the tea art of the North and South. In the northern cities, near the capital, it was mostly government officials that collected teapots. They wanted larger pots to serve many guests, with a lot of ornamentation to show off their power and affluence. In the South, businessmen and commoners alike all drank tea every day. They preferred simple, small pots to make tea for themselves and their friends. There were regional exceptions to these trends. Though not associated with North, South or any particular region, these styles continue even today, and they have diversified, as generations of potters have innovated and creatively expanded the art and its expression, technique and method. I have found that the so-called ‘southern style pots’ are often more conducive to a harmonious tea ceremony, though, as serving tea to large groups is usually more of a social occasion and the tea is but meant to establish warmth and comfort so guests may converse more freely. While I appreciate the more heavily-decorated pots made in this vein, I find more inspiration in the simple elegance of the small pots.

Over the years, potters would develop new clay compositions and formulas, refining the process so much that a whole class of “clay masters” would develop. These men didn’t actually make teapots, they just refined the clay with enough mastery to surpass what the potters themselves could do. And the potters, then, were free to develop new techniques and methods of expressing the many sentiments of tea. Of course, some artists were both expert potters and clay masters as well; but the tradition of having clay masters at all is perhaps unique to the “Pottery City”.

Much like the aged and wise tea leaves, Yixing pots have a kind of consciousness and even destiny. They seem to have a bond with their owners, as they are passed down through time. Walking into a store full of teapots, five separate tea lovers will be drawn to five separate pots without being able to explain why. These pots then become like dear friends, traveling with us over time as we progress. There are times when I enter my tea room undecided about which tea to drink and find myself choosing not based on which leaf I think suits the day, but which teapot I wish to hold. A simple Yixing pot resting on a small plate, framed by mountains, is an image that for me carries all the peace and bliss of the tea ceremony with it.

I imagine myself living in some rural town, with my three Yixing pots and three jars of tea. After a hard day’s work, I can’t wait to return home to these friends each night. I spend the evenings drunk on old teas, poured from small Yixing pots that have been in my family for generations, watching the sun set behind the abundance of distant peaks.

Gentle friend,
Smooth sand steaming;
Open and accepting,
Endlessly so,
A forest of leaves you have held and let go,
An ocean of water you have transformed—
A font of deep, interminable ambrosia.
To you I turn once again for my grace,
My peace,
My everything.

Gentle friend,
May your stream never end,
Changing generations of leaves and water
To golden cups of tranquility,
Long after I am gone.



Qing Dynasty *zhuni*



Qing Dynasty *zhuni*



Ming Dynasty *zisha*