



The World of Yixing

HISTORY, PART I: —PREHISTORY TO THE MING DYNASTY—

By Peng Le Jing

Long before Yixing became an art, long before it was perfected and shaped into a legacy of craftsmanship unparalleled in any other teaware tradition, the stoneware from the “Pottery City” was slowly making its way towards its destined meeting with the Leaf. They say that a monk formed the first teapots out of Yixing clay, using his bare hands and some kitchen utensils. He then fired it in a friend’s kiln. Like so much of tea’s story, Yixing also begins with a hermit who left his simple, rustic pots unglazed. Did he notice the difference the clay had on his tea? Was he the first to feel the magic an Yixing pot can bring to tea? Unfortunately, that monk living in the Jinsha temple’s story was never brushed on paper and his name is lost. But the servant who came to the temple to worship, perhaps stopping to have some tea with the old monk, would go on to become the world’s first famous Yixing potter. Gong Chuan asked to study with the monk,

learning how to manipulate the sticky clay. He developed new tools, shapes and styles and soon others began to take interest. Eventually, his master freed him to spend the remainder of his life teaching his own students, beginning a tradition that continues today. Gong Chuan invented the “square seal” and “dragon’s egg” shapes, though only his “gall” shaped pot survived until the modern day—so called because of its rough surface which mimics tree bark.

We can’t be sure exactly when Yixing ceramics began, but many scholars have suggested as far back as five or even six thousand years ago. Most people know the legend, dating at least to the Qing Dynasty, of the monk traveling through the village offering the people a sale on “honor”. When the people snubbed him as a madman, he changed his call to “riches”, which perked their ears. After he was paid, he led them to the river

and showed them how to mine the rich ore there, departing down the nearest road forever, and once again decorating the tale of tea with carvings of spirituality: to show just how important tea was to the Daoist and Buddhist traditions of China.

Historically, we are certain that by the tenth century BCE Yixing was one of the most important celadon kilns in all of Southern China. The city by then was already devoted almost exclusively to pottery-related trades. In the Tang and Song Dynasties, it reached another zenith, famous for making celadon dishes and teaware. But it was not until the Ming Dynasty that Yixing began to go unglazed and spread throughout China, and not just as expensive wares for the rich, but pottery for all walks of life—used every day and on special occasions.



Shi Da Bin



In the Tang and Song Dynasties tea preparation was complicated and involved quite a bit of teaware used to roast, grind, boil or whisk the powdered tea. In the Ming Dynasty, however, the emperor banned the use of powdered tea, promoting instead the steeping of whole leaves as we do today, though they were all more simply processed green teas. The unglazed clay of Yixing enhances the steeping of tea, smoothing out the edges, remaining hot for long periods and resistant to seasonal temperatures.

Gong Chuan and his master recognized the difference Yixing pots made on tea. Perhaps more important to its spread and ultimate fame, however, is the fact that unglazed purple-sand clay fit perfectly into the new tea aesthetic that developed at the time: a movement towards simplicity and away from all the accoutrements of the Tang and Song Dynasties, which had often been made of expensive silver, lavishly decorated bronze or even gold. As the preparation simplified, so did the taste of tea lovers—and in walked Yixing like love at first sight.

Through his master, Gong Chuan's pots were introduced to the upper classes and the news spread very quickly. In the Long Qing period (1522-1572) several masters followed in the footsteps of Gong Chuan, improving the clay processing, tools and pot formation to meet the growing demand. Of these, Zhao Liang, Shi Peng and Yuan Xi are the most famous, each innovating the growing movement in their own way. As time passed, more and more potters in Yixing began to make teaware.

As their craft developed, more and more early Ming potters began to look to bronzes, inlaid jewelry and even furniture for inspiration, shaping teapots in elegance and even carving designs in relief. The simple household pots that had begun the whole trend were still made, though. Shi Peng continued to focus on perfecting the simple teapot throughout his life. His son, Shi Da Bin, would go on to become one of the greatest Yixing potters of all time. He was born in 1580 and lived until 1650, witnessing the beginning of the Qing Dynasty in 1644.

Shi Da Bin followed in his father's footsteps at first, carrying on the tradition of using the simplest tools to form simple pots, as Gong Chuan had done. Yixing-ware was unique in that there was a whole periphery of careers that blossomed as a result of the town's prosperous ceramic industry, like miners or even more notably the "clay masters" who were responsible for processing the clay. As each clay master was a part

of a unique tradition, there were often a great variety of colors and textures in Yixing clay. Through study, Shi Da Bin helped make the clay processing more uniform amongst several of the clay-processing factories. As the technique moved from hand-grinding to ox-driven grinding, smoother and more moist clays were developed, though still coarser than the kinds of clay found elsewhere. He also improved the firing techniques, inventing the method of putting several pieces together in previously fired jars so that they would all come out in more consistent colors.

Later in his life, Shi Da Bin followed the growing trend of incorporating not only bronzeware but with increasing popularity natural themes into his craft, making the first "plum blossom" and "anise" teapots. He is also famous for designing the "shaman's cap" and looped handle—all traditions that would continue through Yixing's zenith in the Qing Dynasty to modern times. These artists wanted to keep the tra-



ditional simplicity that had established Yixing teaware, and yet refine it to the level of a graceful and powerful art in its own right. For that reason, they began more and more to model their pots after quotidian objects or other inspiration taken from nature. By capturing the nature of a plum blossom within a teapot, they felt successful in mastering the art of combining function and form, simplicity and elegance. And these are still the measures of success amongst Yixing potters, collectors and experts even today.

Shi Da Bin's pots became famous during his lifetime, collected by literati throughout China, and often sold for large sums. Around him, others like Xi-ang Shengsi and Chen Ming Yuan elevated Yixing teapots to international fame. Chen Ming Yuan is known for making the first pot in the shape of a bundle of firewood, bamboo shoots and the classic "water jar pot (*weng hu*)". A handful of his pots are still around even today. Master Xiang, on the other hand, is primarily

known for his legendary “peach cup” which has been featured in dozens of Yixing books, blessing the cover of several. The detail on the leaves and blossoms are exquisite, capturing the purity and simplicity contrasted and highlighted by a subtle elegance that is the paragon of master-crafted Yixing. As they were treasured by the upper classes, however, it quickly became illegal to export the higher-quality Yixing-ware, which were considered national treasures.

In the late Ming Dynasty another master would change the Yixing craft so dramatically that potters from then on would stamp his name on pots, making his name synonymous with Yixing teapots. Hui Meng Chen became famous for making tea sets, cups and pots with matching motif. Later in his life, at the end of the Ming and beginning of the Qing Dynasty, a new type of tea processing had developed in the coastal provinces of Fujian and Guang Dong, called “oolong.” The people there began drinking tea in smaller portions, amongst less people. Some were monks or nuns—the famed temples and monasteries of Wuyi Mountain, for example—while others just

wanted to have a more casual kind of tea. And as we’ve seen, the teaware makers always follow the tea preparation of the times. Hui Meng Chen is often credited with popularizing the smaller Yixing teapot that has since become the norm. Some of his pieces still exist today in private collections and museums, including the famous “lotus seed” pot.

Such smaller pots were rare in the Ming Dynasty, though. Most of the pots were larger, to suit the gatherings held in the North amongst the nobles and literati. The tea was simple and green and so they steeped it in larger pots, for longer times and drank from larger cups. The tradition of combining art forms also began in the Ming Dynasty, often incorporating calligraphy carved by famous poets or artists, as well as glazing painted onto Yixing pots as decoration. The Ming nobles preferred the more ornate pots that resembled bronze-ware, organic objects and even furniture as it pronounced an elegant aesthetic. And yet the simple pots were always popular amongst some, and there was still a trend to view tea as a connection with



Hui Meng Chen



the ancient sages. Many of the scholars of the Ming Dynasty were afraid of the political turmoil and retired to the countryside—they weren’t permitted to gather in some periods for fear of rebellion. In such a climate, they idealized the life of renunciation; and even if they couldn’t become actual hermits, would build gardens with simple tea huts, or bamboo cabins in secluded places where they could enjoy nature as the poets of the Song and Tang Dynasties had. To these artists, poets and nobles the simpler Yixing pots perfectly captured the natural grace they felt tea inspired.

The clay in the Ming Dynasty was ground by hand or by Ox and therefore has a rougher appearance, and yet is surprisingly smooth—especially the pots produced after Shi Da Bin revolutionized several of the clay processing techniques. Much of these processing traditions have since been lost, evolving into different ways of making clay.

The unique characteristics of clays produced in different eras is the guiding principle for accurately dating and appraising antique Yixing pots. While

craftsmanship is also relevant, this can be copied by skilled artists. In fact, one of the difficult aspects of studying all Chinese art is that students often spend their apprenticeship copying the masters of yesteryear. It was felt that they couldn’t be set free to develop their own style until they had mastered the traditional ones, often with enough acumen to make the two indistinguishable to all but the experts. Of course, forgeries have also been made throughout history to be sold as antique. Despite the craftsmen’s ability to copy the style and character of previous masters, they didn’t have access to the same clay, perhaps mined from slightly different strata, and definitely processed using different techniques. For that reason, experts are able to accurately date Yixing pots. Once you have seen some real Ming pots and set them next to later Qing and even modern Yixing, it is easy to see exactly how different they are. Of course, expertise only comes after years of handling many such examples, from different periods and including both authentic and inauthentic pots.

The Ming Dynasty brought Yixing teaware to light. Join us next issue as we explore the true zenith of Yixing teaware, which was of course the Qian Long period of the Qing Dynasty. As you look at Ming pots, imagine the journey they have been on: what kinds of tea have they held? Where they loved by generals, artists who painted the masterpieces we see in the museums? Did a Daoist hermit drink from this pot before his full moon vigil? And since then, how many cups have been filled? And then imagine, if you can, the adventures that came after all those people stood up from the table, perhaps glancing one last time at the host's beautiful Yixing pot before turning towards us...

THE LEAF



The "Hui Meng Chen" stamp has been used again and again, even into modern times. Behind, in the background, is calligraphy carved by his own hand while this Republic Era *shui ping* also pays tribute to his legacy.



This pot was made by Chen Yo Ching, another famous Ming Dynasty Artist

