

The inheritance dilemma of Longquan celadon industry in the Internet age: a study on innovation motivation and professional identity

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Abstract. This study examines the inheritance dilemma of Longquan celadon in the Internet era, integrating sociological and anthropological perspectives. From a sociological lens, this study utilizes Bourdieu's cultural capital theory (1986) to analyze how celadon's craftsmanship, rituals, and market value form a symbolic resource that shapes inheritors' occupational identity and social status. The digital disruption of the market has fragmented this cultural capital's reproduction, leading to intergenerational conflicts in occupational values. This study also employs Geertz's concept of local knowledge (1983) and thick description to unpack how celadon craftsmanship, as a locally embedded knowledge system, is negotiated by several local artisans. The intergenerational gap in digital adoption, including the older inheritors' limited use of short videos versus younger artisans' digital entrepreneurship, reveals a struggle over cultural authenticity and innovation, reflecting the dynamic reconstruction of local knowledge in the digital age. This research advanced both sociology and anthropology by showing how digitalization reshapes the social field of traditional craftsmanship and the cultural meaning of intangible heritage, highlighting the interplay between global technologies and local cultural practices.

Keywords: Longquan celadon, intangible cultural heritage, inheritance predicament, Internet, innovation, professional identity

1. Introduction

In 2006, the firing technique of Longquan celadon was inscribed on China's National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and in 2009 it was further included on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity under the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network · China Intangible Cultural Heritage Digital Museum). As early as the Southern Dynasties, the people of Longquan took advantage of favorable local natural conditions and drew upon the porcelain-making experience of the Yue and Wu kilns to produce celadon. This tradition has continued for more than 1,500 years. Among the burial objects unearthed in Xiabao Village, Chatian, Longquan—dating to the first year of Yongchu (420 AD)—eight pieces of celadon, including a “Chicken-Head Pot,” “Chicken-Crown Pot,” and “Lotus-Petal Bowl,” provide reliable evidence for the origin of Longquan celadon (Lu, 2009).

However, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the prohibition of private overseas trade by the rulers sharply reduced Longquan celadon exports, dealing a heavy blow to production. Under the burden of excessive taxation, only a few kilns survived, and celadon production eventually ceased for over two centuries. It was not until the Republic of China period that Longquan celadon once again gained governmental attention, though production was interrupted during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and only resumed after the founding of the People's Republic of China.

Despite its once-preeminent historical and cultural status, the Longquan celadon industry today faces significant challenges. Field investigations reveal that Master Li, a male representative inheritor of Longquan celadon born in the 1970s—whose works have been selected as national gifts and even used in space-related diplomatic exchanges—seldom engages with the Internet beyond basic WeChat use and occasional short-video viewing for learning purposes. Many small celadon workshops have since closed, and only a few masters retain regular customers. With ongoing social and economic transformations, the market for Longquan celadon has contracted, the number of practitioners has declined, and the continuity of core techniques has been disrupted.

Compared with other Chinese porcelain traditions such as Jingdezhen, Longquan celadon has received relatively limited academic attention, resulting in notable research gaps, including insufficient investigation and a lack of diverse analytical

perspectives. This study aims to explore the tension between traditional inheritance and modern innovation in Longquan celadon, focusing on intergenerational cognitive conflicts and professional identity crises that constrain the industry's development. Specifically, it examines how the Internet influences the creative drive of young celadon artisans, the factors contributing to professional identity dilemmas within inheritance practices, and how traditional masters and young creators differ in their attitudes toward and uses of digital technology. Ultimately, this research seeks to assess whether the Internet acts as a catalyst or hindrance to the revitalization of Longquan celadon, while identifying potential strategies—such as policy subsidies and welfare improvements—to enhance its visibility and address its stagnation in the contemporary era.

2. Research methodology

Based on the theoretical insufficiency from the perspective of celadon artists and workers in the investigation report "Investigation on the Inheritance of Longquan Celadon Culture" from the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network, and considering that the theoretical perspective is only analyzed based on market data, this paper introduces the perspectives of young local ceramic artisans and masters in Longquan to study the problems faced by these producers, and what are their demands.

This article uses the research method of qualitative case study. This research method is applicable to exploring complex social phenomena and can provide a deeper understanding of the inheritance predicament within the Longquan celadon industry. This method is applicable to the study of complex real world phenomena. The main research method is semi-structured deep interviews, supplemented by digital ethnography. The data in this article is derived from an on-site investigation conducted in Longquan in July 2025, including visits to museums, seminars, interviews with inheritors and local residents. Conduct semi-structured interviews with multiple or more key information providers. It also includes digital content analysis of media related to celadon such as Douyin, Bilibili, and Xiaohongshu. When conducting visits, by not directly revealing the identity of the investigator and adopting a more friendly and closer approach to the interviewee to reduce the untruthfulness of the interview content, it may glorify the problems of oneself and the industry. The analytical framework is based on grounded theory for thematic analysis, as well as a comparative analysis of traditional practices and digital practices. In addition, this study has certain limitations. The sample size is restricted by geographical location and time, and it cannot be fully guaranteed that there are no situations inconsistent with the survey data. Therefore, the self-reported data may have potential biases. If research restrictions are to be eliminated, the time limit can be removed and as many industry-related personnel as possible can be interviewed during local visits to reduce investigation errors. At the same time, interviews with Longquan celadon artisans who are not in the local area can also be conducted to further enhance the comprehensiveness of the research.

3. Analysis and discussion

3.1. Market disorder and innovation dilemmas

During the field investigation visits, it was found that there was a problem of disorderly market in the Longquan celadon industry. This directly led to a reduction in the innovative drive of celadon artisans, which undoubtedly hindered the development of the industry and deprived the celadon inheritors of the motivation to persist. Through an offline visit to a young creator of Longquan celadon, we gained a deep understanding that as young creators in this industry, they are confronted with problems such as plagiarism and imitation. After the interview, it was found that this young artisan mainly sells and creates his own works in the form of a personal studio and uploads the finished products to the social media platform Xiaohongshu. The interviewee reported: "By observing the homepages of the fans in my fan list, it can be found that a large proportion of my fans are from the same industry. After following me, they have posted works that are extremely similar to my original works. Even some people directly modified the pictures of the works I posted through AI and then posted them online as their original works." However, because many of the patterns in this artisan's works are quite complex, many people do not copy her works exactly. Instead, they plagiarize the ideas or only copy a part of them. At the same time, this artisan also said that mutual copying and borrowing have always been a tradition in the production of Longquan celadon. Whenever there is a bestseller, they will copy each other. The copyright issue has emerged from this existing problem of plagiarism, reflecting that copyright issues are almost completely ignored in this industry. This directly contributes to the reluctance of many young celadon artisans are reluctant to innovate. In fact, copyright issues are very difficult to solve for small production units like individual studios. At present, the main way to protect originality is through personal rights protection. However, in terms of practical issues such as time and money, the efficiency and results of personal rights protection are far from satisfactory. Especially in this case and similar situations, when not just one person but many others directly plagiarize and publish it as their own work, if the original author wants to protect their rights, they can only choose to Sue one by one or file a complaint on the platform. No matter which one it is, it takes several weeks or even longer to get a result, and sometimes the result is not satisfactory. As a merchant with a smaller output, a cycle of one week or more is sufficient to attract customers interested in this work to the plagiarist's work, thereby

causing the original merchant to lose customers. Therefore, in the face of this problem of plagiarism and sale through the Internet, online platforms can add new functions to protect original merchants. For instance, by enabling online platforms to rationally utilize AI models, when dealing with products such as handicrafts that contain original elements, during the review stage of note Posting, an intelligent automatic image detection system can be set up to determine which parts of the product overlap are considered plagiarism and to check whether the poster's work is original. If the image is identified as suspected of plagiarism, it will be submitted to manual review. Through the recognition of data images in the database, the earliest published notes with a high degree of overlap with the products included in this note can be quickly identified to further detect whether there is really plagiarism. If plagiarism of the work is found, the review will not be passed. This can fundamentally solve the problem of customers being attracted by the notes posted by plagiarists, which leads to a decline in sales, thereby enhancing the original research and development motivation of celadon creators.

3.2. Professional identity crisis among young practitioners

In the Longquan celadon industry, the issue of weak professional identity among young practitioners has become increasingly evident. Ideological differences between senior celadon masters and younger artisans reflect broader generational tensions and highlight the lack of professional commitment and enthusiasm among emerging craftspeople. From the perspective of professional identity, many students who study celadon-related disciplines at local institutions pursue these programs primarily for academic credentials rather than genuine vocational interest. This phenomenon indicates that the weak sense of professional belonging is rooted in the limited industrial development and low public visibility of Longquan celadon, as well as in the fact that many entrants to the industry are not intrinsically motivated by a passion for the craft. The underdevelopment of Longquan celadon is reflected in the low level of public awareness regarding both the craft itself and the broader local cultural environment. "Shangtang," a brand under the Longquan Jiang family, represents one of the most established enterprises in the region. The Jiang family has long been recognized for its contributions to the inheritance and innovation of Longquan celadon and sword culture, and the "Jiang Family" trademark remains the only nationally recognized brand in China's sword industry. Field research indicates that although Shangtang is among the most advanced local brands, its industrial structure remains narrow, focusing primarily on production, exhibition, and sales. Recently, the company introduced experiential programs related to celadon-making and ceramic accessories, modeled after craft workshops in urban areas, yet these initiatives have not significantly expanded the industry's diversity.

Interviews further reveal that some individuals enter the Longquan celadon sector for pragmatic rather than cultural reasons. For instance, a 25-year-old male potter from Jingdezhen reported choosing to work in Longquan because competition there was less intense than in his hometown. Such cases suggest that some practitioners are attracted by lower market pressure rather than a genuine interest in Longquan celadon. This pattern reflects both the limited scale of local industrial development and the continuing dominance of Jingdezhen as the national ceramic center. Field observations also highlight structural constraints on Longquan's regional development. Longquan City, administered by Lishui City in Zhejiang Province, remains geographically and economically peripheral. Its transport infrastructure is underdeveloped, with limited rail access, and its urban population is relatively small. During on-site investigations, sparse pedestrian activity and a high rate of shop closures were observed in the main commercial districts. Although recent urban construction appears modern, economic vitality remains weak. Such local conditions have restricted the dissemination and attractiveness of Longquan celadon, discouraging external learners and limiting professional influx. Many non-local artisans, like the aforementioned potter, treat Longquan as a temporary training ground before returning to larger ceramic centers such as Jingdezhen. The local education system has also made limited contributions to sustaining celadon craftsmanship. The Longquan Vocational and Technical School offers a "3+4" program (three years of study in Longquan followed by four years at Lishui University), allowing students to earn a bachelor's degree in celadon studies. However, interviews suggest a disjunction between curricular content and industry practice. A 23-year-old female employee at Shangtang, a graduate of this program, stated that her practical skills were largely acquired after joining the factory, implying that the school's curriculum does not fully align with the needs of celadon heritage transmission. Strengthening vocational education and aligning it more closely with industrial realities could play a key role in revitalizing the local craft and attracting young practitioners.

To promote sustainable development, coordinated efforts in education, publicity, and urban planning are essential. The local government should strengthen both internal and external communication regarding the cultural significance of Longquan celadon as an element of national intangible cultural heritage. Increasing public engagement and awareness among youth could cultivate stronger professional identity and pride in the craft. Furthermore, improvements in urban infrastructure and tourism development could indirectly enhance the visibility of Longquan celadon. The experience of Jingdezhen provides a valuable reference. Jingdezhen's recent success stems from an integrated strategy that combines cultural tourism, industrial development, and heritage promotion, aligning economic and social benefits through a unified "culture-industry-tourism" framework (Zhang & Tan, 2024). Comparable international examples also demonstrate that the modernization of traditional crafts can be achieved through the integration of design innovation, cultural branding, and architectural or tourism development (Lui et al., 2023). Japanese lacquerware craftsmanship offers a representative case: regions such as Echizen in Fukui Prefecture, Yamanaka in

Ishikawa Prefecture, and Kishu in Wakayama Prefecture have incorporated regional cultural elements into their craft traditions, resulting in distinctive local identities (Xiao, Shen, & Lin, 2024). Drawing on these models, Longquan celadon could similarly integrate its aesthetic features into local architecture and public design. For instance, architectural motifs inspired by the “Spring Flower Jade Pot” or the “Spring Vase” could serve as visual landmarks, reinforcing regional cultural identity. Such initiatives would not only strengthen the symbiosis between cultural heritage and urban development but also stimulate tourism growth. The expansion of tourism, in turn, could enhance public recognition of Longquan celadon, generating synergistic effects between cultural preservation and economic revitalization.

Finally, incorporating historical and cultural knowledge of Longquan celadon into local school curricula could nurture awareness of cultural heritage from an early age. Cultivating such local cultural consciousness is fundamental for building a sustainable ecosystem in which traditional craftsmanship, education, and regional development mutually reinforce each other.

3.3. Intergenerational differences in digital technology adoption

In the face of the rapidly developing online platforms nowadays, whether they can help Longquan celadon achieve better development is a very important issue. Nowadays, as the most rapid medium for information dissemination, many industries and traditional cultures have developed vigorously through the advent of the Internet. However, Longquan celadon has developed differences on the issue of using digital technology and maintains a contradictory attitude towards it. This divergence mainly stems from the intergenerational conflicts and different ways of viewing digital technology between the older generation of celadon masters and the younger generation of artisans. For the older generation of celadon masters, the main focus of their work is still on the production of works. They believe that the time cost and professional level requirements for managing and operating digital platforms are relatively high, which will leave them no time to create. At the same time, their attitudes towards digital platforms are also mixed. Master Liu, a female intangible cultural heritage inheritor of Longquan celadon, was born in 1970. She is a master of intangible cultural heritage and has made many national gifts for the country. She is also the secretary general of the Tao Ling Special Committee (serving female celadon artists). She believes that the Internet and e-commerce have deviated from inheritance and are oriented towards economic interests. In an interview, she said: E-commerce has disrupted the celadon market, using some very cheap and inferior industrial celadon to turn celadon into street stall goods, and it also causes misunderstandings about celadon artisans. Longquan celadon masters would not engage in e-commerce either. The prices of their own products are all above 2,000 yuan. The more famous the master's works are, the less they sell, because the master would rather not sell than lower his own value. Mr. Zhou, who is also an inheritor of Longquan celadon intangible cultural heritage and a senior arts and crafts master, believes that starting an e-commerce account is very difficult, time consuming and energy consuming, and requires a team to operate. Even though business was not good, they did not consider doing e-commerce channels again because all production was done by hand and most of their energy was devoted to celadon. The artisans had no extra time to do e-commerce. It is also believed that the Internet has disrupted the market environment, with a lot of low prices and malicious competition.

Master Li, a representative male inheritor of Longquan celadon born in the 1970s, whose works were once presented as national gifts and which also accompanied to space, said that he doesn't use the Internet much, mainly wechat, and seldom watches short videos. When he watches short videos, it is mainly for learning purposes. Previously, there were sporadic teams selling their ceramics online, emphasizing that professional matters should still be left to professionals. At the same time, even in the face of the impact of the Internet era, he won't consider making a transformation. On the one hand, he is getting old; on the other hand, he thinks all industries are not easy to do. He is still only good at making celadon. Judging from the responses of the three senior Longquan celadon masters interviewed above, the first two believe that digital technology has brought drawbacks to the industry, while Master Li maintains a relatively neutral attitude and even leans towards supporting digital technology. In contrast, the younger generation of Longquan celadon inheritors have a more positive view. The young Longquan celadon artist who started his own studio and was interviewed said that young artists might promote and acquire customers through the Internet. It is believed that the previous generation or earlier artists did not care about the Internet because what they mainly focused on was fame. People on the Internet were not their consumer group. As well known veteran artists, they need to maintain a sense of mystery. Playing on the Internet would seem too demeaning. Jiang Junjie, the new generation inheritor of the Longquan Jiang family mentioned earlier, has over a million followers across the Internet. However, the main content of his account focuses on muscle tattoos, with relatively few displays related to celadon. He positions himself as a young artist born in the 1990s. The contradiction lies in that although the content about celadon is limited, due to its large fan base, it was even reported by the Lishui Municipal Government and became a cultural and tourism recommendation officer. After watching a large number of his videos, it was found that there were indeed ceramic cups promoting his own brand in them, but not all of them were Longquan celadon, and there were no related product links for interested viewers to purchase. In this case, the Internet did enhance the popularity of Longquan celadon to a certain extent, but due to the video content, the help was extremely limited. However, a deeper search revealed that on the video platform Bilibili, one of the biggest video platforms in mainland China, there is a co-produced video of Master Li and the game Genshin Impact, which has received 1.48 million views. The content is game equipment created based on Longquan celadon, and these game equipments are made in reality through real celadon techniques.

From the comment section and bullet screens of the video, it can be seen that people have indeed learned about Longquan celadon through this video and have given positive feedback. This demonstrates that when digital platforms are used properly, they can boost Longquan celadon and enhance its popularity. Even the effect of a single video is greater than that of many vigorous government promotions. However, the key to the success of this video lies in its ability to capture what interests today's young people. By integrating with emerging and popular things, it can effectively gain the attention and affection of young people, achieving innovative development and keeping pace with The Times. From this, it can be concluded that through the official power of the government or private associations, Longquan celadon can be co-branded with modern popular products, bringing Longquan celadon into the view of more people. For example, collaborating with popular games and sports brands. The skins based on Longquan celadon are integrated into the game, and a game with an extremely high number of online players can make this collaboration achieve astonishing results. Millions or even tens of millions of gamers can learn about Longquan celadon through the skins, even if they only know the name, it also sows the seeds for further understanding in the future. Sports brands, on the other hand, can incorporate elements of Longquan celadon into the appearance of their sports equipment, such as using the unique cracks of Longquan celadon as the patterns on rackets.

4. Conclusion

This study, grounded in sociological and anthropological frameworks, finds that the contemporary predicaments of the Longquan celadon industry, including market disorder, intergenerational conflict, and digital alienation, are closely connected to the restructuring of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and the renegotiation of local knowledge (Geertz, 1983) in the digital era. Online plagiarism and malicious competition have weakened the symbolic and economic capital of celadon, eroding the “field” in which creative labor was once legitimized (Bourdieu, 1986) and consequently discouraging young artisans from pursuing innovation. At the same time, the weak professional identity of younger practitioners reflects a widening gap between inherited cultural values and modern career aspirations, which is further intensified by insufficient educational integration and restrictions resulting from urban development. From an anthropological perspective, the dual impact of digital technology demonstrates how local knowledge, which is embodied in celadon craftsmanship and intergenerational transmission, is both endangered and revitalized. While short-video platforms provide new channels for disseminating traditional techniques, generational differences in the use of digital technology, such as Master Li's minimal engagement compared with younger artisans' digital entrepreneurship, have generated disputes over authenticity and innovation. These differences have fragmented the collective process of reproducing this intangible heritage (Geertz, 1983).

To address these challenges, this study proposes a comprehensive governance strategy. First, based on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, digital platforms should establish stronger originality protection mechanisms, including AI-driven plagiarism detection, in order to safeguard celadon's symbolic value and restore artisans' confidence in creative production. Second, following anthropological insights on local knowledge transmission, policymakers and educational institutions should work together to integrate celadon culture into formal curricula and public discourse. This would strengthen cultural identity among young people and enhance the attractiveness of celadon-related careers. Third, collaborations with contemporary cultural intellectual properties and digital content creators can reshape the cultural capital of celadon by creating a new “field” where traditional craftsmanship and modern media practices coexist (Bourdieu, 1986).

The limitations of this study lie in its regional focus and qualitative research design. Future studies could conduct comparative analyses, for example with Jingdezhen porcelain, or adopt longitudinal approaches to examine how digital technology continuously influences the dynamics of cultural capital. In the long term, the sustainable revitalization of Longquan celadon depends on maintaining a balance between the preservation of core craftsmanship and the development of innovative vitality, professional identity, and intergenerational collaboration. Such efforts will not only ensure the continuation of this valuable heritage but also demonstrate how traditional industries can adapt to and flourish within the conditions of modern society.

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