

# YIXING ZISHA

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XANADU



XANADU PUBLISHING LTD  
North Weald, Tylers Green, Epping, Essex, CM16 6RZ.

First published 2014 by Jiangsu People's Publishing, Ltd.  
English translation published 2014 by Xanadu Publishing Ltd

Copyright ©2014 by Xanadu Publishing Ltd  
ISBN 978-1-78459-001-7

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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Printed in China  
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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*“Yixing Zisha”, the handicraft art originated and inherited from Yi Xing, Jiangsu, establishes its uniqueness on the special raw material of purple clay from Yixing, as well as peculiar decoration and firing processes including compression, splicing of clay pieces by hand and handmade mosaics on the surface of teapots. Being an extension of ceramic handicraft dating from 10,000 years ago, “Yixing Zisha” is closely related to traditional cultural customs and arts such as Tea, Chinese seal carving, calligraphy, painting and poetry. Therefore, “Yixing Zisha” stands not only as a symbol of the rich traditional culture of China, but also as a milestone of ceramic handicraft.*

## I. The Time-honored Art of Zisha

**S**ituated on the west bank of Taihu Lake on the south of Jiangsu, center of the Yangtze River Delta, Yixing has long enjoyed its fame as “capital of ceramics” with privileged tea gardens, ecological environment and mineral resources. Pottery clay containing rare purple clay serves as the major mineral product of Yixing as well as the natural basis of the birth and development of the art of Zisha. Woods from forests around Yixing are natural fuels for the firing of ceramics. Rivers and streams interweave and extend all over Yixing with more than 100 water channels providing convenience to waterway traffic, granting efficient exports of ceramic goods.

Yixing Zisha has been spreading in the local famous historic and cultural town of Dingshu and its surrounding areas. Dingshu is 14 kilometers north from Yixing’s urban districts with a built-up area of 5.3 km<sup>2</sup> and an administrative area of 54.66 km<sup>2</sup>. The total population of Dingshu is over 80,000. Dingshu is surrounded by





mountains: Jun Mountain and Chu Mountain on the south; Xiangya Mountain and Tuan Mountain on the west; Qinglong Mountain and Huanglong Mountain on the north; Shu Mountain on the Northeast; Ding Mountain and Tai Mountain in the center. Huanglong Mountain, among all, has been the producer of premium purple clay since ancient China. Dingshu is also named after Ding Mountain and Shu Mountain.

Since the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Dingshu has been the only area where Yixing Zisha is inherited due to the handicraft's long period of maturity: demand for the special raw material of purple clay and the formation of a unique craftsmanship system have resulted to the clear space of this cultural heritage. Yixing Zisha spreads east from Shu Mountain and west from Baidang in Ding Mountain and Tangdu, to the south end of Bai Ni Chang and the north end of Qianluo and Shangyuan, with a total



distance of around 15 kilometers. Almost every family in this spreading space holds the history of producing ceramic goods from blanks. Dingshu is therefore literally the “capital of ceramics” in China.

Despite a relatively limited spreading area of the handicraft itself, the products of Zisha, especially the Yixing Zisha teapots, have circulated all over China with its close connection to Tea Culture. Zisha teapots are admired in almost all provinces and regions in China, especially in Jiangsu, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Anhui, Shandong and Beijing, along with its substantial contribution to the formation of Kungfu Tea in southern Fujian, Chaozhou and Shantou. On the other hand, products of Yixing Zisha were exported to Japan, Southeast Asia, South Asia and Europe during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Zisha teapots were seen as the most precious Tea Ware in Europe with the name of “red ceramics” and various replicas. In modern times, Zisha tea sets are exported to almost 60 countries and areas all over the world. In 1878 (4th year of the reign of Qing Emperor Guangxu), Koie Takatsu, master of Japan’s Tokonameyaki(ceramic and iron handicraft from the city of Tokoname) invited Jin Shiheng and Wu Agen, both Zisha artists from Yixing to lecture in Japan. Today in Japan, Shiyodeiki, also known as Shiyodeyaki and Shideiyaki from Tokoname in Aichiken, Bankoshideiki from Mieken, are all recognized as inheritances resulted from the introduction of Yixing Zisha.



Archeological findings show that ceramic handcraft dates back to around 6,000 to 7,000 years ago. The industry continued its prosperity to the Song and Yuan Dynasties. It is during the Song Dynasty, about 700 years from today that Zisha was born. Inheriting the tradition of their ancestors, Zisha artists combined the ceramic handcraft with the particular features of purple clay to inject unique artistic styles to Zisha with respect of common life style.

Subsequent archeological findings revealed more Zisha ceramics from between the Song and Ming





Deposits of relics of ancient kilns in Yixing

Dynasties. One example is a pair of enameled Liu pots of purple clay that dates back to no later than the South Song Dynasty, hence proving Zisha's existence during the time. Another example is Nanjing's 1966 discovery from the Mausoleum of Wu Jing (1533) of the only Zisha ceramic piece with clear chronological evidence from the Ming Dynasty. From 2005 to 2006, excavation initiated by archeological organizations including Nanjing Museum including various Zisha pieces in the ancient kiln in Shu Mountain, Dingshu, Yixing unearthed more than 10,000 ceramic and china samples. All examples above indicate the long-lasting history of Zisha in ancient China.

Descriptions of Zisha handcraft in specialized books appeared in the Ming Dynasty. Gao Qi's Collections of Teapots in Yangxian written during Tianqi of the Late Ming dynasty takes notes of a series of beautiful stories of celebrities with specific concern of Zisha.

Zisha pieces including purple clay pots and bowls in the Song Dynasty generally served the purpose of routine life. However, with the advent of the Ming Dynasty, teapots stood out as the most distinguished representation of the handcraft as Zisha integrated with Tea culture.

The technics of Zisha handcraft in the Ming Dynasty broke away from its early stage of imitating china handcraft from the Song Dynasty by establishing its unique molding language represented by the emergence of purple clay teapots. The reason of the evolution lies in the transformation of tea drinking styles: Chinese people used to boil the tealeaves or pouring small amount



Part of teapot making tools



The four-pot machine for tealeaf kneading and rubbing

of near-boiled water on mashed tealeaves in the Tang and Song Dynasties while Ming people started applying the more modern style of brewing tealeaves with fully-boiled water, for which Zisha teapots suit as the particular utensil.

The evolution of Zisha is symbolized by the contributions made by various outstanding ceramic artists. Today, people come to acknowledge and admire Zisha through legendary stories and exquisite pieces of these famous artists in Chinese history.



Blue China incense burner from the Six Dynasties



Statue of a mythical beast from the Jin Dynasty, unearthed relics



Jade cup



Teapot lid unearthed from the Yangjiao Mountain



Teapot piece unearthed from the Yangjiao Mountain

## 1. The Monk from Jinsha Temple and the Gong Chun Teapot

According to Collections of Teapots in Yangxian, the development of Zisha teapots is closely related to an old monk from Jinsha Temple, Yixing. Gong Chun, a boy servant of local education official Wu Yishan, studied under the old monk and created the first Shu Ying teapot that resembled the galls of a big ginkgo tree next to the temple. The Shu Ying teapot therefore became a much-celebrated type of Zisha teapots with artistic devotions from traditional artists such as Huang Yulin of Qing, Pei Shimin of Early Modern China and contemporary artists including Wang Yingxian and Xu Hantang.

The Shu Ying teapot is alternatively referred to as Gong Chun teapots. As part of the collection of National Museum of China, the Shu Ying teapot from the Ming Dynasty is engraved with “Gongchun Style” on its handle. In the shape of a flattened sphere, this teapot offers an exquisite resemblance of the natural plant it mimics with a surface covered by unevenness and twining veins. A more modern lid made by famous teapot artist Pei Shimin replaced the original one which was missing.

The art creation of the old monk from Jinsha Temple and Gong Chun’s Shu Ying teapot represents Zisha teapot’s breakthrough from a pragmatic design to an elaboration of practical use and aesthetic value. This breakthrough is the symbol of the transformation of Zisha teapot towards art.



The Gong Chun teapot from the Ming Dynasty

## 2. Shi Dabin and “Royal Admirations for the Beauty of Dabin Teapots”

Shi Dabin, secondary name as Shaoshan, aka Shi Bin or Dabin, is a master of Zisha much appreciated from Wanli of the Ming Dynasty to Shunzhi of the Qing Dynasty. According to certain folk tales, he is also the son of Shi Peng, one of the four Zisha masters of the Ming Dynasty. As a milestone in the history of Yi Xing Zisha teapot art, unsurpassable contributions were made by Shi Dabin in various aspects of the handcraft: technics of molding, selection of clay, design of teapot shapes, presentation of the Chinese style in teapots, etc.

Inspired by essence of other art forms, Shi Dabin invented the revolutionary technic of Tiao Sha mixing raw clay with a certain proportion of fired purple clay grains that interferes with the physical process of drying and firing so that the clay could become more sustainable.

One of Shi Dabin’s most significant contributions is made towards the invention and promotion of Da Shen Tong and Xiang Shen Tong technics: padding purple clay into pieces with wooden tools, then applying clay pieces to form a sphere body of the teapot or; cutting the clay pieces and splicing them into a square or hexagonal body of the teapot. Before that, most Zisha artists generally applied traditional molding tools, some even had to rely on wheel throwing to imitate china handcraft. Though efficient and accessible with uniformed molding tools, such practice does not include uniqueness in artistic



Shi Dabin's square teapot

technics that enables Zisha to stand out an abundance of traditional craftsmanship into the list of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Shi Dabin's works manifest the diversity of teapot styles. Records of various styles could be found in historical documentation. Unearthed relics of Dabin teapots include dozens of styles: the plum blossom teapot, the hexagonal teapot, the round teapot supported by three legs (P024), the Gao Zhi teapot (P025), the Gao Ti Liang teapot, etc.

Unearthed Zisha teapots are recognized as Shi Dabin's works through his signatures. Initially carved according to a previous writing, the signatures of Shi Dabin were carved directly in his later years with

powerful marks. Discoveries also show sealed versions of masters' signatures on teapots made during the Qing Dynasty. Signatures offer a deeper cultural connotation to Zisha teapots as well as the identification of works from different artists.

As part of the collection in the Palace Museum, a Dabin Zisha teapot with carved lacquer from the Ming Dynasty serves perfectly as a standard identifier of the time it was made. Collections from Nanjing Museum, Shanghai Museum, Hong Kong Museum of Tea Ware and other public and private collectors also include several Dabin teapots. However, works made during Shi Dabin's early life are very rare except for a very small amount of pieces represented by the Gao Zhi teapot (P032) in the Palace Museum. More findings are made on Zisha teapots made in the later stage of his life such as the hexagonal teapot, the round teapot and the petal-shaped teapot (P033), all of which are small yet amazingly delicate on the scale with a height of around 10 cm (the tallest is only 11 cm high whereas the smallest is only 2 cm high).

Another feature of Dabin teapots made in the later stage of Shi Dabin's life is the diversified content of carved writings. The most common styles are name carvings, year carvings and a mixture of the two styles.



The Dabing hexagon spheric teapot



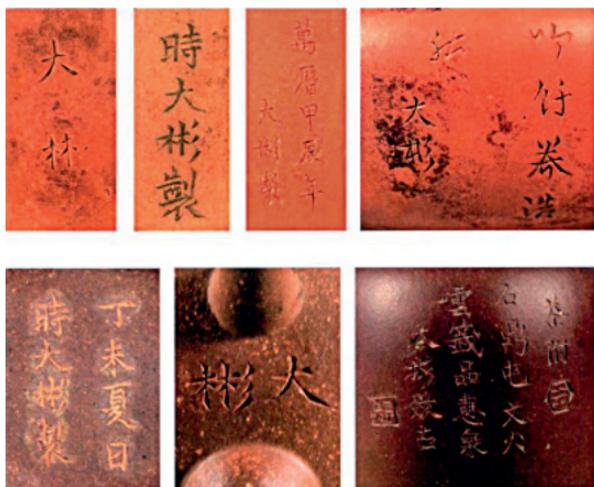
The Dabing spheric teapot with flatten feet



The Dabing Ru Yi spheric teapot



Shi Dabin's flower petal teapot



Carved signature of Dabin's teapots