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# PRESERVING FOLK CERAMICS HERITAGE: POWER, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE CONFIDENTIALITY SYSTEM IN KNOWLEDGE TRANSMISSION

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Abstract: This article examines contemporary ceramic handicraft heritage education within the context of Chinese folk ceramics. It also investigates the current state of the confidentiality mechanism in the folk master-apprentice education system. Using ethnographic methods, the study analyzes master studios in Jingdezhen, China's porcelain capital, to document the master-apprentice educational process and evaluate the implications of preserving or modifying traditional secrecy practices. Our findings reveal a striking paradox: while long-standing identity-based "secrecy" systems are eroding , thereby expanding learning opportunities for outsiders, masters persistently maintain deliberate verbal confidentiality in teaching. Moreover, under selection mechanisms, non-verbal teaching forms embodied by "Wu" not only preserve traditions but also enhance the durability and cohesion of technical heritage transmission. Exploring how traditions adapt or maintain equilibrium amid industrialized societies' relentless pursuit of scientific productivity can advance heritage preservation and educational research.

Keywords: Master-apprentice system ; Ceramics ; Heritage education ; Confidentiality

## Introduction

Porcelain as a contemporary ceramic handicraft has been produced since the Eastern Han Dynasty, primarily in Jingdezhen, China, making it one of the most famous ceramic handicraft cities in the country. Throughout its history spanning more than a thousand years, Jingdezhen has garnered international recognition for the advanced ceramic production technologies it has developed. Despite the passage of time, Jingdezhen's traditional porcelain-making craftsmanship continues to receive positive attention. Before the 20th century, ceramics produced by the handicraft industry were significant economic contributors and carriers of cultural exchanges. However, with

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post-1949 production recovery after the founding of the People's Republic of China and the Reform and Opening-Up policy, which accelerated global trade speed, traditional ceramic handicraft production faced significant impacts from the modern industrialized technology system. This also caused changes in social structure, highlighting a series of conflicting issues. Consequently, the traditional hand-made porcelain method has gradually been replaced by mechanized production, and the subsequent impact has extended to ceramic education.

Despite the long-standing recognition of ceramic skills as a symbol of traditional culture, the limitations of the traditional master-apprentice education system have increasingly prevented it from meeting the demands of industrialized society. The singular teaching form and the knowledge confidentiality system have led to its marginalization, while other forms of education, such as higher education, have gradually emerged as mainstream. Against this background, this research addresses a simple yet critically-posed question: In today's increasingly industrialized society, how should we preserve cultural heritage, and how can we ensure its vitality and continued existence in contemporary society? This is not only a challenge for sociologists and cultural protectors but also requires strong support from education researchers.

This article focuses on the educational transmission of folk ceramic skills under the influence of two factors: social change and traditional values, highlighting the positive role of education in heritage preservation and development. We adopt UNESCO's heritage definition—tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage—and focus our research on intangible cultural heritage represented by traditional handicrafts. Many researchers argue that the discourse on heritage survival should gradually shift from "static preservation" to "dynamic process" studies. Therefore, we will analyze the process of transmitting heritage knowledge through Jingdezhen's folk master-apprentice system and the specific phenomena it manifests.

## Literature Review

The rationale for this study was drawn from narratives related to heritage, traditional values, and confidentiality. Since Janet Black, a British cultural heritage expert, published the book On the Definition of Cultural Heritage at Cambridge University Press more than 20 years ago, people have gradually paid attention to the concept of cultural relics and artwork protection since ancient times (Black, 2000). As early as 1950, UNESCO and other governments had formulated some cultural heritage protection treaties. Unfortunately, Ashworth, Graham, and Tunbridge in Heritage, Identity and Place in Multicultural Societies (2007) mentioned these heritage protection concepts were born with the narrower purpose of addressing war destruction. Since then, various social changes and conflicts have led to the continuous expansion and revision of cultural heritage concepts. According to Smith et al., heritage can be understood as processes and forms of cultural production, and this process can be influenced by the discourses created by social institutions (Gentry, 2019). Ultimately, the conceptual distinction between tangible and intangible cultural heritage became a response to these understandings. For this study, "dynamic" cultural displays of intangible cultural heritage provide visitors with an inside perspective to experience (Imbera, 2012). This allows us to try to understand the current status of traditional handicraft heritage from the perspective of life and identity display, which is also missing from ceramic handicraft research. We agree with the hypothesis of American

anthropologist Barbara (2016) that research and conservation through the inherent properties of cultural changes are an opportunity for endangered cultures facing extinction to demonstrate a second life.

However, when facing the social changes and new environments stimulated by industrialization today, the accompanying problems are also very obvious. The capitalist development model actually masks the problems caused by technological progress. The profit-seeking nature of capital means that technologies which cannot promote productivity and reduce the labour force are often abandoned by the production system (Spencer, 2017). As a result, Zhu Bin (2014) discovered that the content of traditional master-apprentice education is unable to meet the needs of social development. Spindler (1974) questioned: how to sustainably transmit and extend cultural heritage to the next generation has become a complex problem today? We must know that the transmission of cultural heritage always relies on some traditional values and is closely related to cultural changes. Although generalisations are always subject to certain inaccuracies, we can still find significant differences in existing research on changes in traditional culture and values. The American anthropologist William Haviland (1987) emphasised that changes in the environment will cause continuous changes in culture. Changes in social structure, economics, or institutions further provide a deeper rational explanation for this cultural change; the work of modernization theorists, according to Stanley (2000), Karl Marx, and Daniel Bell, echoes this view. However, not everyone is able to support this view. Some studies continue to emphasize that even if the social environment changes, the traditional cultural value system will not necessarily change accordingly. The durability and flexibility of the belief system makes it challenging to integrate traditional values with diverse cultures (Inglehart, 2000). It also resulted in deeply ingrained cultural values being passed down from generation to generation and resisting external influences, as mentioned by Samuel (2010). Max Weber (2010) insisted that whether it is persistence or transformation, we believe that the core question brought about is whether this status promotes heritage protection. Therefore, given the survival issues, the transmission status of ceramic education in the master-apprentice system requires widespread attention.

In addition, there is some consensus in past research. Scholars generally hold the belief that folk master-apprentice ceramics education necessitates approximately three years of study, during which the masters completely control the learning opportunities (Xu, 2013). In the power discourse of masters, the teaching of craftsmanship has always followed the principle of “confidentiality” (Marchand, 2001). Masters have strict restrictions and requirements on the recruitment of apprentices. It is difficult for outsiders to understand the traditional production methods of the masters without a core of insiders (Roslina, 2022). Historian Pamela O. Long (2001) also supports this view, arguing that the concept of intellectual property provides a reasonable framework for the confidentiality of craftsmanship. Neither the "disclosure" nor the "confidentiality" of craftsmanship have reached universal principles. The current situation appears to stem from the masters' secret ideologies and the academic world's admiration of mysticism (Willian, 1994). Their attitude toward their craft tends toward secrecy rather than openness. Today, more than twenty years later, assuming that we still default to "confidentiality", it will become a huge obstacle to the transmission of heritage education in the future. Meijer believes that how to choose to transmit to the next

generation is the core issue in the relationship between education and culture, and it is also a problem faced by traditional systems in today's society (Meijer, 1996).

In order to explore the current "confidentiality" status of folk master-apprentice education, the research team went to Jingdezhen, the porcelain capital of China, for a two-year field trip in 2022, and conducted in-depth participant observation and interviews at the studios of 10 famous local folk ceramic masters. Therefore, the following sections will focus on the findings from our survey and discuss the implications of mentorship for upholding/changing traditional value practices.

## The Past "Confidentiality" System for Heritage Transmission

In the inheritance system of traditional folk handicrafts in ancient China, the transmission of skills and knowledge always revolved around the factor of "confidentiality", and material production can provide a reasonable explanatory framework for this "confidentiality" behaviour. China's porcelain industry, from the Han Dynasty to the Song Dynasty, was considered an auxiliary industry to agriculture. It has long maintained the economic status of a family-run side business. The skills of porcelain making are mostly passed on from father to the next generation. This method of practicing and learning at home is called family inheritance (Zhao, 2002). Therefore, the master-apprentice relationship built between father and son once became the main method of skill inheritance among Chinese people. The transmission of knowledge was maintained through the emphasis on lineage and clan relationships.

After the Song Dynasty, Jingdezhen ceramics achieved rapid development in both technology and scale. At the same time, ceramics' role in the household economy became more important, though still insignificant in improving the overall status of the handicraft industry. During this period, the composition of China's social economy clearly lacked the attributes of industrial production. As Tan Guangwan pointed out, the development of feudal society was dominated by class interests represented by agriculture (Tan, 2013). This led the feudal ruling class to emphasize that "morality is noble and skills are low," believing skills had "nothing to do with national affairs." Additionally, the content recorded in the ancient Chinese text Book of Rites: Kingship highlights the lack of attention paid to crafts by feudal rulers. Officials stipulated provisions for craftsmen: they could not engage in other professions for life, would not be promoted, and were forbidden to associate with scholars (educated elites). Professor Pan argues this stemmed from handicrafts' inability to meet the needs of the state and its rulers at the time (Lushen, 2002). Yet these unequal social relations still played a key role in linking skills and education. Institutional constraints confined heritage knowledge transmission (e.g., handicrafts) within families, indirectly compelling the "small group" family model to emerge as a crucial method for knowledge education in farming societies. Core family skills and knowledge were kept secret from outsiders and passed down from male to female, as Feng Xiaoyang observed (2008).

This phenomenon continued into the Ming Dynasty. A case from Jingdezhen Ceramics illustrates secrecy practices during this period: during the Yuan and Ming dynasties, the kiln industry in Jingdezhen was controlled by a man surnamed Wei, who prohibited non-family members from participating and exclusively taught his son fundamental heritage knowledge (Zhang Deshan, 1999). This underscores the significance of "ancestry" in past skill heritage education. Furthermore, masters' rigor in knowledge

transmission is reflected in Ming-Qing ceramic apprenticeship regulations. For instance, apprentices were accepted approximately once every ten years, accompanied by a public street parade announcing their acceptance—a ritual affirming the apprentice's identity within the master's faction (Moran, 1997). Apprentices then underwent 4–6 years of unpaid study, receiving only meals from their masters. Graduation ceremonies (often banquets) signified the master's recognition of the apprentice's skills and their "freedom" to seek employment. Employers attending these ceremonies could recruit graduates, though some masters offered apprentices studio positions with salaries.

The familial recruitment method persisted until 1949, despite social upheaval. Over the next 50 years, China's public ownership system fluctuated dramatically. During the state-owned ceramic economy's peak, the government recruited and trained skilled workers. Post-reform and opening-up, international trade surged, driving demand for labour and refined Jingdezhen porcelain craftsmanship. However, past confidentiality measures limited talent availability, creating a dilemma: expanding apprenticeships to meet demand while protecting core knowledge. New rules emerged, allowing non-kin apprentices (e.g., same-village residents with recommendations) and even female apprentices. By 2008, masters could have over 20 apprentices simultaneously—a stark increase from pre-1949 levels (Qin Xilin, 2008).

These changes reflect social shifts' impact on secrecy systems but not their dismantling. Rising apprentice numbers heightened masters' concerns about internal competition, particularly graduates rivalling their businesses. To mitigate this, masters reduced teaching periods to 3 years and selectively imparted knowledge, inadvertently creating new confidentiality measures that reinforced conservatism in skill transmission. Thus, even as societies modernized, the folk master-apprentice system persistently emphasized knowledge confidentiality through continual adaptation.

## Methodology

As described previously, the reality of the past was that China's feudal social system and capital competition before reform and opening up limited the scope of apprenticeship recruitment. Even if these constraints changed after the reforms, the confidentiality of knowledge about skill heritage continued. However, today, when the Internet economy is highly developed and heritage protection is respected, this confidentiality situation is in huge contrast with our survey results, which can be regarded as a process of change in traditional concepts. Since the restructuring of the state-owned porcelain factory in Jingdezhen in the 1990s gave rise to a large number of private ceramic studios, the master group has gradually become the representative of the master-apprentice education system and has the right to pass on folk heritage knowledge. The opportunities for young people to learn are entirely under the control of the masters (Yeyu, 2013). We also agree with this point of view, but unlike the traditional conditions for obtaining apprenticeship status, the current acquisition process does not seem to show obvious intervening factors such as blood or family, which we will elaborate on further.

Our investigation indicates that the majority of the apprentices are expatriates from various cities or regions, with the exception of individual relatives. There is no special relationship between their attributes and the masters, which establishes their status as

outsiders. Several masters have disclosed that a significant number of apprentices inadvertently establish a master-apprentice relationship. Some parents got to know the master at work exhibitions or other activities and developed a desire to let their children learn from him. There was even a college student apprentice who got to know the master while buying brushes in a tool store. This kind of master-apprentice relationship established by randomness was difficult to occur before this century. After all, the identity of the apprentice also meant that there was a risk of leakage of secret technology. However, the emergence of new measures has circumvented this problem to a certain extent. Paying a study deposit ranging from 2,000 to 10,000 yuan has become a way for masters to judge whether outsiders have a sincere willingness to learn. The basic mechanism of paying a deposit is considered to have an incentive effect in economics, and rational individuals will respond perfectly to this (Guilhem, 2015). Outsiders may thereafter acquire an apprenticeship. It is evident that this novel method of establishing identity is in direct opposition to conventional practices and is distinct from the findings of Gowalland's 2012 study on China. However, as a result, our initial impressions are that the current restrictions on heritage confidentiality are nearly non-existent, and we are under the impression that these apprentices have effortlessly transitioned from outsiders to insiders.

Nevertheless, the situation is not as straightforward as it appears. After conducting a thorough investigation, we discovered that the majority of these apprentices are between the ages of 14 and 18, and they frequently lack experience in higher education. This is consistent with the descriptions of numerous previous researchers. However, a circumstance captivated our attention. The number of apprentices in the 10 ceramic master studios that were surveyed was significantly different from that of over a decade ago. The average number of apprentices in each master's atelier is less than 2, and some masters have only one apprentice. One instructor once stated that it was common to have ten or more apprentices in the early 21st century. The sparse number of apprentices appears to have returned to the state prior to the formation of New China, but the motivations for the formation of both states are significantly different. As previously emphasised, the masters' deliberate quantitative restriction resulted in a scarcity of apprentices during the Ming and Qing Dynasties due to the secrecy of familial apprenticeship education. However, we perceive the present circumstances as a passive compromise. The masters assert that the number of new individuals who are willing to acquire traditional skills is decreasing. They are even beginning to express concern that the skills will not be passed down and that the heritage will vanish. Despite the fact that some academicians have attributed this situation to the fact that contemporary young people are lazy and lack the patience and enthusiasm to learn, we believe that the real reason may be more complex (Cao Jianwen, 2007).

A set of Chinese education data can highlight some of the reasons for the lack of apprenticeships. According to incomplete statistics from the education department, from the 2022 College Entrance Examination (2022), the number of applicants for China's college entrance examination in 2022 reached 11.93 million, and the acceptance rate was about 85.04%. But 20 years ago, the acceptance rate was only 52%. This means that in the past 20 years, China's ever-expanding higher education enrolment has provided more learning opportunities for young people, but at the same time it has also plundered student resources from private education. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital provides a deeper interpretation for understanding this phenomenon. The form of cultural capital acquired by apprentices in the folk is a concrete state, which is the

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cultural knowledge stored in the body through folk education, cultural skills and cultural accomplishment, but one of the consequences is that there is no proof of graduation, which means there is a lack of real identity documents. In this regard, school education tends to be more institutionalized and capital-based and provides certification materials such as degree diplomas. For highly competitive employment environments, degree certificates or diplomas can correspond to higher employment levels (Lu Lu, 2008). It is not difficult to understand why fewer and fewer young people regard folk education as their first choice for learning. Therefore, we have reason to believe that the reason why masters were forced to change the original traditional "confidential" identity restrictions is related to China's education policy.

Even in the past, admissions measures aimed at keeping skills secret have lifted restrictions and expanded opportunities for outsiders to gain apprenticeship status. However, a shift in traditional values has led us to believe that entering a studio to study no longer signifies a true insider status, but rather a learning attitude. According to anthropologist Gowlland (2012), learning for employment will allow young people to have more time to focus on learning traditional skills and knowledge than in the past. Herafeld (2004) believes that apprentices will actively seek opportunities to acquire more knowledge, and even dare to try to "steal" content that the master has not taught them. Nevertheless, we constantly observe that apprentices are not attentive when they are exercising their skills. They will occasionally cease to move and become captivated by the video entertainment content on their mobile phones. This passive learning state is consistent with the views of Ostrovski and others (Ostrovski, 2021). If students do not become active participants but only passively accept, it will be difficult to achieve deep learning effects. Not only that, according to some masters, many apprentices feel boring and uncomfortable after trying the learning process for a period of time, and eventually give up learning. Although "proficiency in a particular line" is widely emphasized by parents in China's traditional values, they believe that mastering a skill can help enhance young people's voice in surviving in society, but not all young people love this traditional skill activity, and it is normal to reject learning that has nothing to do with their own interests. They prefer to enter society early and seek a job (Yu Hua, 2008).

This aversion to learning can be seen as a hindrance to contemporary young people’s acquisition of heritage knowledge and authentic insider status. Compared with decades ago, we believe that a series of restrictions on identity acquisition can actually promote apprentices' learning awareness. After all, learning opportunities can improve students' performance in learning tasks (Crabb, 2007). But the situation is different now. China's economic development is accompanied by a large number of new job opportunities and learning opportunities. The producer service industries it has spawned, such as cargo transportation, Internet warehousing and express delivery, have become new choices for young people. Importantly, these positions have fewer restrictions, shorter payback cycles, and even higher salaries than those in the traditional ceramics industry as mentioned by Liu (2023). Many apprentices who quit midway often become followers in these production and service industries. Faced with this unfavourable situation, the curriculum setting of a natural screening system has become the choice of masters to avoid this problem, and apprentices who truly gain insider status will also be produced here. We will further describe and discuss these contents later.

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## Analysis

In the past, contemporary masters of folk ceramics reduced the requirements for obtaining apprenticeship status. Even so, they have also implemented a learning barrier to evaluate potential apprentices, as previously mentioned. They intentionally designed the learning content for the first year to be uninteresting. Only apprentices who consistently adapt to the first year's material and do not give up can advance. Apprentices face a significant obstacle in their pursuit of heritage knowledge. We have attempted to acquire comprehensive heritage teaching plans and course content from folk masters in order to identify the learning differences among various apprentices. Nevertheless, the facts are consistent with the assertions of Yin (2019). The absence of systematic curriculum planning is a prevalent issue in the folk master-apprentice education system, as it lacks actual instruction plans and curriculum materials. This means that masters have an absolute say in the process of transmission of heritage knowledge. At the same time, this has also forced us to manually record and organize the teaching data of folk ceramics through observation. There is always a certain degree of inaccuracy in generalizations, even though we find that although the current teaching content still maintains the traditional form, there are significant differences in procedures and stages. We suggest using three stages to describe the content of heritage education for folk masters, as shown in Table 1.

The initial phase is accessible to the general public. During the initial phases of instruction, the master ensures that the apprentices focus on learning fundamental skills, including the preparation of pigments and the reproduction of patterns. We consider that the objective of this method is to differentiate the apprentices. Despite the fact that this type of work is the most basic component of teaching ceramic heritage knowledge, masters emphasize it and consider it one of the most significant assessments for apprentices. All apprentices will engage in these tasks for a minimum of six months, potentially longer. We suspect that this is linked to the increasing recognition of the importance of confidentiality. It is crucial to clarify that this awareness does not suggest masters refuse to impart knowledge, but rather aims to prevent the wastage of educational resources. Ultimately, as mentioned by Le (2011), the character of youngsters is rigorously evaluated through long-term repetitive training, helping masters screen out apprentices whose personalities are unsuitable.

Traditional Chinese folk art emphasizes the interactive relationship between handicrafts, tools, and materials. The masters' reverence for heritage skills makes mastery of tools and materials a prerequisite for learning ceramic art. The ancient Chinese saying, "If a worker wishes to excel, he must first sharpen his tools", illustrates the importance of these foundational tasks in heritage transmission (Song, 2021). Apprentices who solidify their basics within a year find it easier to demonstrate craftsmanship in ceramic construction. Additionally, apprentices practice drawing lines on small porcelain plates using brushes and paint during free time—an exercise that bridges theory and practice.

Unlike the first stage, not all apprentices qualify for subsequent studies. Only those who persist and excel in the first stage earn "elite" status. In the second stage, elite apprentices learn color filling, focusing on spot dyeing and color registration techniques. The constraints of ceramic technology (unlike oil painting) demand precise color matching without interference, requiring prolonged concentration and material expertise (Li, 2005). This underscores the screening system’s role in curating

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knowledge transmission and explains masters' focus on character evaluation and phased confidentiality.

The third stage involves the most complex educational content. Mastery of techniques like "Glass White"—a pastel decoration requiring advanced pigment proficiency—depends on prior stage competencies. Apprentices advance only upon reaching specific skill levels. Notably, supervisors reward acknowledged apprentices with identity-construction roles, allowing participation in the master's work. This mirrors Renaissance workshops like Raphael's, where collaborative models enhanced efficiency and rationalized artistry (Xu, 2009). Such opportunities validate apprentices' practical and symbolic value.

Overall, the screening system mitigates risks from relaxed confidentiality by selecting industry-suited heirs, distinct from familial predecessors. While new inheritors emerge, the system ensures effective knowledge transmission. As recognition deepens, "elite" apprentices progressively acquire advanced expertise.

## Finding and Discussion

Although the educational content of ceramic heritage is currently becoming more public, to further explore whether "confidentiality consciousness" ists in the educational activities, we, as outsiders, assumed the role of apprentices and participated in folk education activities. The nearly month-long experience left a deep impression on us. Unlike the classroom teaching methods of academic education, the knowledge transmission process of masters is still carried out in a traditional form today. They did not use any modern multimedia equipment; there were with pictures or slides, and there were no supporting teaching materials. In the masters' discourse, ceramic knowledge transmission is practice-oriented. In this regard, Hadjimichael (2023) discussion grounded in Michael Polanyi's theory of knowledge provides an intuitive concept: knowledge can be divided into explicit and tacit. Explicit knowledge represents the type of knowledge that is easily expressed verbally, while tacit knowledge is the opposite.

During our investigation, we discovered that the masters primarily imparted tacit knowledge to their students, with only the basic teaching of tools and pattern reproduction requiring extensive language explanations. However, even though tacit knowledge is often difficult to express verbally, face-to-face observation and imitation have proven to be very effective means of learning this type of knowledge. In fact, masters do use similar methods to pass on knowledge to the next generation. For instance, the master not only demonstrates the drawing process but also physically guides the apprentice's hand to ensure that the 'correct' action is performed when they attempt to draw a line. We refer to it as an interventional instructional approach. Its advantage is its ability to intuitively transfer heritage knowledge to pupils and prevent an excessive number of errors. After the training concluded, we attempted to codify it into attributes that could be visually assessed. Consequently, it became our critical responsibility to conduct a systematic analysis of the masters' knowledge transmission channels.

It is noteworthy that the theory of knowledge transmission developed by educationist Bello (year) is a significant foundation for this analytical work. His framework divides channels into four dimensions: vision, hearing, scent, and touch. Furthermore, in

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conjunction with Macarthy's framework for evaluating relationship quality, we employ four levels to assess the channel's strength: very strong, strong, medium, and weak. Table 2 shows the final results.

The content shown in the table highlights the essence of folk heritage transmission. We examined how channels play a role in the transmission of heritage knowledge, with some tools or steps introducing types of explicit knowledge that masters can verbalize clearly, and numerous demonstration opportunities providing excellent learning examples. However, when it comes to tacit knowledge, the masters adopted a silent attitude, which can easily be regarded as a "confidentiality" measure by the outside world, because they hardly explain the clear principles of knowledge like the professors in the academy, emphasizing more on intervention and demonstration. However, we observed that demonstrations were primarily utilized during the initial stages of instruction. Subsequently, the instructors shifted to verbal guidance as their method of intervention. For instance, instructors may occasionally evaluate our practice outcomes and provide feedback such as, "The paint in your pen has dried and requires resorption," "The lines you have drawn are excessively thick; please reduce their width," and other comparable phrases. Nevertheless, this type of language is typically not informative or elucidating. They do not provide an explanation for their actions; rather, they inform students of their errors and the necessary corrections. This aligns with the anthropologist Marchand's (2001) assertion that traditional education is devoid of substantive language expression.

Overall, the intensity of the masters' education channels diminishes. The demonstrations and interventions they provide initially gradually diminish over time, and eventually they no longer even provide guidance. We believe this is a deliberate approach, suggesting a gradual secrecy of knowledge, which raises doubts about the lifting of confidentiality restrictions.

However, a new discovery has altered our perspective. We observed that the word "Wu" recurred frequently in the masters' discourse. Whenever the masters finish demonstrating or commenting on the students' practice works, they urge the students to perform more "Wu" on their own. According to our survey, "Wu" is a traditional way of thinking unique to China. Chinese scholar Guo Fulan (1992) defines "Wu" as a high-level thinking process. In the cognitive practice and development activities of Chinese society, "Wu" is also a manifestation of mature thinking. In the masters' view, ceramic heritage knowledge, especially technical knowledge, must be acquired and ultimately mastered through long-term practical exercises, rather than verbal instruction. In other words, the focus of "Wu" teaching is not just a simple knowledge transmission channel, but a process of continuously maturing the understanding of heritage skills from a spiritual perspective. Importantly, this traditional teaching value has not changed due to modernization. The value of "Wu" has always been continuously emphasized and adhered to by masters. According to the masters, knowledge learned through "Wu" is more memorable than knowledge imparted verbally. Deliberate verbal "confidentiality" is not a concealment of knowledge, but a unique teaching method in Chinese pedagogy. Although Western thinking acknowledges the concept of "Wu" to varying degrees, it advocates rational "Wu" in the practical sense rather than irrational "Wu". We interpret this as a spontaneous and "non-literal" teaching process, which also illustrates the role of "Wu" in transmitting heritage. It can be said that "Wu" represents an important way for the Chinese folk heritage education model to cultivate students to think

independently and discover the world. However, the current limitation lies in "Wu" being more suitable for the transmission of experiential tacit knowledge. For explicit knowledge, the role of "Wu" is very weak.

Even though we have a new understanding of the folk teaching method represented by "Wu", the reason for its emphasis may, in our opinion, be related to the educational background of the masters. In our research on the collected folk education data, we found that almost all masters lack higher education experience, and their acquisition of cultural capital stems almost from the folk education system. During China's Cultural Revolution in 1966, higher education was disrupted and repurposed as a tool for political power consolidation (Fu, 2015). In particular, the "left-leaning" policy of eliminating the "four olds" (old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits) hindered the transmission of national culture. The hostile environment toward traditional culture deprived many individuals born in the 1950s and early 1960s of the opportunity for higher education. This led many masters to enter the workforce prematurely. Although they later engaged in folk heritage knowledge learning, theoretical education in colleges and universities—as Glaser (1984) argues—helps to establish logical thinking abilities alongside basic skills, and is more effective for learning skills from a problem-solving perspective. Therefore, the lack of a theoretical foundation in their education explains why masters rely on the verbal confidentiality strategy of "Wu" instead of adopting explanatory teaching methods.

## Conclusion

We conducted a comprehensive anthropological analysis of ethnic ceramic heritage education in China, focusing on masters' practices, to unveil the evolution of the "confidentiality" system in this study. Our interest in this topic stems from the fact that today's social development context, while retaining industrial-era traits, has led to a shortage of heritage inheritors. Despite this, the dominance of the screening system in folk education exacerbates the long-standing gap between tradition and confidentiality. While some aspects align with prior research on folk confidentiality ideology by Geoffrey Gowlland, our findings contradict its assumed teaching qualities. Nevertheless, new discoveries reveal a transformative shift: modern folk education transcends apprenticeship identity constraints to promote heritage learning — a trend we attribute to China's continuously evolving educational policies and social dynamics. Furthermore, this suggests that folk ceramic education has retained traditional consciousness amid challenging living conditions. By refining knowledge transfer frameworks, masters strive to maintain equilibrium in a rapidly changing world. This resilience of traditional value systems against environmental shifts echoes theories of scholars like Samuel and Max Weber, emphasizing robust adaptability.

Moreover, knowledge transmission theory proves invaluable for explaining ceramic heritage education and clarifying the link between traditional values and transmission behaviors. We argue for redefining "confidentiality". Earlier scholars such as Marchand, Pamela O. Long, framed confidentiality as a narrow system focused on withholding core knowledge. However, masters treat the "Wu" method as a vital tradition, transforming "confidentiality" into a pedagogical strategy. Despite efforts to enhance transparency in heritage education, they retain essential verbal "confidentiality strategies", thereby fostering learning autonomy and infusing heritage education with positivity. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that "Wu" can be challenging for outsiders or novice learners. As Meijer noted, the core challenge of education lies in transmitting

knowledge across generations. We propose that supplementing "Wu" with theoretical explanations via targeted channels could improve heritage knowledge transmission efficiency.

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