

“Objects, memory and cultural identity in (re)construction”

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The Yingge Ceramics Museum and the Institutionalization of a New Taiwanese Artistic Tradition. Taiwan Ceramics as a Mirror of Taiwan History and its National Culture Shift

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 21st century, Taiwanese ceramic art and industry appears to be well-entrenched parts of the cultural and economic landscape of the country. At the forefront of advanced industrial ceramic technology, and boasting the creation of one of the relatively few ceramic museums in the world, Taiwan presents itself as a land of ceramic culture. A closer look at Taiwan's history shows however that ceramics in Taiwan are a rather “modern” tradition that rose in the 20th century, and especially after 1950. The development of Taiwanese ceramic industry and art is actually the product of the country's modernization, and ceramic production history closely follows the modern political and economic changes in Taiwan since 1895 and its cession to Japan. While coarse utilitarian and architectural earthenware, as well as Koji ware for temples, were produced locally in the 19th century, most quality ware and ceramic products were imported from China's ceramic centers, then after 1895 from Japan. Ceramic art finally appeared in Taiwan only at the turn of the 1980s following a series of technological and socio-economic development that raised the level of ceramic production and knowledge on the island.

This paper studies the institutional development of ceramic art in Taiwan as an example of the contemporary construction of a national Taiwanese culture, with a focus on the Yingge Ceramics Museum created in 2000 by the Taipei County Government under the stewardship of the DPP governor Su Tcheng-chang. The ceramic production center of Yingge, in Taipei County, is itself a good symbol of the recent development of Taiwanese ceramics. Now considered the heart of Taiwanese ceramics, it only reached national status in the 1950s and especially in the 1970s while other old and more renowned production sites, like Beitou, Nantou or Miaoli, declined. Reflecting this particular history, the Yingge Ceramics Museum, as a “local” museum, has a mandate to develop local culture and tourism that creates ambiguities and tension with its national and artistic ambitions.

We will look how the creation of Yingge Ceramics Museum illustrates both the institutionalization of a new artistic practice in Taiwan and the promotion of ceramics as part of the Taiwanese national culture and tradition. It also offers a good case study of the role of museums in the (re)construction by the state of the collective memory of the nation, following the worldwide established pattern of national culture's crafting by the modern state and reversing forty years of Chinese cultural invention in Taiwan under the KMT regime.