

# **In the Face of Instability and Marginalisation in a Gendered Craft Industry: Self-Realisation and Resilience of the Self-employed Craftswomen in Jingdezhen, China**

**Ruoxi Liu**  
**University of Cambridge**

*Through a four-month ethnographic study from May to August 2020 in Jingdezhen, the Chinese capital of porcelain, I investigated the self-employment practice and work-and-lifestyles of the female craft workers. Despite the increasing presence of female self-employed craft workers in Jingdezhen in the recent decade, its local ceramic labor distribution continues to be gendered. This study incorporated a variety of qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, participant observations and diary method. Despite the self-realization of female craft workers in Jingdezhen through self-employed craft work, I firstly highlight the instability embedded in their craft work, marginalization of craftswomen's roles and works and self-doubtfulness on creativity. I argue that the frequent critiques of craftswomen's ceramic works have generalized them as being domestic and feminine and ignored their diverse skills, aesthetics, and artistic dispositions. I also suggest that such generalization has further marginalized 'femininity' in ceramic cultures and productions. Secondly, I recognize the difficulties that the craftswomen have encountered in non-workplaces and the pressures from family and social expectations and argue that the allegedly 'work and life balance challenge' set for women overshadows their compromises and sacrifices in their craft journey. By showcasing my interlocutors' 'minor' feelings and reflecting on my own fieldwork experience, I reveal a gendered power relationship in personal interactions at an everyday level continued to exist in Jingdezhen's craft world. I finally argue that while self-employment and craft are empowering practices and have offered the craftswomen opportunities to fulfill their potentials, independent craftswomen in Jingdezhen still suffer from instability, marginalization, societal expectations, daily disrespect in the local male-dominated industrial context. Meanwhile, I showcase their resilience against this background by demonstrating how they negotiate these difficulties and pressures.*

*Keywords: craft workers, gender, self-realization, marginalization, resilience, China, ceramics*

## **GENDER IN CRAFT LABOR: CASE OF JINGDEZHEN, CHINA'S PORCELAIN CAPITAL**

The issues of gender, along with ethnicity, race, age and disability, have remained unarticulated in the extensive scholarships of cultural industries (Oakley 2006). In terms of the craft industry, academic literature in the 1970s and 1980s has formed a strong image of heroic masculinity, which Sennett's *The Craftsman* (2008) did not remedy (Huges 2012). Only since the 2010s, more research on craft and craft labor have highlighted 'gender' by examining how gender patterns and differences are practiced and reinforced in the process of craft-making (Huges 2012; Palmköld 2018). Some of these discussions also recognize the feminization of 'craft' in comparison to art, which in a way also results in the marginalisation

of women's work (Parker, 1989; Parker and Pollock 1991), and exacerbated the divisions between the public and private, the paid work and the leisure activity (Huges 2012).

The above focuses of the craft research firstly have contributed to investigating to what extent the craft industry still manifests a gendered dynamics and how different genders are situated in such a situation. In addition, they also urge refreshing our understanding of craft and its practitioners, in relation to (those of) other cultural industries. In this regard, this paper selects Jingdezhen, a small Chinese midland city, yet a representative of craft-centered city, as a research case to deconstruct gender from craft. Jingdezhen has exported its blue and white porcelain across the globe for over 1,000 years (Fang 2000) and is therefore known as the Chinese porcelain capital. Meanwhile, Jingdezhen's ceramic industry has undergone a long-term, state-driven development.<sup>1</sup> Only since the 1980s, the city's private economy has re-emerged and since the 2000s, a new generation of migrant workers comes to the front stage. These drifters are young, migrant, and often creativity-driven. Called as Jing drifters (*jingpiao* 景漂) in both the official and public discourse (Liu 2022), these young migrant craft workers have also aroused many academic interests.

In the previous literature on Jing drifters, craft making approaches and business models are frequent themes. Gender, again, seems to have been put aside in the discussions. In fact, there are mainly two strands of literature touching on gender and gendered power relationship within and beyond ceramic making places for the female craft workers in Jingdezhen. The first strand focuses on discussing the imbalanced gender representation in the labor distribution of the local ceramics industry. For example, some ethnographic studies found that the family workshops focusing on ceramic painting (陶瓷彩绘) entailed a gendered division of labor: Men (usually the husband) mainly drew the patterns (描线) and women (usually the wife) often painted in the patterns (填色) (Fang 2000; T. Wang 2009). The second strand focuses on business partnership. For example, several researchers found that the cooperative operation model was quite popular in Jingdezhen, such as in mom-and-pop shops (*fuqidian* 夫妻店) (Fang 2000; T. Wang 2009; Li 2014; D. Wang 2015; Wei 2016). Some of them argued that women's economic achievement was based on a cooperative production (Li 2014).

Some limits can be seen in these scholarships. Especially, when tackling with gender-based issues, they don't really specify and highlight a gender aspect. For example, the first strand of study is mostly descriptive by presenting Jingdezhen's traditionally gendered ceramic-making process without investigating into the reasons behind it. Then, having overemphasized the role of the cooperation model in ceramic-making, the second strand of literature tends to undermine women's independent work. In addition, both strands of literature possess an industrial focus, and this also suggests an economic determinism of those studies. Such economic determinism also is common in urban and migrant studies. However, in Zhang's studies on the floating Wenzhou commerce communities in Beijing, she challenged such an analytical approach by arguing that economic determinism has simplified women's (self-) empowerment. Zhang called for a more nuanced understanding of the power relationships within a migrant community other than examining economic achievements (2001). This suggests a fuller account of factors including economic, social, cultural, and interpersonal factors to consider in studying women's work.

As suggested above, 'gender' as an analytical aspect has been undermined in previous scholarship. I argue that to study the contemporary craft industry and workplace in Jingdezhen, a 'gender' aspect is worth being re-introduced, especially when researching the recent generations of migrant self-employed craft workers new and different characteristics from the previous generations. Also, despite a rising number of women craft workers in Jingdezhen's ceramics industry, positions of different genders and their power relationships have never been carefully explored. Although some scholarship has presented observations on gendered labor distribution, little has scrutinized the reasons behind it. Given these research gaps, the new generation of craft workers deserves a particular re-examination through the lens of gender.

Accordingly, to re-examine gender within a contemporary ceramic-making field and craft world, I have investigated women's work and lives within and beyond the craft community in Jingdezhen. I particularly analyze the power relationships between different genders in both work and non-workplaces. Taking Jingdezhen's craft world as a case, I inquire into the following questions: What can craftswomen achieve or realize by doing ceramics work? What difficulties or vulnerabilities do they experience in this process? What are their experiences within and out of Jingdezhen's working places? By delving into the everyday

work and life of craftswomen in Jingdezhen, and drawing on their experiences and reflections, I also aim to reflect on: To what extent, our knowledge and understanding of Jingdezhen and its ceramic industry are framed and oriented by the male perspectives? And to what extent, women's works and roles have been marginalized in the discussions of craft, art and creativity?

## RESEARCHING JINGDEZHEN'S CRAFTSWOMEN: THE CONTINUED YET UNARTICULATED GENDERED LABOR DISTRIBUTION

I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork in Jingdezhen from early May until the end of August, 2020. During the long-standing pandemic, this was a calm period. Jingdezhen, by my first visit, was reviving from the effects of the severe outbreak in China in January 2020. As it is not a densely urban city and many ceramics production sites are located in its outskirts and countryside, the locals and the craft workers were relieved with many Covid-related concerns (Liu 2022). Most of my stay was based in an Airbnb accommodation owned by Mian, a female ceramic maker. I paid visits to the studio, factories and apartments of Jingdezhen's craft workers mostly on weekdays; and on weekends and Monday mornings, I frequented various ceramics markets around the city. From mid-August 2020, I started learning ceramic-making skills such as centering, throwing, and turning from a craftsman Yimu, one of Mian's local friends. For the whole fieldwork period, aside from conducting the in-depth interviews, I observed research participants in their studios, apartments and craft markets. Besides, most of my relaxing hours in Jingdezhen were spent with my craft worker friends: we cooked, ate and had tea together; we talked about crafts, past experiences and local anecdotes. I thus became close to Mian, Yimu, and some other craft worker friends during my research, and this allowed me to dive further into their ceramic-making routines and their daily lives. Along with the process of participant observation, I conducted 37 interviews with self-employed craft workers including both the younger generation and the more traditional craftsmen. I then selected four representatives of the self-employed craft workers to conduct diary methods.

It was not hard for me to find that my field--the ceramic industry of Jingdezhen--was male-dominated and characterized by a gendered labor distribution. In the more traditional ceramic working settings, such as in the production lines of ceramic factories and traditional family-size studios, the skilled workers I encountered in hand-forming (centering, throwing, turning, etc.), dusting, slip casting, glazing and firing were mostly male, and those in incising, coloring, drawing, and applying decals, wetting before glazing were mostly female,<sup>2</sup> just as previous ethnographies of the family-run ceramic workshop workers suggested (Fang 2000; T. Wang 2009; Gillette 2016). As for the younger generation of craft workers within my focus, such gender segregation in labor distribution seems to be less obvious. In contrast, some previous scholarship still recognized some gender-based differences among contemporary ceramic workers. For example, Wei (2016) reported a high proportion of female entrepreneurs in the ceramic jewelry industry, which I also encountered during my fieldwork. Besides, I found a higher proportion of female craft workers in decorative ceramics, focus on paintings and illustrations (*huamian* 画面), than their male counterparts. Overall, of my 37 interviewees, only 11 were women. Of the 34 who were still craft workers, 8 were women.

In addition, among the younger generation of self-employed craft workers in Jingdezhen, I recognized a continuing unspoken rule concerning labor division: female craft workers were less engaged in physical work considered as hard (*xinku* 辛苦) and dirty. Taking my observations of three cases of wood firing (*chaishao* 柴烧) organized by my interlocutors as an example, craftswomen were less involved in the process of wood kiln firing given such concerns. Meanwhile, the male craft workers thought of my presence on the site, even just observing them, as hard-working for me.

Compared with propane kiln firing, wood kiln firing is a more complicated and time-consuming firing process and consists of three basic steps: kiln placing (*zhuangyao* 装窑), wall building (*qiyao* 砌窑) and firing (*shaoyao* 烧窑).<sup>3</sup> In all three wood firings that I attended, women were less involved than men in these three steps. During kiln placing, craftswomen would help stick the items with the clay, but they were not responsible for placing the items onto the board, nor for carrying the board to the kiln. During the wall building and firing stages, craftswomen usually stood by and accompanied the men who were working.

Also, when the male ceramists needed help, they seldom turned to the female ceramists. In general, there were also fewer craftswomen present during this process, except that on the day that the fire was about to finish, more female craft workers came to collect their fired works after male workers opened the kilns.

**FIGURE 1**  
**WALL BUILDING IN WOOD FIRING**



Despite such conventional, gendered divisions of labor continuing to overplay in Jingdezhen's contemporary craft world, surprisingly, gender is something my interlocutors seldom discussed or explicitly referred to. Almost no craftswoman in the Jingdezhen field ever articulated out 'gender', nor talked about what they had suffered in the context of gender differences. Even gender imbalance was rarely raised by my interlocutors. This partly lies in the rising presentation of female ceramists and their creative studios with the increasing number of self-employed craft workers in Jingdezhen. As most of their businesses are individually organized, some craftswomen would insist on hand-making their products and overseeing the entire production and selling processes entirely on their own. As Jingdezhen preserves every procedure of ceramic-making and the production cost is very low, these individual craftswomen can start by engaging themselves in different procedures of making ceramics. Some others, benefiting from the highly specified labor distribution and relatively low local labor cost, can distribute some intense labor to the skilled workers (*shifu* 师傅) at a manageable cost. In both cases, women were able to apply their creative ideas into practice through ceramics. Consequently, the rising craftswomen and businesswomen in the local craft markets have seemed to diversify the traditionally male-dominated ceramic market representation.

Although a gender-blinded narrative is prevalent among my interlocutors and despite women's increasing presence in the industry, when conducting my fieldwork, I still found the working environment male-dominated. The following section will draw on my participant observations, in-depth interviews, and diaries to showcase a more detailed account of craftswomen's work and lived experiences in Jingdezhen's craft world.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The last two decades have witnessed a rise of young generations of self-employed craft workers, who can start ceramics making from their university ceramics education, or simply from experimenting, and

learning from the more experienced workers through practices. Along with this trend, younger generations of women have been more present in Jingdezhen's ceramics industry. The first time I visited Jingdezhen, my first contact Xia'nian led me to Hewan, a Jingdezhen local and second-generation ceramics entrepreneur working on antique-inspired ceramics, to offer me a perspective of a female ceramist and entrepreneur in Jingdezhen. Born in a family who has been making ceramics since the 1990s, Hewan is relatively well-resourced. As a second-generation, she set up her own business after graduating from Jingdezhen Ceramic University in 2012. As her enterprise grew, she also thought of developing a hotel and farm business. The time when I visited Hewan was one of her busiest moments. After finishing organizing the live streaming work of the day, she came to Xia'nian and me for a talk. She served the first several rounds of tea and commented on young women doing ceramics work in Jingdezhen.

While recognizing herself as an emerging example, she reiterated that her pathway was still rare among her colleagues. Of 200 of her classmates, only 3 stayed in the industry six years after graduation. Despite the rising number of women as individual ceramists, 'there have been very few female ceramic entrepreneurs'. Other than herself, Hewan only found one other ceramics enterprise owned by a female director who reached a similar size to her.

The post-90s generation women who make ceramics (in Jingdezhen) should be only me! There are very few women doing ceramics, because this industry is really hard. It is very hard work! It's not a very chill industry! It's not beautiful, not fanciful or whatever, and you have to cope with many things and there are a lot of tedious things. Then the people you meet every day are like idiots...

(Extract from the interview with Hewan, female, in her 20s, ceramics entrepreneur, single)

Despite people's appraisals of being a promising young ceramic entrepreneur, Hewan kept emphasizing the unwanted side of this career and described ceramics making as hard work full of tedious routines and unpleasant interpersonal relationships. Accordingly, the following two subsections, while echoing these features suggested by Hewan, will respectively discuss and reflect on the paradox of craftswomen's self-realization versus the instability and marginalization they have faced, their allegedly work-life balance dilemma, and the micro-aggressions they have encountered in their daily lives.

### **Self-Realization Narratives but Instability and Marginalized Creativity**

It is a long way for a migrant craft worker to own an enterprise to the size of Hewan's. The majority of Jing drifters, being migrants, still work individually and have to cope with difficulties in ceramics making and living in Jingdezhen on their own. My landlord and housemate Mian was an individual female craft worker in Jingdezhen. Having graduated with a Ceramics Design major from the Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute, Mian had two years of working experience as a graphic designer in Hangzhou, capital city of Zhejiang province that is within a 3-hour high-speed train distance. Tired of being in a big city and in the pursuit of ceramics creation, Mian returned to Jingdezhen in 2018 and picked up her ceramic-making skills as an individual worker. It was at first a healing process for her: She was influenced by the 'Do-It-Yourself' spirit through her entire ceramics education and training and enjoyed much of ceramic-making and other forms of craft work. They could provide her with a sense of achievement. She also loved Jingdezhen's environment as she preferred a simple and self-sufficient lifestyle.

Just as Mian's journey suggests self-realization and independence, much literature on craft labor has recognized the empowering characteristics of craft and cultural work for women, especially those that incorporate de-traditionalized approaches and economies that can offer women paths to workspace freedom (Banks and Milestone, 2011). However, this is just one side of the story. As Mian's working experience accumulated, she started to realize the low efficiency and profitability of craft work. Although Mian sometimes subcontracted centering, glazing and firing to skilled workmen, most parts of her works including drawing the patterns, trimming and wetting were done by herself at home. Ceramics making is a slow process and is not as profitable as people often think. For several months, Mian had been worried about the number of orders she could receive and complete in a month. The fluctuations in income also added to her concerns about the sustainability of making creative ceramics.

Like Mian, many of my interviewees worried about and suffered from income instability, especially in the early years of their careers. Besides, very few of my informants have neither joined such a program nor bought commercial welfare or insurance plan. Being not affiliated to companies that are responsible for the employees' welfare package, and nor surrounded by peers who are concerned with risks, these self-employed are unaware of the necessity of joining a welfare system. Besides, the relatively risk-free environment of Jingdezhen, as well as the fact that they are still young, alleviates their concerns about risks and uncertainties. Some interlocutors mentioned that their low and unstable income led to not joining social welfare at the moment, particularly when the incomplete Chinese national welfare system sets a higher bar for the independent workers to join in (Liu 2022).<sup>4</sup> As for craftswomen, income instability thus has prevented the self-employed craft workers from paying regularly to welfare and insurance, which further results in little risk-dealing capacity and increasing social instability.

As such, working alone and facing production and financial difficulties and social welfare instability from time to time, they have recurring doubts on and hesitance about future pathways. Although income instability and lack of social security or safeguard is a common phenomenon regardless of gender, women who are faced with more pressure from their family, especially if they are the only child of the family, would also face worries from family and the broader society for being a 'left-over woman' (*shengnü* 剩女), a stigmatizing term to refer to an unmarried woman in China. They, consequently, more often pondered over their career pathways and self-employment choices.

The last few days of this week were particularly bad, and I feel like I came to a state of hesitation and wandering. I had the idea of not working and giving up over and over again.  
(Extract from Mian's diary, week 4. Mian, female, in her 20s, individual craft worker, single)

In addition, in face of the frequent dilemma of whether 'fulfilling orders and going commercial' approach versus 'artistic creation' approach in craft work, craftswomen were more hesitant as they were not confident enough about the quality, creativity and artistic dispositions of their works.

Maybe I am not really that creative or artistic... Maybe what I make are just some daily pieces of stuffs...

After I have been alone for a long time, my self-confirmation is just not that full...you know? It's easy to get caught up in a little thing...I became a little sensitive, and I wonder if my works are really bad or not...because I am not on a normal trajectory. I don't have any criteria to judge whether I am good or bad. In other industries, maybe a high salary means a strong ability; but in this industry, we can't say because someone earns less so their works are poorer. There is no way to make a firm judgment in this market... though I think every industry still has certain rules.

(Extract from the interview with Mian, female, in her 20s, individual craft worker, single)

As Mian's struggling narratives imply, although there haven't been any written rules in ceramic aesthetics and profitability is not the only standard for well-recognized craft work, there indeed have been preferences in the market. In many of our private conversations, she frequently expressed her dissatisfaction and self-doubtfulness about her creativity, and this made me wonder what kind of aesthetic structure and standards made her feel so. From Mian's perspective, her works were characterized by routinized and daily features, not being creative and artistic enough. These comments were found among other female interlocutors during my fieldwork.

Meanwhile, I found some frequent vocabularies from Chinese scholarship when describing the craftswomen's artistic styles and creative approaches, such as 'feminine' (*nüxinghua de* 女性化的/ *yinrou* 阴柔), 'daily' (*shenghuohua de* 生活化的), 'freshing' (*qingxin* 清新), 'tender' (*wenrou* 温柔), 'subtle' (*xini* 细腻) and 'delicate' (*jingzhi* 精致) (Meng and Xiao 2008; Guo 2012; Zhu 2018; Li and Fang 2019). Although some of these literature recognize that women are marginalized in the ceramic industry and in the creative competition (Zhu 2018; Li and Fang 2019), most of these critiques have generalized craftswomen's works and styles to be a miniature of their everydayness full of nuanced details and expressive feelings. These comments not only ignore the diversity of women's craft works whose aesthetics and styles are beyond this

range, but also, they have created an untruly contrasting counterpart--men's craft works that direct to every else feature except 'feminine'. These tendencies also resonate with the arguments of some non-Chinese scholarship that associate women's craft works with domestic and practices versus their associations of men with expertise and professionalism (Huges 2012).

Accordingly, with women's creativity having been overlooked and stereotyped, feminized works and aesthetics have also been marginalized in the market. Previously in the analysis of home craft and women's magazines published during the 1920s and 1930s, Hackney (2006) argued that with a strong association with the feminine side, magazine articles, which included embroidery, rug-making, crochet, simple carpentry and woodwork were either mocked or overlooked by professionals. Similarly, in the case of Jingdezhen, the fact that feminized works are understood as mediums to touch on routinized lifestyle also makes them no longer able to be recognized as a high-brow art exhibited in an established gallery venue. Such unequally male-dominated aesthetic structures have thus led to craftswomen's low confidence and hesitation. In the meantime, despite being self-doubtful, they have also persuaded themselves that what the market acknowledges is not necessarily good. I argue that this kind of pushing back and forth in their mindsets has challenged the male-led aesthetic traditions and can adjust the mainstream standards in tandem with new tendencies of ceramics cultures. However, an overall optimistic picture cannot be drawn as women's creativity and inputs into the craft world have still been marginalized.

It seems paradoxical that in one aspect, the journey of female ceramic workers pursuing a career as a craftswoman and entrepreneur is empowering, and, in another aspect, they suffer from extensive instability resulting from low profitability of craft work, financial and social insecurity. Especially, their aesthetics and creative works, having been stereotypically interpreted, are marginal and secondary in the ceramic markets and cultures. Such a fact frequently leads to their low confidence and hesitation. To summarize, the empowering side of the story does exist, but the mass and new media have also romanticized the local ceramic industry by depicting Jingdezhen as a world full of dreamful creativity and easy to achieve joyful success (Guangming Daily 2020; Sohu 2021; Lu 2022). The above section, while bringing up craftswomen's individualization, self-realization and alternative-seeking mentality, highlights their instability in craft work, particularly the extra social pressures and marginalization that the craftswomen are faced with.

### **Compromise, Sacrifice and Resilience: Combating with Work-life Balance and Everyday 'Minor' Feelings**

As suggested above, the idyllic side of Jingdezhen and empowering journey of craftswomen does not reduce the instability and vulnerabilities faced by the young craft workers. For craftswomen especially, vulnerabilities do not only come from the working spheres. During my stay in Jingdezhen, my roommate Mian came to a crossroads in her life. She planned to purchase a house in Jingdezhen to settle down, but this plan was delayed because her parents had decided to save money for her younger brother rather than pay her deposit. Moreover, her parents' worries about her being still single further intensified her anxiety. These all added to Mian's pressures and frustrations, and this situation was not unique among the female craft workers of Jingdezhen. Often the only child of their families, these women, upon reaching their 30s, would confront multi-level pressures. Moreover, senior members of their families often challenge the choices of single women to be self-employed. In the penultimate week of her diary, Mian wrote about herself quitting being a self-employed craft worker:

Finally, I resolutely realized that if I just were to focus on drawing in my ceramics making, it would be difficult for me to continue. So, I finally chose to give up making ceramics and have found a job in designing in a company... a young company... Ceramic making is a long-term thing for me. I will keep it as my hobby. (Extract from Mian's diary, week 11.)

Mian's journey reveals the struggles of a single craftswoman in Jingdezhen, and her choice also suggests the compromise one may have for these struggles. In comparison, married female ceramists, who face less pressure from their parents, still experience pressure from their routines. Once, I visited the

workshop of Hui, Mian's good friend, and we discussed her time commitments with Yiqu, Hui's neighbor and a male self-employed craft worker. Regarding time, Hui expressed a minor inconvenience in daily life:

**Ruoxi:** Do you think you can take care of different things at the same time?

**Yiqu:** Sure, there are many things to take care of at the same time. I think one can manage anything.

**Hui:** People's thoughts do vary.

**Yiqu:** It's not about the thought. It's about determination. You have to push yourself.

**Hui:** I just can't push myself.

**Ruoxi:** Oh, Mian said the same thing.

**Hui:** Yes, I don't think pushing myself works. Do you know that I wake up at 5:30 am every morning but don't arrive here until 9 am? I spend three hours doing housework.

**Ruoxi:** Doing what?

**Hui:** The housework –it's such a waste of time, but you just cannot escape it. I feel annoyed. It's likewhen people ask you to make some other things while you are busy, you have to stop doing your work and turn to the others.

(Extract from the interview. Hui, female, in her 30s, individual craft worker, married. Yiqu, male, in his 30s, individual craft worker, single)

Hui, at the time, was preparing for her wedding. Compared with other single craftswomen, Hui was more certain about continuing her career in Jingdezhen, where she had lived since her undergraduate. Nonetheless, her promising life plan coexists with other sources of pressure, either from her ceramic work or from her (family) chores. While Hui emphasized the burden of housework, Yiqu did not seem to consider it.

In addition, during my fieldwork, I encountered some partnership-based ceramic workshops between married and unmarried couples. Women, in most cases, regardless of their previous experiences in the ceramics making, would take on marketing, sales, or other auxiliary work, especially after marrying or having a child. Some previous scholars mentioned women's incapability for physical work (Yu 2018) and argued that this change of work focus results from women's incapability for physical work (Li 2014). I argue these are sexist generalizations, which not only undermine women's capabilities, but also ignore their possible compromises and sacrifices.

The above experiences and feelings suggest how much female ceramists may suffer from their non-industrial workloads and how often they need to negotiate work with family and other life chores. Previous Chinese academic literature (Xu 2019) summarized this as craftswomen's way of balancing their work and life. However, I argue that the fact that the work-life balance seems to be a challenge for craftswomen is worth re-examination. The work-life balance narrative also needs reflecting on what balancing means to women, and whether and to what extent such balancing leads to compromises and sacrifices.

In addition, other than women's negotiations with the pressures from both the work and non-work spheres, I also found that women, including those considered 'successful' in their careers, suffer in their interpersonal relationships. In conversations with Hewan, one of the few young female entrepreneurs in Jingdezhen, I unexpectedly heard her complain about her an irritating moment while operating her business.

**Hewan:** Some people don't know how to respect others. Sometimes they just say one sentence and you will feel extremely uncomfortable. [But] He doesn't see the problem there. These are bad-mannered people. If I don't do business in ceramics, I will not get in touch with these guys for my whole life... Do you understand this?

**Ruoxi:** Do you mean those workmen (*shifu* 师傅)?

**Hewan:** Yes, some craftsmen.... They may have left their hometown when they were ten years old to find work; they have no culture, nor any family education...For example, I remember there was one man who came to trim the clay. After we agreed to the day rate, he started working here. On the second day, he didn't show up. I asked him why he didn't come that day. He said 'because you were not here'. I asked why I needed to be there. He said 'I came here to work only because you are a beauty. If you are not here, who do I watch for?' What the hell? Does he have a mental problem?

(Extract from the interview with Hewan, female, in her 20s, ceramics entrepreneur, single)



Hewan's narrative reveals some of the insults and disrespect that female ceramists experience, even for those who are superiors in the professional setting. But none of my interviewees ever articulated these issues and their experiences as problems related to 'gender', but as things concerning 'culture' and 'family education'. Without further feminist analysis, these gender-based misbehaviors would remain veiled and obscure. Hewan's experience led to me reflecting on my own ethnographic experience: Most of my interviews and participant observations in the studios and kilns occurred during the midsummer of Jingdezhen. As the craft workers thought I made a great effort to visit them, listen to, and learn from them, and I tried to work as much as I can in the studio, I received some appraisals and comments from craftsmen such as 'not the typical female Ph.D. student' and was 'different from other girls'. I was aware that many of these comments were made to compliment me, and they were sincere. Meanwhile, these comments revealed the lack of gender awareness of the craft workers in the Jingdezhen's field. I later also realized that these views are based on stereotypical views of women in the craft world. For instance, female self-employed workers would be considered atypical and admirable if they managed the whole production process, especially hand-forming work and firing, on their own. More importantly, while my interlocutors attributed these misbehaviors to workmen having 'no culture' or 'little family education', in fact, they are gender-based. Furthermore, these misbehaviors happened on an everyday basis. These everyday feelings, as the craftswomen dismiss as irritating and frustrating, are indeed not minor. I argue that the way craftswomen have described their uncomfortable experiences and feelings as 'minor' further reflects the highly male-dominated industrial environment in Jingdezhen, where gender-based interactions can occur frequently within the craft communities, in working places, and in private interpersonal interactions. In such a context, gender-based insults and disrespect have been more easily to be normalized and ignored.

Despite all these difficulties coming from the industry's male-dominated environment for craftswomen, my field observations still highlight women's resilience to face and tackle these multi-faceted pressures. Hui has continued her craft career with her husband; Hewan's business has been growing; and Mian, in May 2022, almost a half year after giving up craft work, returned to self-employment in craft work again.

## CONCLUSION

Craftswomen in Jingdezhen are still situated in a male-dominated industry and experience various gender-based dilemmas. Based on my ethnography, I find that despite the rising Jing drifters and self-employed female ceramists within them and there seem to be more women present in different sub-industries of Jingdezhen, the gendered labor distribution continues to be present in Jingdezhen's local industry. Women have achieved their professional and artistic pursuits through ceramics works, but they are also experiencing income and social instability in their handmade craft work and self-employment. Besides, other than the difficulties aroused in the working place, women also experience pressures from their family and society and often, they will need to choose and balance, negotiate and compromise between family and profession, social expectations and personal pursuits. Moreover, the insults and offences that may happen in women's everyday life further indicated an unequally gendered personal relationship but regarded as normal between these craft workers.

Jingdezhen's collective craft world is still characterized by gendered collective working space and interpersonal relationships. Against such context, while women's (self-) empowerment and self-realization can be highlighted in craft and creative work, they are not devoid of vulnerabilities, marginalization and sufferance. However, this paper does not end up being overall pessimistic. In contrast, it recognizes craftswomen's resilience and persistence. Moreover, to further knowledge on gendered power relationships in craft work and craft labor, this paper calls for more research in future with a gender perspective to be conducted within the Chinese craft worlds.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Jingdezhen has a population of under 1.7 million in an area of 5,256 km<sup>2</sup>. It is a small city by Chinese standards (Jingdezhen People's Government, 2021).
2. In pottery techniques, centering is the work to ensure that the clay revolves in the exact centre of the wheel head before throwing; throwing is the hand-forming process of a mass of soft, plastic clay on the rotating wheel head; turning involves trimming excess clay from around outside base edge and under the thrown form; and glazing is the process by which glaze is applied in liquid form to the surface of an object before firing (Cosentino 2018).
3. In kiln placing, the workers attach every unfired work onto the kiln board (*yaoban* 窑板) with the clay before placing it in the kiln properly. Because an item's position has a strong effect on whether and how wood ash falls on them, this step is important and can last up to three hours. Once every item is placed properly, the workers begin to seal the kiln by piling up the brick walls. This step may last for another hour or two. After the kiln wall is built and sealed, the person in charge of the wood firing lights the fire. The wood firing usually lasts 48 hours, during which time at least one person monitors the kiln, and its temperature and adds wood when needed.
4. The Chinese social security system includes five insurances and one fund. For the employed, the payment is organized by their employer and paid by them. For the self-employed, they can join the system either through direct registration or through agency and affiliation. In some cities, participation is limited to those with a local household registration. Besides, participation through an agency usually asks for a commission fee. In addition, not all insurance policies and funds are available for the self-employed (Liu 2022).

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