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## The Modern Value of Traditional Chinese Crafts and Discipline Construction—A Reprint of the Compilation Summary of *Complete Collection of Traditional Chinese Crafts*

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**Date:** 2023-03-19T00:00:00+00:00

### Abstract

Traditional crafts possess extremely significant livelihood, academic, and modern value, constituting an essential and indispensable component of China's modernization drive. Consequently, the disciplinary construction of traditional crafts has become an urgent task requiring research and implementation. To this end, the Chinese Academy of Sciences launched a major research project in 1996 to compile the "Complete Collection of Chinese Traditional Crafts," and after 20 years of effort, published 20 volumes comprising the first and second series in 2017. As a systematic series of documentary academic monographs, its publication has generated extensive social impact and received high acclaim from the academic community, being regarded as a foundational undertaking for the nation's scientific and cultural endeavors. However, its limitation lies in being comprehensive in name but not in substance, with an overly simplistic treatment of the relationships and interactions between crafts, economy, and humanities. Therefore, revision and expansion are necessary. Currently, with the care and support of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the revision, supplementation, and continuation of the "Complete Collection" are being carried out in an intensive and orderly manner.

### Full Text

### Preamble

**Special Issue: Cognition and Revitalization of Traditional Crafts and Arts**

**Modern Value and Discipline Construction of Chinese Traditional**

## Crafts and Arts—Editorial Notes on *Complete Collection on Traditional Chinese Crafts and Arts*

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Traditional crafts possess significant livelihood value, academic value, and modern value, representing an indispensable and integral component of China's modernization drive. Consequently, the disciplinary construction of traditional crafts has become an urgent priority requiring immediate research and implementation. In response, the Chinese Academy of Sciences launched the major research project to compile the *Complete Collection on Traditional Chinese Crafts and Arts* in 1996. After twenty years of dedicated effort, twenty volumes across two series were published in 2017. As a systematic series of documentary academic monographs, its publication has generated widespread social impact and earned high praise from the academic community, which regards it as foundational infrastructure for national scientific and cultural undertakings. However, its limitation lies in being “comprehensive in name but incomplete in substance,” with insufficient attention paid to the relationships and interactions between crafts and economics, as well as humanities. Therefore, revision and expansion are necessary. Currently, with the care and support of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the revision, supplementation, and continuation of the *Collection* are proceeding in an intensive and orderly manner.

**Keywords:** traditional crafts, modern value, discipline construction

**DOI:** 10.16418/j.issn.1000-3045.2018.12.004

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## Past and Present of Traditional Crafts

Traditional crafts are handicrafts formed historically and transmitted to the present day. China has long been described as “founded on agriculture,” but this characterization is not entirely accurate. Agriculture requires the support of handicrafts, and together they created ancient China's material and spiritual civilization. All artificially made cultural relics, ancient architecture, and ancient engineering works are products of handicrafts—that is, traditional crafts. From this alone, we can see the tremendous historical role and value of traditional crafts. *Kaogongji* lists the “hundred crafts” as one of the six essential functions of the state, praising “the affairs of the hundred crafts as the work of sages”—a highly accurate assessment.

However, ancient China emphasized the Dao over the vessel, regarding handicrafts as “inferior skills.” From the pre-Qin period to the end of the Qing Dynasty, across three millennia, only two books systematically documented crafts: *Kaogongji* and *Tiangong Kaiwu*. All other records appear sporadically in official histories, unofficial records, notes, and novels, mostly in brief and fragmentary form. Some extremely important crafts that played major roles in

socio-economic development, such as malleable cast iron technology, were never documented; while widely applied techniques like lost-wax casting and metal mold casting only received mention in the Song Dynasty and late Qing period.

Even during the decades from the 1950s to the early 21st century, this situation did not fundamentally change. Indeed, traditional crafts lacked institutional affiliation for a long period. The responsible departments—the former Ministry of Light Industry, later the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology and the China National Light Industry Council—never managed these crafts effectively, causing many excellent traditional crafts to be discontinued or fall into endangered states. This represents the day before yesterday and yesterday of Chinese traditional crafts.

Times change, and fortunes shift. In 2004, the Chinese government signed the *International Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Subsequently, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) protection was implemented as a national undertaking reflecting the will of the entire populace and received support from all sectors of society. Traditional crafts listed in the national ICH catalog reached over 1,350 items, accounting for one-quarter of the total ICH inventory, and received particular attention due to their relevance to national welfare and people's livelihoods. Finally, in 2015, their inheritance and development were elevated to a national strategy, with policy concepts and work priorities shifting from protection to revitalization. In 2017, the State Council issued the *Plan for Revitalizing Traditional Chinese Crafts* (Document No. 25 [2017] of the General Office), jointly formulated by the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and Ministry of Finance. This indicates that the contemporary fate of traditional crafts is better than in ancient and pre-modern times, and their institutional affiliation has finally been established. This represents the promising today and tomorrow of Chinese traditional crafts.

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## Modern Value of Traditional Crafts

For a time, some scholars avoided discussing the modern value of traditional crafts, deliberately or unconsciously evading this topic. A few individuals, including some leaders in charge of relevant departments, even regarded traditional crafts as dispensable, outdated matters destined for museum shelves. This view is mistaken and contrary to reality. Look around us: axes and chisels, hoes and mattocks, black and green tea, rice and grain wine, bamboo and rattan weaving, wood and jade carving, clay and dough figurines, tie-dyeing and batik, Yun brocade and Suzhou embroidery, gold and silver foil, celadon and purple sand pottery, paper-cuts and New Year paintings, Tongrentang, Quanjude, Wang Mazi scissors, Zhang Xiaoquan knives, cloisonné, Chinese knots... oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar, clothing, shoes, hats, fireworks, writing brushes, ink, paper, and inkstones—much of what we eat, wear, use, and play with, what

hangs on our walls and adorns our bodies, remains handmade products . With national economic development, rising living standards, growing yearning for a return to nature and local culture, and elevated aesthetic orientation, people will have greater and more sophisticated demand for handmade products, and more individuals will participate in craft activities and engage in manual production. Therefore, as an important component of excellent traditional culture, traditional crafts will increasingly be valued and well-treated—this is certain.

According to the classification scheme formulated by the Chinese Traditional Crafts Research Association, Chinese traditional crafts can be divided into fifteen major categories: tool and instrument making; agricultural, livestock, and mineral product processing; sculpture; construction; weaving, dyeing, embroidery, and clothing production; ceramic firing; metal mining, smelting, and processing; weaving and binding; lacquer decoration; furniture making; paper-making; printing; paper-cutting, carving, printing, and painting; special crafts; and traditional Chinese medicine processing. Under these major categories are subcategories, and under subcategories are specific types, forming a three-tier classification system. For example, tool and instrument making includes subcategories such as tools, agricultural implements, machinery, instruments, vehicles, vessels, and musical instruments, with tools further including specific types like axes, chisels, saws, and ink lines. All these traditional crafts are closely connected with people's daily needs, customs, folkways, and socio-economic culture, as well as national strength.

In my article “Reconsidering Handicrafts,” I pointed out that “traditional crafts possess essential characteristics that can be briefly termed ‘three qualities and four natures’: practical quality, rational quality, and aesthetic quality; and the humanistic, individual, dynamic, and eternal nature of handicrafts. These essential characteristics correspondingly determine their inherent values, such as livelihood value, economic value, academic value, artistic value, humanistic value, historical value, and modern value” .

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## Compilation of the *Complete Collection on Traditional Chinese Crafts and Arts*

### Origins of the Compilation

In view of the importance of traditional crafts, since the mid-1980s we repeatedly called for rescuing and protecting them, publishing numerous articles in newspapers and journals and submitting reports to the State Council and relevant ministries. In early 1987, with support from then State Science and Technology Commission Director Ruan Chongwu and State Cultural Heritage Administration Consultant Xie Chengsheng, we secured a soft science research grant of 20,000 yuan. With these funds, we conducted nearly two years of field investigations and comprehensive research, visiting renowned scholars including Fei

Xiaotong, Qian Linzhao, Yuan Hanqing, Wang Shixiang, Li Xueqin, and Xi Zezong, and formulated the *Implementation Plan for Protection and Development of Traditional Chinese Crafts*, which we submitted at the end of 1988. However, as the relevant departments were not concerned with this matter at the time, the plan ultimately came to nothing.

To unite experts and scholars nationwide who were committed to researching and protecting traditional crafts, Tan Derui, Zhu Dazhen, and I initiated the establishment of the Chinese Traditional Crafts Research Association in 1995. Drawing lessons from the loss of traditional crafts in developed countries during their early years and their subsequent remedial efforts, from Japan's advanced concepts and effective measures for protecting and revitalizing traditional crafts, and from UNESCO's long-term advocacy and unremitting promotion of cultural heritage protection and inheritance, we recognized that protecting and inheriting the treasure trove of national science and technology that is traditional crafts, and enabling them to flourish and integrate into modern life, holds not only major practical value but also crucial significance for continuing the national cultural lineage and preserving national spiritual characteristics. This is an integral and indispensable part of China's modernization drive—something that would eventually be put on the agenda. Although the state had not yet legislated or initiated this protection work, we believed we could first compile existing research findings from traditional craft investigations to provide a scientific basis for future protection, inheritance, and development. Accordingly, we proposed the compilation concept for the *Complete Collection on Traditional Chinese Crafts and Arts* (hereafter referred to as the *Collection*).

After being declined by several publishers, this concept finally received strong support in 1996 from the renowned publisher Zhou Changlin, President of Elephant Press, who not only agreed to undertake printing and publication but also funded 200,000 yuan for compilation expenses. We promptly reported to then Chinese Academy of Sciences President Lu Yongxiang, who deeply understood the importance and rich connotations of traditional handicrafts. Under his direction, a compilation work meeting for the *Collection* was held in autumn 1996, with him personally serving as chief editor, and volumes such as *Lacquer Arts* and *Ceramics* were immediately launched.

In spring 1999, the *Collection* was formally listed as a major research project for the Chinese Academy of Sciences' "Ninth Five-Year Plan" and a key publication for the former Press and Publication Administration's "Ninth Five-Year Plan." Funding was quickly secured, enabling comprehensive development of the compilation work.

### **Structure, Compilation, and Publication**

Unlike folk literature, music, fine arts, and theater ICH items, traditional crafts had long lacked institutional affiliation, with no one attending to disciplinary construction, no national-level dedicated research institutions, and no clear or

recognized classification system. Therefore, when designing the top-level framework for the *Collection*, structuring its framework became a challenge. The framework for the current first series was established after extensive consultation and several rounds of revision, with the acknowledgment that it was not complete. For example, both “construction” and “furniture making” are important major categories of traditional crafts. However, the former was temporarily set aside because Tsinghua University and the China Academy of Building Research had already published or were compiling systematic academic monographs, and the Institute for the History of Natural Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences, had also published works on architectural technology history—without better compilation concepts or suitable authors, we could only postpone it. The latter category had invited Professor Chen Zengbi from the Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University, to serve as chief editor, and he had even conducted field investigations in Shandong. Sadly, he passed away prematurely, and this volume was also shelved. Similarly, folk crafts such as paper-cutting and carving, woodblock New Year paintings, and weaving and binding have long histories, exceptional techniques, and rich humanistic connotations, yet for various external and internal reasons, they were not given separate volumes, receiving only brief treatment in the *Folk Handicrafts* volume. Notable volume configurations include the establishment of a dedicated volume for *Gold and Silver Filigree and Cloisonné* within the *Metal Crafts* volume, and the relatively rare specialized monographs in *Cultural Relics Restoration and Authentication* and *Traditional Chinese Medicine Processing*, which provide valuable references.

From its launch in 1996 to full implementation in 1999, and through 2006, over ten years, the first series of the *Collection*—14 volumes in 13 books—were completed: *Lacquer Arts*, *Ceramics*, *Gold and Silver Filigree and Cloisonné*, *Papermaking and Printing* (two volumes combined into one book), *Traditional Chinese Medicine Processing*, *Investigation and Research on Traditional Machinery*, *Sculpture*, *Metal Crafts*, *Silk Weaving and Dyeing*, *Folk Handicrafts*, *Cultural Relics Restoration and Authentication*, *Brewing*, and *Craft Masters Through the Ages*. After review, revision, and final approval by the executive chief editor, the manuscripts were submitted to the press for editing and proofreading, and were published successively from 2004 to 2008. At that time, as ICH protection work was being rolled out nationwide, and since traditional crafts constitute an important component of ICH—accounting for one-quarter of its total volume—society urgently needed to understand their connotations and value. Moreover, volumes such as *Papermaking and Printing*, *Silk Weaving and Dyeing*, *Ceramics*, and *Lacquer Arts* in the *Collection* provided authoritative scientific bases for relevant crafts applying for national ICH listing, making the series widely welcomed.

In 2006, the first seven volumes of the *Collection* won the inaugural National Excellent Publications Award from the former Press and Publication Administration. The evaluation committee’s comments stated: “This research possesses extremely high academic and historical value, contributing to the maintenance of China’s cultural lifeline and preservation of national spiritual characteristics,

and will promote the development of related disciplines.”

At the outset of the *Collection* project, Chief Editor Lu Yongxiang stated: “The *Collection* is comprehensive in name but incomplete in substance, yet we must strive to make it as complete as possible.” Accordingly, compilation of the second series began in 2008, under the project name “Traditional Craft Investigation and Comprehensive Research.” In 2009, *Armor Restoration* was first published. The remaining five volumes in six books—*Agricultural, Livestock, and Mineral Product Processing, Ceramics (Continued), Forged Copper and Silver Ornament Crafts* (two volumes), *Papermaking (Continued) and Brush Making*, and *Inkstone and Ink Making*—were published in February 2016.

Spanning 1996 to 2016, this twenty-year effort produced a set totaling 20 volumes in 20 books, with over 14 million characters and more than 14,000 line drawings and photographs. Total compilation expenses, including Elephant Press’s sponsorship, amounted to only 2 million yuan—a truly low-input, high-output research project. Over 340 experts, scholars, and artisans participated in compilation, along with more than 60 editors, art editors, and proofreaders. Each volume’s chief editor was an authoritative expert or scholar of great reputation who had long toiled in their respective field with abundant achievements. During compilation, despite some being in their advanced years and others, like Qiao Shiguang, suffering from serious illness, all personally conducted grassroots investigations, examined materials, and wrote manuscripts. For chapters drafted by students or artisans, they carefully reviewed and repeatedly revised them until they met standards. Such personal involvement was truly commendable and deeply moving.

Among these 20 volumes, *Lacquer Arts, Ceramics, Silk Weaving and Dyeing, Papermaking and Printing*, and half of *Cloisonné* have been recognized by the industry as timeless masterpieces. *Armor Restoration* and *Cultural Relics Restoration and Authentication* belong to rare and neglected disciplines with few comparable works, possessing unique value. The remaining volumes are also mostly excellent or qualified works.

The *Collection* covers the fifteen known major categories of traditional crafts, documenting nearly 600 types of techniques. Written at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, this work represents the meticulous field investigations, analysis, testing, authentication, and careful compilation of over 300 experts, scholars, and artisans from the perspective of contemporary science and technology. Initially, we only intended to faithfully record existing traditional crafts for future protection, inheritance, and sustainable development, without considering comparison with the two classic works in our minds—*Kaogongji* and *Tiangong Kaiwu*. However, after all 20 volumes were published, we felt that although this work was far from complete and had many omissions and deficiencies, to some extent it might be considered an attempt at contemporary supplementation and continuation of *Kaogongji* and *Tiangong Kaiwu*.

### Temporal Limitations and Supplementary Progress of the *Collection*

The *Collection* has temporal limitations: (1) The overall framework is deficient—comprehensive in name but incomplete in substance. Besides the aforementioned absence of the two major categories “construction” and “furniture making,” and the lack of separate volumes for paper-cutting, carving, printing, and painting, weaving, dyeing, embroidery, and clothing production are represented by only one volume, *Silk Weaving and Dyeing*, with dyeing and embroidery treatments being quite thin, and cotton, hemp, and wool textiles completely absent. (2) The work emphasizes documentation of techniques and craftsmanship while oversimplifying the interactions among economy, humanities, and crafts. This reflects deficiencies and inadequacies in disciplinary construction that require future improvement.

Following the *Collection* launch conference, *Guangming Daily* published an article of mine mentioning the necessity and feasibility of revising and continuing the *Collection*. Subsequently, after consultation, Chinese Academy of Sciences President Bai Chunli and Ministry of Culture and Tourism leaders decided to collaborate on revising and continuing the *Collection*. The preliminary research for this project began in July 2018, including compilation of two volumes—*Introduction* and *Furniture Making*—and revision of the *Armor Making* volume. It is expected that by June 2019, sample manuscripts of 300,000 characters can be submitted, along with the overall design and feasibility report for the *Collection*, to be reported to the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Ministry of Culture and Tourism leadership for approval before requesting state financial support. The revised and continued *Collection* is projected to comprise approximately 30 volumes in 33 books, over 20 million characters, and 20,000–30,000 illustrations, covering all fifteen major categories of Chinese traditional crafts, elaborating on their origins, evolution of techniques, masters and masterpieces through the ages, intersections and interactions with socio-economics, livelihood, culture, politics, and military affairs, relationships with anthropology, history of science and technology, folklore, and other related disciplines, as well as the historical and modern values of traditional crafts and their protection, inheritance, innovation, and revitalization in contemporary times. This national-level project represents a foundational undertaking for China’s scientific and cultural cause, with broad coverage and considerable difficulty. Over 400 experts, scholars, and artisans will participate in the revision and continuation, devoting their full efforts. Upon completion, the project is expected to play a long-term role in revitalizing traditional crafts, enhancing national soft power, and maintaining cultural diversity and national spiritual characteristics.

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### Discipline Construction of Traditional Crafts

All these efforts are intimately related to the soundness and robust growth of disciplinary construction. Therefore, disciplinary construction is extremely

important for the inheritance and revitalization of traditional crafts and holds fundamental significance.

Discipline construction for traditional crafts must focus on the following aspects:

- (1) **Establish a joint conference for traditional crafts discipline construction** to plan and operate discipline construction nationwide. During the 5th China Forum on History of Technology held at Nanjing University of Information Science and Technology in 2017, eight units spontaneously formed a partial joint conference for traditional crafts disciplines. A comprehensive organization is needed, however, hosted and supported by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism to advance this work.
- (2) **Establish national-level dedicated research institutions for traditional crafts.** Among the ten categories of ICH, singing, dancing, folk arts, and acrobatics all have national or ministerial-level research institutes, yet traditional crafts have none, let alone systematic investigation and planned disciplinary construction. This situation must change! If conditions are not yet ripe for establishing national-level dedicated research institutions for traditional crafts, several research institutions can be established at qualified academies, institutes, and universities. For example, the Chinese Academy of Sciences has established the Center for Scientific Cognition of Cultural Heritage; Nanjing University of Information Science and Technology has established the Traditional Crafts Research Institute; and Guangxi Minzu University has established the Center for Revitalizing Traditional Crafts with support from the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region Department of Culture. Research institutions should cover all fifteen major categories of traditional crafts, with special attention to balance across the field, as agricultural, livestock, and mineral product processing and special crafts remain nearly blank. Some scholars have long equated arts and crafts with traditional crafts, which is a serious error. Non-artistic handicrafts constitute a large portion of traditional crafts, such as brewing, papermaking, and agricultural, livestock, and mineral product processing, while some categories (like ceramics and metalwork) combine both aspects. If this issue is not given proper attention, practical work will suffer from inconsistent emphasis with undesirable consequences. Due to long-term lack of institutional affiliation and neglect, disciplinary construction for traditional crafts has suffered from congenital deficiencies and inadequate development. Such shortcomings cannot be remedied overnight. Competent authorities should implement policy preferences, providing support and funding for traditional crafts research institutions. These institutions should be few but excellent, admitting only master's and doctoral students and granting degrees under the first-level discipline "History of Science and Technology." Various ICH categories have corresponding first-level societies that play important roles in discipline construction and inheritance development. The existing Chinese Traditional Crafts Research Association is a second-level society under the Chinese So-

ciety for the History of Science and Technology and should be upgraded to a first-level society to coordinate with the Arts and Crafts Society.

- (3) **Establish an inheritance and development operation model combining cadres, experts, and communities, enterprises, and artisans** to replace the current government-dominated, non-regular, and non-precise support model. Both traditional crafts research institutions and societies must connect with several key traditional crafts projects for long-term targeted investigation, supervision, and support, while also learning from communities and artisans to absorb folk wisdom and enrich existing theories and practical experience.
- (4) **Establish special funds to support traditional crafts research.** Traditional crafts research institutions and societies must formulate feasible research plans, coordinated by the joint conference for traditional crafts discipline construction. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism can undertake many tasks, such as compiling authoritative monographs for screened national-level traditional crafts projects, including interview records of important inheritors. The Chinese Traditional Crafts Research Association has launched the first three volumes of *Essence of Chinese Traditional Crafts—Lacquer Decoration, Gold and Silver Inlay, and Shiwan Ceramic Sculpture*—which require support to accelerate editing and publication progress. Foreign-related works and materials need timely translation and publication. High-level documentary series should also be produced under expert guidance to facilitate dissemination and enhance the international reputation of Chinese traditional crafts. Japanese cloisonné, Japanese swords, and magic mirrors all have Chinese origins, yet their fame and influence far exceed Chinese counterparts of the same categories. One reason is our lack of dissemination efforts; another is that product quality and packaging do not meet high standards.
- (5) **Hold series of academic conferences on traditional crafts and publish proceedings; establish Chinese-English bilingual *Chinese Traditional Crafts* journals** to strengthen exchange and dissemination.

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## Author Biography

**HUA Jueming**, born in Wuxi, Jiangsu Province in 1933, graduated from the Department of Mechanical Engineering at Tsinghua University in 1958 and completed graduate studies in mining and metallurgy history at the Institute for the History of Natural Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences in 1967. He has served as a research professor and deputy director at the Institute for the History of Natural Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences, director of the Institute of History of Science and Technology and Ancient Documents at Tsinghua University, and president of the Chinese Traditional Crafts Research Association. His research focuses on the history of technology, philosophy of technology, and traditional crafts. He has published over 130 papers and 14 monographs, receiving the First-Class Science and Technology Achievement Award from the Ministry of Culture, the National Excellent Publications Award, and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the China Foundry Association. E-mail: hua jueming@vip.sina.com

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