



Cultural Identity of Sichuan Yingjing Black Sand Pottery in Contemporary China

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Abstract

This paper reviews the cultural identity and modes of self-expression embodied in Sichuan Yingjing black sand pottery within the context of China's modernization. As a time-honored ceramic tradition distinguished by unique local raw materials and handcrafted techniques, Yingjing black sand pottery carries profound cultural memory, regional identity, and practical value. However, China's rapid modernization has posed significant challenges to traditional handicrafts, particularly in negotiating continuity between inherited practices and contemporary lifestyles. This study traces the transformation of Yingjing sandware from its earlier identity as Yingjing casserole—once centered on utilitarian kitchenware—to a diversified form of black sand pottery characterized by technological advancement, artistic innovation, and expanded social functions since the 1980s. Based on field investigations, participatory observation in production and firing processes, and a review of relevant literature, this paper examines Yingjing sandware as both an intangible cultural heritage and a living cultural practice. It explores how traditional craftsmanship, settlement culture, and ecological values are preserved while being reinterpreted to meet modern consumer demands. The study further situates Yingjing sandware within contemporary academic discourse, identifying insufficient studies and limited analysis of its cultural identity and social significance beyond technical and historical perspectives. The findings suggest that Yingjing black sand pottery functions as an important carrier of cultural identity in contemporary China, mediating tensions between rural heritage and urban consumption. Its sustainable future depends on balancing the preservation of traditional craftsmanship with innovative design strategies response to modern lifestyles and diverse markets.

Introduction

This paper aims to review the cultural identity and self-expression of Sichuan Yingjing black sand pottery in the context of China growing modernity. As a time-honored ceramic art form, Yingjing black sand pottery is renowned for its unique materials and craftsmanship, carrying rich cultural memories and regional characteristics. Due to the rise of China's modernisation process, traditional black sand pottery has faced challenges in balancing its legacy with modern lifestyles. The impact of modernity on traditional handicrafts has resulted in transformations in their cultural significance and social function.



Yingjing sandware was once widely recognised as "Yingjing casserole". Before 1981, limited by its singular product type of kitchenware, "Yingjing casserole" almost became synonymous with Yingjing itself. Since 1981, social and other changes, including technological advancements, the Yingjing's sandware product range expanded significantly and production techniques became increasingly sophisticated. This transformation led to the unified designation of "Yingjing sandware" or "Yingjing black sand", which not only reflected product diversification but also symbolised the region's transition from traditional craftsmanship to modern innovation.

Yingjing Sandware, a national-level intangible cultural heritage, has established its irreplaceable cultural status through unique material properties, exquisite craftsmanship, and profound historical significance. This traditional pottery crafted from distinctive raw materials refined by generations of artisans over centuries, retains both artistic charm and practical value. It embodies not only the inheritance of sand-making techniques but also traditional settlement and cultural continuity. Yingjing Sandware has fulfilled consumers' needs for tableware, it creates emotional value by infusing black sandware with fresh social and emotional significance. This allows consumers to experience the original warmth of nature and appreciate the rustic beauty of the natural world through these ceramic creations.



Figure 1 Yingjing sand chromatography (Photo by Cao Xiaoling, 2025)

Through this review, Yingjing sandware culture was explored through field investigations by conducting hands-on experiences with production processes and firing techniques. Building on this investigation, black sandware should undeniably be designed to serve modern society; while preserving traditional craftsmanship.



Yingjing Sandware and its Legacy

The craftsmanship of Yingjing Sandware has remained steadfastly rooted in traditional handmade production, a practice steeped in historical heritage that has endured through the ages. The entire manufacturing process utilizes only all-natural raw materials. Its distinctive rustic techniques, combined with skilful craftsmanship, transforms each piece into an artistic masterpiece. These sandware pieces not only possess exceptional aesthetic value but also demonstrate outstanding practicality, achieving a perfect fusion of artistry and functionality. This true embodiment of "the art of earth and fire" has earned Yingjing Sandware its prestigious reputation as a testament to human wisdom.



Figure 2 Opening of the steamed bread kiln (Photo by Cao Xiaoling, 2025)

The abundant sandware artifacts unearthed in Yingjing region hold immeasurable archaeological value for exploring the area's history. These cultural relics are not merely material remains, but invaluable resources for historical research and exploration. Dating back to earlier times, indigenous sandware predecessors not only witnessed the evolution of human civilization and served as birthplaces of cooking tools, but also facilitated dietary practices' transformation in various aspects.

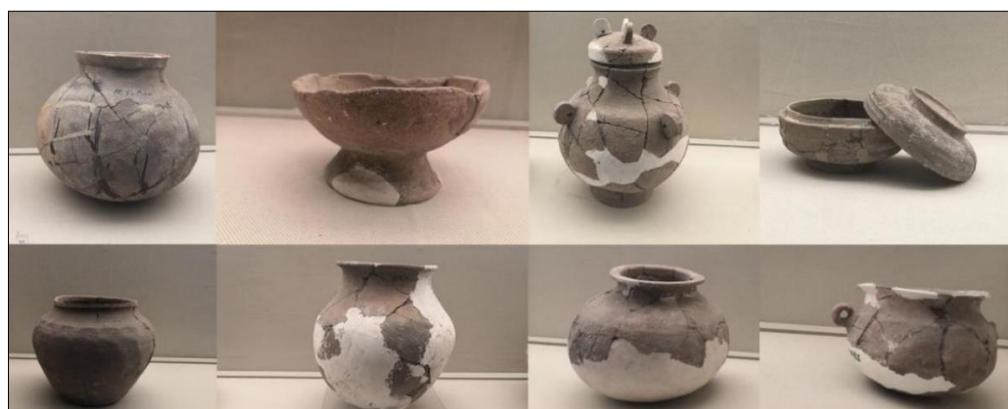


Figure 3 Pottery of the Warring States period in Yingjing County
(Photos by Cao Xiaoling, 2025)



(1) Casserole

For thousands of years, the cooking of food as an essential part of daily life for Chinese people lives has continued to this day. Among these, the casserole pot, as a traditional cooking utensil, has occupied an indispensable position in people's daily lives. The Yingjing sandware, as a type of casserole pot, still reveals traces of the Qin and Han dynasties through its unique manufacturing features, particularly in its shape characteristics that continue to preserve the ancient form of the "fu" (cauldron).

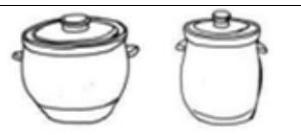
Traditional Yingjing casserole pot modeling type	name	Basic appliance modeling
Straight cylinder type	Lift ear casserole pot	
Single handle casserole pot open type	Single handle casserole Lift ear casserole pot	
Single handle casserole pot	Ring ear casserole pot	

Figure 4 Traditional Yingjing casserole pot shape (Illustration by Cao Xiaoling, 2025)

Traditional Yingjing clay pots are categorised by body shape into straight cylindrical, open-mouthed, and narrow-mouthed types. When classified by pot ear design, they are further divided into raised-ear and ring-ear varieties. While these distinct forms differ in appearance, they all share a common purpose: serving as premium cooking vessels for stewing foods, embodying the region's rich culinary heritage and historical legacy.

(2) Sand tank

Compared to traditional clay pots, sand jars serve a more specialized function, primarily used for preparing Chinese herbal decoctions. These containers are typically mass-produced through mould injection moulding, resulting in more affordable pricing. Consequently, their design variations remain limited when compared to clay pots, often featuring minimal decorative elements. The basic designs typically include simple components like single-ring handles, double-ring handles, or single handles, showcasing a straightforward and unadorned aesthetic.



Figure 5a New tea ware of Yingjing and **Figure 5b** Side handle sand pot shape
(Photos by Cao Xiaoling, 2025)

By examining the types, forms, production techniques, and circulation patterns of sandware artifacts, they reflect the historical and cultural landscape, daily customs, cultural heritage, and local traditions of ancient societies. Undoubtedly, by reviewing Yingjing sandware and its predecessor pottery provide a rich understanding of historical and cultural contexts of Yingjing in broader regions.

Yingjing Sandware and its Evolution

The evolution of Yingjing sandware unfolds as a vibrant cultural story. What began as simple household items gradually transformed into sophisticated craftworks imbued with profound cultural significance. The artistic value of Yingjing sandware has transformed its original utilitarian purpose for achieving craftsmanship and artistic refinement making Yingjing sandware unique when compared to other folk crafts, emerging as a radiant gem in the garden of traditional Chinese craftsmanship.



Figure 6 The shapes of sandware that continues to this day (Photo by Cao Xiaoling, 2025)



Figure 7 Various shapes of Yingjing sandware (Photo by Cao Xiaoling, 2025)

Through this review, black sand tableware culture embodies respect for nature and reverence for traditional craftsmanship. Each piece requires meticulous handcrafting and firing processes, making every item a unique work of art. This heritage not only preserves ancient techniques, but also reflects environmental stewardship. By examining its development timeline, practical applications in daily life and current trends show the profound historical values embedded in Yingjing's ceramic traditions. Furthermore, this article shows how Yingjing sandware can secure its place in today's market while charting a viable path forward.

Yingjing Sandware in Research Sector

Since 2008, when Yingjing Sandware was honored as part of China's second batch of intangible cultural heritage, its unique charm has gradually attracted widespread social attention, driving continuous growth in research and development. The number of researchers has significantly increased, with corresponding academic achievements showing a steady annual growth trend. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of Yingjing Sandware's influence in modern society, data platforms like CNKI and conducted in-depth searches using keywords such as "Yingjing Sandware" and "Yingjing black sand pottery" in relevant publications are reviewed to provide robust academic development and innovation.

In recent years, studies on Yingjing sandware have also seen significant development. "Research on the Protection and Inheritance of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Urban Cultural Development: A Case Study of Black Sand in Yingjing County" emphasized that the manifestations of a city's unique cultural appeal and civilizational advancement, play a pivotal role in sustaining urban development and construction through their inheritance and innovation (Yuan Xuejiao, 2022). The black sand culture, unique to Yingjing County in Ya'an, Sichuan Province, currently faces critical challenges including transmission gaps and neglected heritage. By addressing this, scholars have proposed recommendations which are; integrating cultural and tourism resources, promoting innovative development of intangible cultural heritage industry, and expanding promotional channels. These measures aim to embed this cultural heritage into urban development. Such initiatives enrich the city's cultural assets as cultural soft power, and create a learning and showcasing platform for black sand pottery.



Existing literature and examining the characteristics of the Cao Ran Life brand tableware, enables this study to build upon Hu Hailing (2020) paper titled "Innovative Design of Yingjing Black Sandware in Modern Life under Traditional Cultural Context". The article highlights two critical research focuses: first, how to adapt Yingjing sandware to contemporary lifestyles by analysing its inherent qualities and functional relevance to modern household patterns; second, how traditional craftsmanship can survive amidst industrialisation. This paper delves into the heritage lineage of Yingjing black sandware, and explores innovative application strategies for achieving harmonious coexistence between tradition and modernity.

To date, insufficient foreign-language materials have been published to address Yingjing sandware making limited in-depth academic research into this ceramic area. The artistic evolution of Yingjing sandware can be traced back to the 1980s. During this period, Professor Ma Gaoxiang from Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts led a team of international ceramic artists, including his American graduate student Charles Matthews, on multiple visits to sandware workshops in Xingjing County. By utilizing local black sand clay and traditional steamed-bun kiln firing techniques, the team created a distinctive series of sandware artworks. Although these pieces later gained attention in exhibitions across Canada and the United States, their international impact remained limited due to a lack of internet coverage at that time.

Research Gaps

There are insufficient studies on China's modernization and cultural changes, specific research on Yingjing black sand pottery, particularly in exploring its role as a carrier of cultural identity and self-expression within the context of modernity. Existing research primarily focuses on the technological aspects and historical origins of black sand pottery, while less attention paid into cultural and social significance in contemporary society.

Under the leadership of the Yingjing County government and through the collaborative efforts of local sandware heritage inheritors and artisans, Yingjing has established multiple cultural activities, for example exhibition, and workshops during the Black Sand Culture Expo Park, to draw public attraction to express and preserve traditional black sand craftsmanship techniques.

In this era of rapid digital transformation, Yingjing Sandware has gained increasing recognition. The sandware industry is experiencing a revival and flourishing, with seamless integration of cutting-edge technology and innovative materials. Through the collaborative efforts of Yingjing's intangible cultural heritage inheritors and community members—including university faculty and students—this traditional craft has expanded its product range significantly. Moreover, Yingjing Sandware now regularly features in prestigious platforms such as design competitions, craftsmanship exhibitions, and artisan skill showcases, garnering widespread attention and acclaim.



Conclusion

Through field research and relevant review, Yingjing sandware can be broadly categorised into two types. The first category consists of traditional cooking utensils, primarily featuring low-cost sand pots and jars with rustic designs. The second category comprises modern black sand artworks, including high-end tea sets and intricate black sand sculptures that demonstrate superior craftsmanship and artistic value.

This paper indicates the importance of Yingjing black sand as a symbol of cultural identity in contemporary society and its challenges to fulfil the function and heritage expression according to contemporary lifestyles and developing a balance between rural and urban consumption in China. Compared to today's ceramic industry, Yingjing sandware products have a limited variety of products with predominant traditional features which mainly cater to basic daily needs (e.g., tea brewing, cooking, or domestic utensils) embodying their traditional and practical value. However, in the face of today's diversified and dynamic market demands, the Yingjing sandware industry may need to explore new pathways for product innovation and market expansion. To drive further development, the industry has to preserve traditional craftsmanship while enhancing product innovation and distinctive features to meet modern consumers' diverse needs for achieving sustainable development.

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