



A stunning *paifang* greets you as you enter Yixing Museum. — All photos by Louis Lee

# Yixing — teaware not the only draw in the ‘capital of pottery’

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When one thinks of China’s greatest export, one thinks of tea. Yet, how can good tea be had without good teaware?

And when one thinks of China’s greatest teaware, one thinks of those

from Jingdezhen in Jiangxi Province. Jingdezhen, nicknamed the “capital of porcelain,” was where imperial kilns churned out masterpiece after masterpiece, now prized by museums worldwide.

Yet, how can discussions of great teaware be complete without regard

to those from Yixing, affectionately dubbed the “capital of pottery?” Teapots made of *zisha* (紫砂) are no less beloved (with auction prices to match). *Zisha*, literally “purple sand” or “purple clay,” are found in and only in Yixing.

Hence, I made a point of going to Yixing in Jiangsu Province to find out what *zisha*-ware is all about. My port of call is the twin-museum complex of the China Yixing *Zisha*-ware Museum and the China Yixing Ceramic Museum.

The complex is, unsurprisingly, located in Dingshu Town, the center of *zisha*-ware production and a township named after the hillocks Dingshan and Shushan. The fabled *zisha*, however, is mined in Huanglongshan, another hillock to the north.

You will get to see *zisha* in its myriad forms at the *zisha*-ware museum, which occupies the second floor of the Historical Ceramics Hall of the complex.

Scholars still debate when *zisha* teapot crafting began. However, its golden era

was undoubtedly the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, when key techniques were perfected, master makers emerged and *zisha* teapots became collector’s items for royalty and academics alike.

It is interesting to note that the master of tea Lu Yu praised tea from Yixing, formerly known as Yangxian, highly enough that Yangxian tea was designated a tribute item as early as the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907), long before *zisha* teapots became all the rage.

In any case, the art of tea appreciation evolved with the emergence of *zisha* teapots, with some believing that one must dedicate one teapot to a specific type of tea — the reason being the unglazed clay of the teapot absorbs the tea’s flavor. You don’t want to mix up teas!

The *zisha*-ware museum will stun you with teapots of all shapes and sizes, and may make the exhibition of pottery-making history in Yixing (on the first floor) seem like an unworthy



China Yixing *Zisha*-ware Museum displays different varieties of the fabled *zisha*.