

## CHINESE GOLDSMITHING – LUXURY CRAFT OR LUXURY PRODUCTS?

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**Purpose:** The text presents the crafts related to precious metals in terms of the importance of gold in China's economic culture; the development of jewelry manufacturing techniques and their makers, the jewelry market divided into the geographical location (within the PRC); the needs and preferences of the demand side, as well as the gender and age group of the final consumers. The aim of the article is to answer the question whether Chinese goldsmithing is associated with luxury or associated mainly with the production of luxury products.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The research method used was *desk research* – an analysis of the literature and articles written by Chinese journalists based on interviews with goldsmiths.

**Findings:** The article points out that the contemporary group of Chinese goldsmiths is very diverse. Although gold is associated with luxury and a good financial situation, the profession of a craftsman is not as closely associated with this social consciousness.

**Originality/value:** The article presents the topic of goldsmithing, which is relatively rarely represented in the literature of economic sciences.

**Keywords:** crafts, Chinese crafts, China, goldsmiths, jewelry market, economic culture.

**Category of the paper:** research paper.

### 1. Introduction

To In ancient times, the Chinese symbol for gold [金] was closer in meaning to metal than to the chemical element with the symbol Au – the soft and the most ductile metal (Knobloch, 1977, p. 68). This is indicated, among others, by two dots – equivalents of metal lumps, which in the earlier version of the record were located next to the arrowheads and the ax (𠄎 [金]), i.e., objects that were made of metal. Due to its properties, gold was not a good material for the production of weapons. Moreover, for a long time this metal was not considered the most

valuable in China, silver had a much greater value (Künstler, 2007, p. 308), and later on, they were equally valued (Prodan, 1975, pp. 177-178). Both these metals, however, were not as precious as copper and tin alloys – bronze. Bronze products were symbols of the right to exercise political power for rulers by Heaven, they symbolized not only the held power, but also the status associated with it. Apart from bronze, jade was also perceived as a valued artistic material (Zhang et al., 2015).

On the other hand, the reason for the lower price of gold than silver most likely was associated with the availability of both ores in China. Gold occurs in veins as well as in alluvial and crumb deposits, while silver only in deposits, anyway, acquisition of them requires mining. Therefore, the metals obtained from them were rare and not often used by craftsmen (Scarpari, 2008, pp. 58-61).

Under the Song Dynasty [960-1279], gold mines would be explored by the community, but later on, public mining was forbidden until 1033. During the Yuan Dynasty [1279-1368] miners were perceived as the lowest class of the population, which was not favorable for gold mining and gold popularity (Zhang et al., 2015). Nowadays, Chinese gold is obtained from three provinces: Anhui - Shaxi Copper Mine, Shandong - Jiaojia Gold Mine, Dayingezhuang Gold Mine, Sanshandao Gold Mine, and Gansu - Zaozigou Gold Mine (five of the largest gold mines in China in 2020, 2021). In 2020, China was the largest producer of this metal in the world, generating 368.3 tons - 11% of total world production (Global mine production, 2021). As the export of domestic goldmine production is prohibited in China, all production remains in the country of origin (Frisby, 2022).

From the very beginning, crafts related to precious metals in China were associated with the creation of luxury goods. They were initially intended for the imperial court and temples, and, later on, were available for those in power and wealthy people. Luxury goods are defined as having an income elasticity of demand greater than one (Begg, Fischer & Dornbusch, 2007, p. 589). They are also characterized by the fact that they have unique features that satisfy specific consumption needs, excluding basic needs. Nowadays, precious metal products are still luxurious, but they are becoming available to a growing group of Chinese recipients. Jewelry, as one of the types of luxury goods, is perceived as a carrier of historical and cultural values, quality and artistry of craftsmanship which means durability and, moreover, exclusivity (Armano, 2019/2020).

Although China's leading position in the global gold production, as well as the common knowledge about the economic power of gold related to, among others, its widespread recognition as securing the real value of paper money and strengthening the country's financial credibility (The Ministry of Finance explains the role of gold in Poland's currency reserves, 2021), there are very few texts on the issues of goldsmithery and economic sciences in the literature on the subject. For example, in the Web of Science database, after entering the phrase Chinese goldsmithing (and other derivatives of these words), not a single item appears. Due to the above, the article focuses on the topic of Chinese goldsmithing and the craftsmen involved

in it, in relation to the perception of the value of gold in Chinese culture, the main techniques of jewelry making and the gold luxury market in China. The aim of the article, apart from presenting the professional situation of contemporary craftsmen – a very diverse group of goldsmiths and traditional jewelers, is also to answer the question whether Chinese goldsmithing is associated with luxury or associated mainly with the production of luxury products. The article uses the method of existing data analysis.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The research was conducted in two stages. The first was related to the literature analysis of the subject in Polish, English and Chinese. During the research, it was noticed, that Chinese goldsmithing is not a popular subject which is rarely selected for research by the scientific community. Due to the above, the research was continued, looking for journalists' articles, based on interviews with Chinese goldsmiths, which were available only in English and Chinese. The selection was made by entering various combinations of words in the search engine: *goldsmith*, *gold*, and even *silver*, *jeweler*, *jewelry*, *China*, *crafts*, *market*, and after obtaining more detailed data, e.g., names of craftsmen, articles/ interviews dedicated to them were also searched for.

## 3. Chinese jewelry market

The jewelry market could be analyzed from the perspective of clients' preferences, i.e., those interested in renting jewelry (currently under development) or those interested in purchasing jewelry. Precious goods can be bought for their own needs/use or to meet the needs of other people. Therefore, in China we can distinguish: the wedding market (accounting for about 50% of consumer sales in China) and the “celebration” market (including the celebration of spring [春节], anniversaries, birthdays and Valentine's Day) (HKTDC, 2021). The Chinese jewelry market can also be divided into sub-markets according to the sex of the recipients or their birth year – belonging to a specific generation. In this way, we can talk about the women's jewelry market (the dominant buyers in China) and the men's jewelry market. In addition, we can distinguish client markets to which various craft products are directed – markets:

- children (a market more static than the adult market, with large growth forecasts, among others due to the withdrawal of the one-child policy in the PRC (HKTDC, 2021)),
- youth,
- young adults (including the Millennial generation),

- mature adults,
- seniors (including jewelry less resistant to inflation, with sentimental value (HKTDC, 2021)).

The jewelry market can also be divided due to its geographical location related to the places of processing and distribution of raw materials, semi-finished products and finished products. Plants specializing in the production of jewelry are located mainly in the provinces of Guangdong, Shandong, Fujian, Zhejiang and the separate city of Shanghai (HKTDC, 2021). For example, the following markets could be pointed out (THL, 2021):

- gold and silver (e.g., Shenzhen Luohu [深圳罗湖]),
- jade (Xiuyan in province Liaoning [辽宁岫岩]; Ruili, Yunnan [云南瑞丽]; Tengchong, Yunnan [云南腾冲]; Sihui, Guangdong [广东四会]; Pingzhou, Guangdong [广东坪洲]; Putian, Fujian [福建莆田]; Zhenping, Henan [河南镇平]),
- turquoise (Zhushan, Hubei [湖北竹山], Longling, Yunnan [云南龙陵]),
- pearls (Zhuji, Zhejiang [浙江诸暨]; Suzhou Xiangcheng [苏州相城]),
- sapphire (Shandong Changle [山东昌乐]),
- Shoushan stone [寿山石] (Jin'an, Fuzhou [福州晋安]),
- agate (Fuxin, Liaoning [辽宁阜新]),
- artificial gems (Wuzhou, Guangxi [广西梧州]),
- etc.

As well as the so-called jewelry production bases, incl. Chengyang, Qingdao [青岛城阳]; Shunde Lunjiao, Guangdong [广东伦教]; Panyu, Guangzhou [广东番禺], and Guangzhou Huadu [广东花都].

The Chinese jewelry market is of characteristic worth that began with ancient crafts and the most exquisite works made by the hands of those craftsmen. Mainly due to the fact that, although contemporary research is being conducted in the field of shaping goldsmith products and the uniqueness of the materials used in this craft (See: Zhou et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2015), nevertheless, "(...) in the field of processing precious metals, antiquity has already done everything that could be done, and later times could at most certainly add to it some technical improvements that would shorten the path to the goal a bit" (Gradowski, 1980, p. 15).

At the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty period [1046 BC - 256 BCE], precious metals had appeared in Chinese crafts. At that time, gold was mainly used for inlaying bronzes (Prodan, 1975, pp. 177-179; Künstler, 2007, p. 308). Inlays, using the technique called "damaskinage" were performed in two stages: first, colored metal wire was clapped into previously made patterns on the surface of the object, and then the surface was smoothed with a grinding stone so that it did not protrude and became smooth and shiny (5000 years..., 2014, pp. 39-69). Besides, small adornments were often made of gold or decorated with gold small ornaments

e.g., buttons, earrings and beads (Demandt, 2016) – found in the tombs of emperors and their families.

During the reign of subsequent dynasties, not only did the shape and preferences regarding the golden decoration of objects change, but also the techniques used in working with precious metals. The first Chinese gold coin was molded during the Warring States period [480 BC - 221 BC] (Zhang et al., 2015). Initially, only the molding method was used, later on (late period of the Zhou Dynasty and the Han Dynasty [206 BC - 220 AD]), forging was also implemented. The final shape and decoration was achieved by tapping and carving with a chisel (Tang Dynasty [618-907]) (Prodan, 1975, pp. 177-179). The value of gold began to be appreciated during the reign of the Han and Tang dynasties. Especially between the 7th and 10th centuries, the imperial family and the aristocracy started to value gold products. The golden vessels were given to officials to appropriate their work and the aristocracy often paid tribute to the ruler in the same way. Under the Tang dynasty, the Imperial Workshop was established for the production of gold and silver utensils (Zhang et al., 2015). At that time, however, gold was mainly used for the production of jewelry (Scarpari, 2008, pp. 58-61). Jewelry was a part of costume to emphasize the rank of the position held by the person (China Fetching). Only after the reign of the Song dynasty were art works of goldsmiths' hands delivered to recipients outside the imperial court. At that time, goldsmithing techniques such as: repoussé (boning), punching and chiseling, plating and gilding achieved a high level (5000 years..., 2014, pp. 233-279).

During the reign of the Ming Dynasty [1368-1644], the price of gold increased, so it was mainly used to make coins and jewelry (Prodan, 1975, pp. 177-179). In this period, the method of encrusting lacquerware products with gold and silver was developed (Kajdański, 2005, p. 94). About 1400 C.E., China began trading with South Asia and India, which resulted in access to new jewelry materials e.g., turquoise. Towards the end of the Ming Dynasty, trade with Europe and North Africa grew rapidly, which meant that Western techniques and materials were adopted and refined by Chinese jewelers. This is how the Chinese cloisonné technique was created, combining works with bronze, porcelain and painting (Invaluable, 2017). Brass, bronze or copper surfaces were first decorated with metal wire (as lines of ornament), then in between a multicolored paste was applied, then the item was heated, sanded, polished, and finally, metal elements were gilded (5000 years..., 2014, pp. 334-365). Another original method invented by Chinese craftsmen was tian-tsui/dian cui [点翠] – sticking fragments of kingfisher feathers on the metal (mainly silver) surface. In this way, very delicate hair ornaments and cyan-azure coloured brooches were created (Yun Boutique, 2017).

In ancient China, gold was also used to make dishes (spoons, goblets, cups, bowls, bowls), storage boxes, seals, harness ornaments, masks, clothes hooks and headgear ornaments (tiaras, cufflinks and pins) (J.J. Lally & Co. Oriental Art, 2012).

Gems like jade, pearl, coral, amber, agate and lapis lazuli were also used by Chinese manufactures to attract jewelry (including hairpins and necklaces). Closer to our times, activities related to the manufacturing of goldsmithing work are as follows (Gradowski, 1980):

preparing a workplace (mostly independently (Knobloch, 1977, p. 276)); project preparation; basic works (e.g., forging, spinning off, repoussé, die-cutting and embossing, molding); surface treatment (e.g., grinding, texturing, polishing, chiseling, engraving, etching, granulation, gilding, coloration, inlaying and applying, plating); special works (e.g., filigree, niello, enamel, jewelry stone decoration, jewelry making, chryselephantine) and assembly works, incl. soldering and other hot and cold bonding methods. Gold, on the other hand, continues to hold a high position in China (at this time much higher than silver and bronze), and its reserves are increasing. At the end of 2020, China's national reserve amounted to almost 14.73 thousand tons (CIS, 2021). During the Covid-19 pandemic, despite a drop in gold consumption by 18.1%, the level of retail jewelry sales decreased by only 4.7%. Chinese consumers purchased 490.6 tons of gold jewelry in 2020, which was influenced, among others, by an increase in the price of ore (HKTDC, 2021). The Chinese generally like gold. In the past this color (like yellow) was dedicated only for one recipient - the emperor, and to this day, it symbolizes prestige and is extremely positively correlated. This is also evidenced by the changing urban landscape, where jewelry stands and shops with gold products appear in all shopping malls. However, the demand for gold is not only in the jewelry market, it also applies to the group of private investors, buyers of bars/coins and the high technology industry (Kaliński, 2014).

It is forecasted that in the longer term, the demand for jewelry, including gold jewelry, will continue to increase in China. This is affected by three factors: rising incomes and therefore, the expansion of the middle class; the persistent high level of savings and the specificity of Chinese culture – its tradition, incl. the popularizing of jewelry as a gift, especially during weddings and celebrations (WGC, 2014). Furthermore, other precious metals, like platinum is obtained by China mainly from import, the decrease of which in 2020 was 17.1%.

Moreover, China is the world's second largest consumer of diamonds (including imported diamonds), with demand rising despite the pandemic, reaching RMB 70.7 billion [approximately US \$ 11.1 billion] last year (HKTDC, 2021). In the first decade of the 21st century, China was also the world's largest producer of silver jewelry and fully one third of Chinese silver production was targeted for the domestic market. Silver jewelry along with silver-plated jewelry (covered with a more noble metal), due to its lower price lower in respect to gold and platinum, finds its customers among the lower-ranked group of Chinese society, including people from rural areas (Hsu et al., 2014).

#### **4. Chinese goldsmiths and traditional jewelers**

A goldsmith is defined as a person who produces or sells gold items (Goldsmith), and in a broader sense, one who also sells decorative objects and jewelry containing other precious metals (The goldsmith). Commonly, this term is also used as a synonym for a jeweler,

i.e., a person who deals with jewelry, precious stones, watches, silver and porcelain (Jeweler). In Chinese, the word goldsmith [金匠] is presented with symbols of gold [金] and craft [匠]. A Jeweler [珠宝商人] is a person [人] engaged in business [商] related to jewelry [珠宝], a derivative of pearls [珠] and treasures [宝]. This article discusses artisans who identify themselves either as goldsmiths and jewelers (who run traditional shops where hand-made jewelry is made), or as technicians and designers.

In China's Imperial Period, goldsmiths specialised in the production of jewelry, designed products intended mainly for the imperial court. Their works could not be sold on the private market. However, over time private companies known as silver buildings [银楼] not only produced and sold precious metals but also granted loans against valuable items. These companies were represented by guilds (Hsu et al., 2014). The development of products manufactured from precious metals was hampered by the Cultural Revolution. At that time, jewelry was considered as a symbol of the rejected capitalism. However, at the end of the 20th century, the jewelry industry flourished again. Although initially the quality of jewelry was relatively low, over time it improved to the point when it became a competitive advantage. The following materials are mainly used to produce jewelry: metals (precious: gold, silver, platinum as well as alloys and base metals – mainly copper and aluminum), stones (diamonds and other colored precious stones, including jade and pearls) and other raw materials (including clay, wood, string, leather and ivory) (HKTDC, 2021). Similarly to other professions, Chinese goldsmiths are not a homogeneous group. While some of them are faithful to a specific precious metal, others adjust to market changes and change or combine the materials they work with. While some goldsmiths predominantly use traditional Chinese motifs (images of dragons and phoenixes, decorative motifs of bamboo, peony, lotus, floating fish, philanthropic and Chinese zodiac signs, and famous characters from literature), others follow Western design patterns. The third group combines both of the above. For example, Wang Naiyan [王乃炎] is a craftsman who combines eastern and western trends. He believes that modern handicraft can combine old production technology and modern design (KKNews, 2017a). Likewise, Zhou Jingzhao [周镜钊] represents the artisanal spirit of “inheriting innovation without forgetting the past” [“传承不守旧,创新不”. This also shows that the spirit of craftsmanship is fostered by dedication, self-improvement and seriousness – and is gaining social recognition and respect (Deng, 2017).

Another aspect refers to recognition at a wider than just local scale. Jingyi Bai [白静宜] a Beijing craftswoman and artist-designer, who mastered the art of filigree inlay and specialises in filigree and marquetry (a fine gold decorative technique that has been listed as China's intangible cultural heritage in 2008) may serve as an example. She has developed a unique artistic style. In 2009, she was named the Representative Inheritor of filigree inlay art [花丝镶嵌]” (Yuncunzhai, 2016). In 2010, she was also awarded the honorary title of Master of Chinese Jewelry Design [中国珠宝首饰设计大师] (Lu, 2019). Another example is Yue-Yo

Wang [王月婁] – a jewelry designer from Taiwan, who combines the arts of knotting and marquetry. According to Yo Wang, nowadays, it is very important to create products for several different markets (Lucas et al., 2015). Another aspect is income. It would seem that in the era of luxury goods, every goldsmith is “doomed” to wealth. However, according to Master Luo [罗] two aspects need to be considered. Firstly, in the past, the Chinese visited a goldsmith in search for a dowry, wedding gifts (e.g., dragon and phoenix bracelets or mandarin duck rings) or welcoming gifts for a new family member. Nowadays, they first visit jewelry shops (not necessarily traditional), and not every goldsmith owns such a store. Secondly, most often the Chinese visit goldsmiths not to buy something new but to repair or process the jewelry they already have. Therefore, the change in preferences has become evident (KKNews, 2016). The goldsmith industry has also been affected by the first stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the companies went bankrupt, others have been functioning, but they have been forced to sell jewelry below its market value (Yidu, 2020). Brand development can also affect the level of income. Goldsmiths and jewelers know that nowadays the price of a product also depends on the brand under which a given product is sold. Creating a brand is much more economically profitable than the production of jewelry itself. For example, the price of diamond jewelry with a label of a well-known brand may be as high as 300% of the same product offered without a brand (Xiang, 2021). Another aspect refers to those, who are actively working in the profession – creating or making repairs, developing new products and focusing on teaching and spreading cultural heritage – and those who work in the industry, but mainly as managers, and people who have retrained.

Wang Bisheng from Nanjing specialises in the production of thin gold leaves. The handmade leaves made with a hammer are softer and more sophisticated compared to machine production. They are used for gilding other surfaces. Master Wang, in collaboration with the Nanjing Gold Thread and Gold Leaf Factory, trains a new generation of craftsmen (Chinadaily, 2020).

Zhang Zhengang, a craftsman from Hangzhou, is a goldsmith who specializes in hand hammering and carving in gold and silver. Due to the precise and time-consuming nature of all necessary individual activities, the designing and forging of one item takes about three months. Zhengang also holds classes at the Hangzhou Intangible Culture Protection Center. In ancient times, the northern province of Zhejiang was full of goldsmiths. Due to fierce competition, they achieved advanced craftsmanship. However, once popular gold and silver craftsmanship declined over time and the demand for gold handicrafts decreased significantly. According to the craftsman Zhang, government support has no longer been enough as the craft requires greater public interest and more importantly – continuation. To make a living, Zhang designs factory molds for mass production (Shanghai Municipal People’s Government, 2020). According to another goldsmith, Chung Chunzhong [鍾春忠], changes in the handicraft market have become evident as goldsmiths have been gradually abandoning manual production and



now sell gold jewelry made automatically with casting molds instead (Lin, 2018). According to Master Xiong [熊] although working conditions have significantly improved over time, as a parent, he would not want his child to become a goldsmith in the future. It is a physical and tiring work that requires many years of training job and repeating the same activities, which is often reflected in the condition of the hands, eyesight and the pace of work. For example, it used to take him two hours to make a chain and now it takes him at least four hours. However, Master Xiong hopes his craftsmanship will not disappear in the same way cameras are still available despite the mobile revolution. He believes goldsmithing also will not disappear, but adapt to a specific customer market. He sees opportunities in education (jewelry design courses at universities) and the importance of transferring knowledge in textbooks written by current craft masters (KKNews, 2018). The craftswoman He [何] also believes that goldsmithing requires not only patience (sitting in one position for several hours) but also good eyesight. When working with blowtorches, burns and roughness of hands are quite common (Ma, 2013). Prior to 2000, traditional jewelry stores most often redesigned jewelry from older pieces provided by customers. At that time, products made of gold were most popular and not only jewelry shops were selling it. Subsequently, the change in consumer preferences and numerous reports of gold ‘stolen’ during its cleaning contributed to lowered trust towards this professional group. Furthermore, learning this craft is difficult and time-consuming. Entering the industry requires an apprenticeship followed by working in a craft shop and doing all kinds of activities. Then, a master gradually teaches the craft for several years (KKNews, 2017b). However, even those who complete their education, do not always work creatively as goldsmiths but quite often engage in business outside China, or set up their own jewelry companies (KKNews, 2017a).

## 5. Conclusions

As a final product, gold jewelry is a combination of materials (including the selected metal and additives used), as well as the creativity and skills of its creator – a craftsman. Chinese artisans use their talent and skills to develop pioneering techniques that have had a lasting global impact on designed items, including jewelry.

The main conclusions of the conducted research are as follows:

- In Chinese culture, the value of gold was initially lower than the value of silver and bronze, however, it has increased over time and is now worth far more than silver or bronze. This affects the dynamic development of the gold jewelry market, and many new sub-markets within it, for example, addressed to children;

- Both in scientific articles and opinion columns, the issues of the raw materials, techniques or final products are discussed more often than the profiles of craftsmen, the position of this professional group and the data on handmade gold jewelry. Moreover, studies and articles have shown, there is a considerable imbalance between the number of texts devoted to ancient and contemporary goldsmith masters. Works of contemporary jewelry manufacturers and designers, including those containing precious stones, are more popular. This is directly linked to the position of gold in Chinese culture, its acquisition and its popularity, which has increased over time.
- The group of Chinese goldsmiths/traditional jewelers is not homogeneous, although in China gold jewelry craftsmanship is mainly associated with repair services. Despite the fact that gold is associated with luxury and wealth, the profession of a goldsmith is not perceived as such neither by the overall Chinese society nor the craftsmen themselves.
- As in case of other traditional Chinese crafts, measures are needed to prevent goldsmithing from disappearing, and being completely replaced by large concerns and fully automated production.

Due to the difficulties in accessing scientific literature discussing the economic aspects of Chinese goldsmithing, as well as the lack of data on hand-made gold jewelry, this study has been limited. The online interviews (mainly in Chinese) certainly make a significant contribution to this topic; however, they are mainly conducted among individual jewelry makers, with various specialisations and working in different places (geographic location), therefore, it is not certain whether the results of this research are valid for all contemporary Chinese goldsmiths/traditional jewelers. Due to the above, it is recommended to continue this research and conduct in person interviews and surveys with Chinese artisans.

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