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Research on the Classification and Cultural Value of Characters on Porcelain of Imperial Kiln of Ming & Qing Dynasties*

HU Yang, YUAN Yutong, SANG Yuexia
Jingdezhen University, Jingdezhen, China

The characters on porcelain from the Ming and Qing imperial kiln in Jingdezhen are important carriers of ceramic culture and the art of writing, carrying rich historical information, craftsmanship features, and cultural value. This paper takes the characters on the porcelain of the imperial kiln of the Ming and Qing Dynasties as the research object. Based on the physical objects in the museum collection and in combination with historical documents, the characters on the porcelain of the imperial kiln are divided into two categories: One is the functional characters for identification, communication, and management, specifically including chronology, foreign and ethnic characters, and production management characters; the other type is decorative writing for aesthetic expression, which includes the main decorative type, the auxiliary embellishment type, and the implicit integration type. It reveals the significance of the imperial kiln porcelain script in the social context of the time and provides a new perspective for understanding the history of ceramics, writing, and culture of the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

Keywords: imperial kiln, porcelain, classification, cultural value

Introduction

The Jingdezhen Imperial Kiln site was the center of porcelain production in China during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, with a firing period of more than five hundred years, representing the pinnacle of ancient Chinese porcelain-making techniques. The characters on the porcelain of the imperial kilns, as a cultural carrier, are diverse in form and rich in connotation. The forms of these characters on the vessel include being engraved on the bottom, inscribed on the body, and integrated into decorative patterns. The appearance of writing on ceramic wares has a long history. As early as the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, writing patterns appeared on pottery. In the Majiayao culture (Yu & Zhan, 2009), there was a combination of writing and decoration. In the Tang Dynasty, kilns across the country entered the era of writing decorated ceramics. In the Song Dynasty, complete writing decoration became popular in the Cizhou kiln, opening up a new field of ceramic decoration (Pan, 2008). In the Yuan Dynasty, the national porcelainmaking center began to move to Jingdezhen. In the Ming Dynasty, with the establishment of imperial kilns, Jingdezhen became the national porcelain-making center, and the characters on porcelain made a significant leap in function, decoration, and cultural connotation.

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HU Yang, Assistant Professor, College of Humanities, Jingdezhen University, Jingdezhen, China.
YUAN Yutong, Third-Year Undergraduate, College of Humanities, Jingdezhen University, Jingdezhen, China.
SANG Yuexia, Ph.D., Associate Professor, College of Humanities, Jingdezhen University, Jingdezhen, China.

The characters on the porcelain produced by the imperial kilns were both diverse in form and rich in connotation. Functionally, the script was not only used for marking, recording, and communication, but also became an important basis for dating porcelain; in terms of decoration, the writing on porcelain transcended the mere function of information transmission and endowed the objects with unique cultural connotations and spiritual realms through art forms such as calligraphy, poetry, prose, and painting. The functionality and decorativeness of the characters make porcelain an important carrier of Chinese culture and aesthetic taste.

Research on the Functional Classification and Connotation of Characters on Imperial Kiln Porcelain

Chronological Inscriptions

The dating inscriptions are the most essential functional identification of the imperial kiln porcelain inscriptions, used to determine the production dynasty and era name of the porcelain, and are the key basis for dating and identifying fakes.

After the four-character seal script format was established in the Yongle period of the Ming Dynasty, it developed into a six-character double-line system in the Xuande period. Although inscriptions were rarely seen in the Zhengtong, Jingtai, and Tianshun periods due to the “blank period”, the Chenghua, Hongzhi, Zhengde, Jiajing, and Wanli periods all continued the basic norms of six-character or four-character date inscriptions, with only slight adjustments in the style and layout. The standard marks of Ming Dynasty official kilns such as “Made in the Xuande Period of the Great Ming Dynasty” and “Made in the Chenghua period of the Great Ming Dynasty” are written in blue and white on the bottom of the vessel. The characters are neat and indicate both the production period and the official kiln status exclusive to the imperial power, which are the core written evidence of the dating and grade of the vessel. The Qing Dynasty’s imperial kiln dating marks were further refined on the basis of the Ming Dynasty’s system. The inscriptions, such as “Made in the Reign of Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty”, “Made in the Reign of Emperor Yongzheng of the Qing Dynasty”, and “Made in the Reign of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty”, continued the format of the official kiln inscriptions of the Ming Dynasty (Wei & Li, 2024). The style of the inscriptions varied slightly with the dynasties and was also written on the bottom of the vessel. It was a sign of the strict control of the imperial kiln factory in the Qing Dynasty, reflecting the standardization of official kiln porcelain. These characters are not only decorative but also an “official certification” of porcelain used in the Ming and Qing courts. They carry the information of the dynasty and date, and also reflect the porcelain-making management system and the aesthetic of characters at that time. They are the key basis for dating and forgery in the study of porcelain from imperial kilns.

Foreign and Ethnic Scripts

Foreign and ethnic scripts carry the function of cross-cultural communication, which is both the absorption of foreign cultures and the witness of the integration of ethnic cultures. The use on imperial kiln porcelain was not unique to the Zhengde period, but a cultural phenomenon that ran through the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The types of writing and cultural connotations of different periods were both consistent and distinctive, embodying the continuity of the compatibility of the Central Plains dynasties with foreign cultures.

The appearance of Arabic on imperial kiln porcelain can be traced back to the Yongle period of the Ming Dynasty. Influenced by the cultural exchange craze during Zheng He’s voyages to the Western Seas, imperial kilns produced blue and white porcelain with Arabic script, mostly written in blue and white with Islamic maxims

and blessings. The Xuande period continued the tradition but with fewer pieces; during the reign of Jeongdeok, Arabic decorations flourished, combined with floral patterns, reflecting cultural integration. Although it was not as popular in the Qing Dynasty as in the Ming Dynasty, Arabic marks were still used on export porcelain during the reigns of Emperor Kangxi and Emperor Qianlong. The use of Phagspha on imperial kiln porcelain was concentrated during the Zhengde period of the Ming Dynasty, for inscriptions and decorations on porcelain, due to the absorption and inheritance of northern ethnic cultures and the political, religious, and diplomatic background of the time, as physical evidence of cultural exchange. Although it faded away later, it laid the foundation for the application of Manchu and Tibetan on porcelain in the Qing Dynasty. Arabic bowls and Phagspar plates from the Zhengde period of the Ming Dynasty are physical evidence of the deep integration of Chinese and foreign cultures, fully demonstrating the open and inclusive, diverse, and symbiotic characteristics of the Ming Dynasty.

Tibetan decorations ran through the Ming and Qing Dynasties, with the Xuande period of the Ming Dynasty being the peak. They were mostly prayers and eulophies, witnessing the exchanges between the court and Xizang. It has been passed down from each subsequent dynasty. It was more common in the Qing Dynasty. During the Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns, it was often used in conjunction with Sanskrit for offerings before the Buddha and was an important carrier of the fusion of Han and Tibetan cultures. Sanskrit decorations ran through the Ming and Qing Dynasties. They had appeared in the Yongle and Xuande reigns of the Ming Dynasty and became more abundant in the Zhengde and Jiajing reigns. During the reign of Emperor Yongzheng and Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty, which reached its peak, it was related to court religious activities and reflected the court's inclusiveness of diverse religious cultures. In addition, the imperial kilns of the Qing Dynasty were decorated in ethnic languages such as Manchu and Mongolian, enriching the types of writing and highlighting the inclusiveness and depth of Chinese civilization. These Ming and Qing imperial kiln porcelains, linked by characters, combined foreign language art with Central Plains ceramic craftsmanship, reflect the court's emphasis on absorbing foreign cultures, demonstrate the long-term integration of Chinese and foreign ethnic cultures, and serve as a chain of physical evidence for studying the cultural exchanges of the Ming and Qing with foreign ethnic groups.

The Ming and Qing imperial kiln porcelain with foreign lands or ethnic scripts is a carrier of the combination of different cultures, religions, and the decorative techniques of Central Plains porcelain. The integration of foreign script art into ceramic art, which is bound by characters, not only reflects the court's emphasis and absorption of foreign cultures, but also demonstrates the integration of Chinese and foreign ethnic cultures in exchange and coexistence, achieving the perfect combination of the function and decoration of characters. It also attests to the breaking of geographical and ethnic boundaries in cultural exchange during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the continuous enrichment and development of traditional Chinese culture through exchanges and mutual learning, highlighting the inclusive spirit and profound heritage of Chinese civilization, demonstrating the cultural inclusiveness of imperial kiln porcelain, and becoming an important physical evidence for the study of cultural exchanges between the Ming and Qing Dynasties and other ethnic groups.

Research on the Decorative Expression and Value of the Characters on Imperial Kiln Porcelain

Main Decorative Characters

This type of Characters uses text as the core element of the decoration of the vessel, directly conveying cultural implications and aesthetic pursuits by occupying the main visual space of the vessel body. The design expresses or carries multiple cultural connotations, or expresses and hopes for beautiful things, and at the same

time demonstrates the innovation of the decorative techniques of the imperial kilns. The Qing Dynasty Qianlong pastel Imperial Poem and Prose Rooster Cup, relying on pastel craftsmanship and ink-color regular script techniques, takes the Qianlong imperial poem and prose as the core theme decoration. The poem and prose convey the emperor's self-awareness of "not being complacent" through allusions such as "Jia Chang fighting the rooster", and at the same time integrate with the auspicious meaning of "rooster", achieving the unity of secular blessings and imperial thoughts. The Yongzheng blue and White Sanskrit plate is an offering vessel in front of the Buddha in the court. The Sanskrit text itself is a medium for "chanting sutras and praying for blessings", and its outer wall is mainly decorated with Sanskrit, condensing religious beliefs, political demands and aesthetic expressions into one vessel, conveying the court's inclusiveness of multiculturalism. The poems such as "Xiaoyan Yuanfen Jinzhanglu" on the Kangxi blue and white Doucai cup are the result of the combination of literary imagery and literati aesthetics, carrying poetic words in the form of elegant craftsmanship, highlighting the court's elegance and making the words a bond connecting "craftsmanship—decoration—culture".

The theme decorative text of imperial kiln porcelain, as the core visual presentation carrier of porcelain decoration, is both a concrete reflection of the cultural preferences of different periods in the Qing Dynasty and follows the design concept of "characters born with the vessel, text conveys the way", promoting the deep integration of imperial kiln craftsmanship innovation and cultural expression, and ultimately making the text a key link connecting practical function, artistic value, and the cultural meaning of the court.

Auxiliary and Embellishing Text

The text complements the patterns and pairs with the designs to create a composite decorative effect, enriching the visual hierarchy of the objects. Most of the characters are of the auspicious meaning type, which is a typical manifestation of the saying "pictures must have meaning, meaning must be auspicious" in the wares of the imperial kilns of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The "Feng" character in the Ming Dynasty Jiajing blue and white Five-Grain Abundance Cloud Dragon pattern bowl, combined with the five-grain abundance and cloud dragon pattern, not only echoes the theme of "five-grain abundance", but also conveys the hope for agricultural harvest and national peace and prosperity, and is a projection of the Jiajing era's emphasis on agriculture on the vessel; the combination of "Great fortune" and floral patterns in the Ming Dynasty Wanli blue and white five-color flower pattern gourd vase, where "good fortune" is a traditional auspicious image and the gourd itself sounds like "blessing and prosperity", achieves the superimposition of the characters with the shape and patterns, further strengthening the meaning of blessing. The Qianlong red-ground gilded gourd-shaped hanging screen of the Qing Dynasty, with the character "Ji" more prominent, combined with the display attribute of the gourdshaped hanging screen, not only continues the auspicious tradition of "Ji", but also showcases the court aesthetic through elaborate craftsmanship.

The characters on the porcelain of the imperial kiln factory serve as supplementary embellishments, presenting the characteristics of "literary decoration". The characters are small in size and flexible in distribution; not only will it not seize the visual core position of the patterns, but also echo the theme, making the decorative effect of the porcelain more culturally profound and achieving the aesthetic experience of "mutual verification of picture and meaning".

Implicit Integration Type of Text

The characters on imperial kiln porcelain are integrated into the porcelain decoration in a subtle and implicit way, both functional and aesthetic, without spoiling the overall artistic conception of the object. The "Fu"

character in the Ming Dynasty Wanli blue and white porcelain bowl with the characters for happiness, longevity, health, and peace is embedded in the pattern in an "invisible and integrated" way. The curly strokes of the "Fu" character, through the natural fit with the arc shape of the bowl body, allow the character to spread out along the arc of the body, making the decoration and the shape of the vessel integrated. The design of "hiding the fu in the pattern" is in line with the traditional cultural psychology that "the fu should not be fully exposed". With the ingenious idea of "receiving blessings through subtlety", the blessings carried by the vessel are more elegant and thought-provoking. The implicit integration of the "longevity" character in the Yongzheng Douzai Longevity pattern plate of the Qing Dynasty dissolves the straightness of the "auspicious characters". Through the circular composition of the disc, the flower branches of the "longevity" character spread out in a ring shape, perfectly fitting with the circular boundary of the center of the plate, achieving a sense of harmony where "the character follows the shape of the vessel and the pattern surrounds the character", rather than the stiff occupation of the picture by the characters.

The invisible integration of the characters into the porcelain decoration of the imperial kiln factory is not visually prominent and requires careful observation to be discovered. It fulfills practical functions such as identification and recordkeeping, while maintaining the simple beauty of the surface of the vessel, conforming to the aesthetic pursuit of "hiding without revealing" in traditional culture.

Conclusions

The characters on porcelain from the imperial kiln of the Ming and Qing Dynasties are mainly divided into functional marks and decorative characters. Their forms include dating marks, ethnic characters, production marks, and characters of poetry and prose, which have both practical and aesthetic value. These characters provide key evidence for dating and counterfeiting of porcelain and carry multiple historical information such as the management system of the official kilns, the inheritance of craftsmanship and cultural exchange. The cross-cultural attributes are vividly displayed through foreign and ethnic scripts, while auspicious characters reflect the changes and developments in folk customs and aesthetics. The writings of the imperial kilns are spiritual symbols of the ceramic culture and have diverse values. Their collation and research provide precious materials for a deeper understanding of the production system, cultural connotations, and social background of the imperial kilns of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Through the sorting and analysis of these characters, not only the evolution trajectory of the characters on imperial kiln porcelain from practical identification to artistic decoration and then to cultural inheritance is explored.

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