

Study on the Change of Religious Decoration of Imperial Porcelain in Ming Dynasty

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Abstract: In Ming Dynasty, the Royal Kiln of Jingdezhen made considerable progress in producing official kiln porcelain, especially imperial porcelain. Under the background of strengthening centralized power, these unique ceramics played an important role in maintaining the political system of Ming Dynasty. Imperial porcelain had special properties, such as the monopoly and authority in its production and usage. At that time, these ceramic wares were affected by emperors' religious beliefs; Buddhism and Islam images, mottos and scriptures in porcelain were typical examples. This paper analyzes the Signification of religious symbols painted in imperial porcelain, and finds that these religious elements gradually changed from symbols of religious instruments and holy articles to pure decorative icons.

1. Seeing Humans through Materials

Patron is a factor which can influence artistic creation and deserves more attention. In ancient China, the royal family had the largest demand for luxury art, and dominated the formation and transformation of the art styles of ceramics. As the supreme "patron", the emperor could launch large-scale art projects since he had the power to manage human and financial resources of the whole nation. One of these projects was the Royal Kiln of Jingdezhen in Ming Dynasty. A number of Ming emperors had special hobbies in amusement and refused to deal with government affairs. Their tastes and religious beliefs influenced the production of imperial ceramics. How did religious culture integrate into porcelain production? What was the evolution direction of religious symbols? In order to solve these problems, it is necessary to clarify how emperors' beliefs affected the production of porcelain through a series of policies and cases in Ming Dynasty.

2. The Relationship between Religious Factors and Imperial Porcelain of Ming Dynasty

With the help of Da-ling Xu's classification of the history of Ming Dynasty, this paper analyzes the strengthening of related concepts in imperial porcelain according to the evolution process of the royal family. A series of topics which are not related to commodity production are discussed. Relevant topics include court-designated samples, official supervision, the prohibition of private use, the monopoly of production and usage processes, as well as the personal interests and religious beliefs of emperors. The influence of imperial power on porcelain production cannot be realized without the high concentration of imperial power in Ming Dynasty. There were many cases about the strengthening of imperial power in Ming Dynasty since the abolishment of prime minister during the reign of Yuan-zhang Zhu, the first emperor of Ming Dynasty. At the micro level of ceramic production, the imperial power also left a deep impression. In Fourteenth Century, some kilns in Jingdezhen became official kilns specializing in Royal orders. In 1577 (the fifth year of the reign of Emperor Wanli), the court placed an order for 174700 pieces of porcelain with Jingdezhen. [1] High-rank central officials and local officers were responsible for the supervision of this project. According to The Record of Yuan-zhang Zhu, the First Emperor of Ming Dynasty, in the second year of Hongwu, Yuan-zhang Zhu stipulated that all sacrificial utensils should be porcelain. The number of imperial porcelain increased. Afterwards, specialized officials in palace should made samples of

porcelain first; craftsmen then make utensils according to these samples. According to the Code of Great Ming Dynasty, "since the 26th year of Hongwu, all imperial utensils were first formulated by the internal government, and then made in kilns located in Rao, Chu or other places."

Through the design of samples, high standard products could be guaranteed; skilled craftsmen could ensure the authority and monopoly of products in glaze, modeling and decorative patterns. Through these measures, supreme and unique imperial utensils could be made. The production process was further improved during the reign of Emperor Xuande: the year of manufacturing was imprinted on the imperial porcelain as a standardized process. This was also a measure taken by Emperor Xuande to rectify the imperial kiln and further control the production of imperial porcelain. The ultimate goal was to strengthen the centralized autocratic rule. Emperors' powers and ideas also deeply influenced the color of china. According to the 161 volume of The Record of Yingzong Emperor of Ming Dynasty, "the official of Raozhou, Jiangxi Province produced private porcelain with prohibited colors of yellow, purple, red, green, blue as well as white and blue,... The principal criminal was put to death by dismembering the body. All his properties were confiscated. Male adults in his family were transported to the frontier for penal servitude. People who knew his crime but not report were also punished."

Different colors represented different social classes. This was a long tradition in ancient China. Yellow was the emperor's exclusive color; no one else can use the yellow glazed porcelain. People in different status and different grades should use utensils with different colors: it was a kind of institution. Since the abolition of prime minister, the highly centralized imperial power in Ming Dynasty exerted tremendous influence on the production of ceramics, almost determining the design and production of porcelain. [2] During the reign of Emperor Wanli, imperial kilns were often instructed to produce strange objects, such as square boxes, chess screens and so on. Craftsmen were sentenced to death if they violated or did not conform to official patterns. [3] The concept of imperial porcelain formed with the strengthening of imperial power in Ming Dynasty, and led to the execution or conviction of people who owned or used imperial porcelain; Shan Zhang was an example. Severe laws frequently imposed capital punishments such as "dismembering the body" and "cutting-off the head" to punish and warn those who do not abide by the rule of "imperial usage". The will and the centralized authority of emperors deeply influenced the production and usage of imperial porcelain with distinctive hierarchical efficiency. The art of imperial constantly adjusted to adapt various policies, and gradually became the symbol of imperial power. [4] Therefore, imperial porcelain did not have the property of "exchanging" or commodity circulation. It is a kind of privately customized luxury with the strong feature of "imperial articles".

3. The Changing Significance of Religious Symbols

In Ming dynasty, apart from the basic using functions and aesthetic values of imperial porcelain, the integration of various "religious" decorative concepts with ceramics also enhanced the role of imperial porcelain as the sacred symbol of the supreme imperial authority. Royal Kiln porcelain, especially the imperial porcelain, could only be used by the emperor himself. After the Emperor Yuan-zhang Zhu abolished the position of prime minister, the highly centralized imperial power needed the support of the hierarchical material system. The imperial porcelain was also called as "Shang Yong" and played an important role in the hierarchy system of Ming Dynasty. Emperors' personal religious beliefs deeply influenced the production of ceramic wares. There are many religious traces in imperial porcelain of Ming Dynasty. The emperor influenced the production of porcelain; the Royal Kiln porcelain influenced folk kilns; unified "official samples" sent by the palace to Jingdezhen exerted subtle but profound influences on surrounding folk kilns. This kind of appliance had both practical and aesthetic functions, as well as diversified religious decorations. Examples of the affects of patrons' religious beliefs on porcelain with Buddhist, Taoist and Islamic characteristics are discussed as follows.

In Ming Dynasty, Buddhism was integrated into imperial porcelain through shapes of wares like lotus flowers or monk hats. Typical utensils include monk hat pots decorated with Sanskrit and Tibetan characters, as well as Yingluo patterns. [5] Representative artifacts include the Blue and

White Spoon Decorated with Lotus and Sanskrit characters made during the reign of Emperor Yongle, the Blue and White Covered Jar Decorated with Sanskrit Characters, Halberd and Sanskrit Dharmacakra made during the reign of Emperor Xuande, and the Blue and White Cup Decorated with Sanskrit Characters made during the reign of Emperor Chenghua. Some ornament patterns are composed of a single Sanskrit or Tibetan character; some patterns are Sanskrit scriptures distributed according to the shapes of utensils; some are combinations of Sanskrit characters and other decorative elements such as lotus petals, auspicious clouds, as well as smooth lines and stripes. Decorative area varied in sizes. Some wares have small numbers of words and large blank spaces; some are full of Sanskrit characters which can cause great visual impacts. The decorative parts can be inside the porcelain, outside the porcelain, or at the bottom of porcelain. The integration of Buddhism with Chinese ceramics has a long history; imperial porcelain made in Ming Dynasty has Buddhist characteristics, which reflects that Tibetan Buddhism had great influence on the royal family of Ming and thus directly influenced the production of Jingdezhen ceramics.

Besides Buddhism, Islamic elements can also be found in imperial porcelain of Ming Dynasty. He Zheng's Voyages during the reign of Emperor Yongle strengthened the relationship between China and Central and Western Asia, especially the Arab world. Since then, Islamic culture came to China with foreigners. Hou-zhao Zhu, the Emperor of Zhengde had the interest of "seeking novelty" and preference for foreign cultures, which prompted the emergence of considerable amount of Islamic cultural factors in imperial porcelain made during his reign. Shapes of ceramics include Kalasa (Kundikā), the Blue and White Candlesticks Decorated with Arabic Characters made during his reign (stored in the Palace Museum now), as well as the Blue and White Plate Holder Decorated with Arabic Characters made during the reign of Emperor Yongle. Decorative patterns include Persian and Arabic proverbs and aphorisms, such as the praise of Allah and Mohammed. In addition to practical and aesthetic functions, these elements also helped to spread the doctrine of Islamism. Now the research circle cannot reach consensus on the religious belief of Wuzong (the Emperor of Zhengde, whose name is Hou-zhao Zhu); some argue that he believed in Tibetan Buddhism, while others hold that he believed in Islam in private and list relevant evidence. [6] There is no clear evidence to prove the emperor is a religious believer. But for this powerful ruler, the novel extraterritorial culture, the Islamic art style, as well as the mysterious Arabic and Persian font designs had unique aesthetic appeals. [7] Relevant shapes include stationery articles like pen holders, candlesticks and others. Different from Christianity, Buddhism and Taoism, Islam forbids idolatry and concrete arts. Because of this doctrine, no "idols" can be found in Arabic arts. The Islamic artisans have a long tradition of decoration through the extensive use of abstract "non-figurative" patterns such as characters, flowers and plants. The interpreting and copying of the Koran are holy acts; Arabic characters become the medium connecting believers and Allah. Islamic aesthetics pursues for balanced compositions with strong senses of movement and rhythm through the combination of dots and lines in Arabic calligraphy, as well as letters with different lengths and in different positions. [8] The arrangement of Islamic decorative patterns on imperial porcelain made during the reign of Zhengde conforms to the supremacy of abstraction.

Utensils with Taoist features are also in large quantity. Emperor Jiajing (Hou-cong Zhu) believed in Taoism, which had a great influence on the production of Jingdezhen imperial porcelain. In this period, both the shapes and the ornaments of china wares were deeply affected by the Taoist belief of the emperor; it was also the remarkable characteristic of imperial porcelain at that time. The shapes of utensils include gourd bottle; ornament patterns include gourds, the sermon of Lao Zi, matches of magical powers between Taoist priests, Taoist magic figures, cloud and crane patterns, cross, the Eight Immortals, the eight trigrams, Ganoderma Lucidum, and the eight treasure pattern with interlock branch lotus. According to the interpretation of Taoism, Taoist humanity includes all Taoist scriptures, seals, pictures, scriptures, incantations and rhymed formulas, since all of them can exemplify and manifest the spirit of Tao. [9] The Palace Museum in Beijing now stores a number of such objects, such as the White and Blue Plate Decorated with Ganoderma Lucidum, Peach, Crane and Taoist Magic Figures, the White and Blue Bowl Decorated with Ganoderma Lucidum, and the Colorful Plate Decorated with Ganoderma Lucidum and Peach Tree. Taoism does not have strong

religious significance; it is more like a kind of auspicious culture in the folk.

Undoubtedly, imperial wares are luxury products which require excellent skills, tedious processes and high costs. Luxury goods are for a small group of people. Marx expressed that the true luxury goods have the least significance in all commodities when comparing different productive epochs from the prospective of crafts. [10] It is undeniable that imperial porcelain has a narrow circulation range and a very small number of audiences. It cannot be regarded as commodity in the strict sense; it can only reflect relevant problems of a small space. But the key is, this small group of people has political and communication powers; they can produce significant influences. In researching, scholars cannot neglect their pursuit of luxury works and aesthetic interests, as well as their value orientation and cultural identities. All in all, no civilization can be independent from the world. Since ancient times, the Chinese culture has accepted all kinds of foreign cultures and absorbed a variety of nutrients by combining them with its own genes. This is vividly reflected in the imperial porcelain of Ming Dynasty. The diversified religious and cultural elements enriched the contents of ceramic culture in China. At first, Islamic culture and artistic characteristics were introduced in China as religious elements; however, with the development of the times, many Arabic and Persian painted in porcelain of the later period could not be understood. They became pure ornamental decorations with mysterious exotic beauty; the contents of characters were no longer important. The decorative patterns and shapes introduced by emperors transformed into decorative elements in China. There were many reasons for the appearance of religious factors in imperial porcelain of Ming Dynasty, such as the requirement of consolidating political power, appeasing the people and propagating the doctrine. Out of the pursuit of consolidating the rule, individual aesthetic interests or religious beliefs, emperors showed their strong personal characteristics in custom-made imperial porcelain; china wares were deeply influence and marked with the stamps of the times, which facilitates today's identification of Ming porcelain. Analyze from the semiotic point of view, both characters and images are symbols; they are composed of "signifier" and "signified." [11] On one hand, imperial porcelain utensils are vessels with religious symbols. They were regarded as sacred objects symbolizing the religious spirit in various religious rituals. On the other hand, both local and foreign religious and cultural factors gradually lost their religious connotations and became pure decorations. Characters and patterns full of exotic customs and appeals provide more choices for the creation of Chinese pottery. Some wares of imperial porcelain of Ming Dynasty are decorated with religious characters. As symbols, Sanskrit, Tibetan and Arabic characters have different "signifier" in different cultural backgrounds; the forms and features of their "signified" also change. The original religious and cultural symbols became pure decorative patterns, which also reflected changes in the development of porcelain production. In the early Ming Dynasty, the authority stipulated repressive rules. In the mid-Ming Dynasty, the religious atmosphere was relatively unrestrained due to battles among emperors, imperial concubines, relatives of the royal family and ministers in the worshipping of Buddhism, Taoism and other folk religions. [12] But the imperial power system became increasingly closed; the harsh and abnormal ban on maritime trade with foreign countries after the mid-Ming Dynasty was an example. [13] According to literature, in his old days, when writing about "barbarism", the Emperor Jiajing used very small characters in all documents. This may be out of the philosophy of "China should be treated with reverence but the barbarians should be treated with depreciation". [14] Transformations of the royalty's interests in religion were displayed on imperial porcelain through religious decoration factors; the double composition of religious symbols made corresponding adjustments to the changes of the times. The comprehensive characteristics of these works of art are symmetry and strict restriction, reflecting the stagnation of social development in modern times of China and the absolute imperial autocracy. The evolution of religious symbols concretely reflects that after Emperor Wanli, the royal family and the government failed to adjust their policies to adapt to new situations. [15]

To summarize, imperial porcelain wares are objective existence; they can record past moments and embody history. Religious factors on imperial porcelain reflect details in the exchanges of culture, especially the religious culture between China and foreign countries in the Ming Dynasty. The imperial porcelain is "sponsored" by emperors of the Ming Dynasty. Through the design of samples,

high standard products could be guaranteed; skilled craftsmen and relevant policies could ensure the authority and monopoly of products in glaze, shapes and decorative patterns. Through these measures, supreme and unique imperial utensils could be made. Religious messages contained in these objects show the absorption and digestion of foreign cultures by the Chinese culture.

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