

PROCEEDINGS ARTICLE

The Representation of Urban Commoner Culture in Ming-Qing Ceramic Painting: A Case Study of Thematic Inspirations from Ming-Qing Novels

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Abstract

The ceramic paintings in the Ming and Qing dynasties formed their own unique features. Whether in the selection of themes, artistic styles or artistic forms, they all showed strong characteristics and trends of urban folk culture. The formation of this trend is closely related to the aesthetic tastes of the society and the values of literary works at that time. Combining with the social background of the Ming and Qing dynasties, this paper takes the themes of novels in the Ming and Qing dynasties as the entry point of the research, and analyzes the manifestation forms of novel themes in ceramic paintings. It is found that the handling of the expressions, costumes and movements of the characters in ceramic paintings, as well as the popular and intuitive narrative plots and the expression of glaze colors, all prove the characteristics of urban folk culture contained in the ceramic paintings of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Keywords: Ceramic Painting; Urban Folk Culture; Novels of the Ming and Qing Dynasties

1. INTRODUCTION

Urban folk culture is a cultural phenomenon that emerged with the formation of the urban citizen class. It reflects the daily lives of ordinary people and encompasses a wide range of contents. Among this cultural category, novels, with their unique narrative charm, have become an important representative of urban folk culture. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the scenes and character stories depicted in novels frequently appeared in the decorative patterns of ceramics. [1] These patterns were not only deeply loved by the people at that time but also became a prominent feature of ceramic art. These exquisite ceramic works are not only widely popular in China, but also many porcelain items produced by folk kilns are exported overseas. This allows Chinese ceramic art and novel culture to transcend national boundaries, enabling people around the world to appreciate the unique charm and far-reaching influence of traditional Chinese culture.

2. THE URBAN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE AESTHETIC TRENDS OF CERAMICS AND THE VALUE ORIENTATIONS OF NOVELS IN THE MING AND QING DYNASTIES

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, both the aesthetic trends of ceramics and the value orientations of novels exhibited a distinct trend of secularization. Firstly, there was a significant transformation in the aesthetic concepts of ceramics. It shifted from the previous aesthetic ideals that pursued gentleness, elegance, and implicit connotations to forms of expression that were more in tune with the interests and tastes of folk life. Painted porcelain wares, which were once despised by literati and refined scholars, were widely favored by the general public because they vividly presented the pleasures of folk life. Especially, the works from folk kilns, in order to meet the aesthetic needs of the broad masses of the people, began to extensively adopt characters from novels and operas as well as historical stories as decorative themes. These works were not only large in quantity but also reached a

rather high level of artistic accomplishment. The aesthetic characteristics presented by the aesthetics of ceramics, [2] as Li Zehou once stated, "The aesthetic appeal of artistic forms is inferior to the appreciation of the content of life, and elegant tastes give way to secular realities."

Secondly, in terms of the value orientation of novels, the works of the Ming and Qing dynasties gradually abandoned the obscure expressions in classical Chinese and instead adopted vernacular Chinese that was easier for the general public to understand. In terms of content, these novels placed more emphasis on subjective expression, delved deeply into the inner world of individuals, emphasized the sincerity of emotions and the richness of imagination, and relatively reduced the traditional didactic elements. These changes signify that novel literature was moving towards the direction of secularization. For example, widely circulated classic works such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin*, *Journey to the West*, *the Golden Lotus*, and *Dream of the Red Chamber* all fall within the category of popular novels. With their language and plots close to real life, they were deeply loved by the people at that time.

There are naturally various reasons contributing to this urban characteristic phenomenon. Firstly, with the development of the commodity economy and the emergence of the sprouts of capitalism, this economic transformation promoted the rise of cities and the expansion of the urban citizen class; [3] Secondly, in the cultural field, the trends of realism and humanism became the mainstream; Finally, in the Ming and Qing dynasties, the policies gradually lifted the restrictions on the sea ban, and the commercial activities along the southern coast gradually recovered, and maritime trade thrived again. The improvement of these policies provided conditions for the development of urban folk culture. It symbolizes the renewal of people's aesthetic consciousness, indicating that people are eager for novelty and difference and actively pursuing a more open new life.

3. THE URBAN CHARACTERISTICS PRESENTED BY THE CHARACTER IMAGES AND ARTISTIC NARRATION IN CERAMIC PAINTINGS

[4] The novel literature in the Ming and Qing dynasties is a vivid manifestation of urban folk culture. Therefore, it was very popular to paint novel themes on porcelain, and this practice was highly regarded because of its storytelling, interestingness and informativeness. It not only enables contemporary people to have a deeper understanding of history through historical allusions but also provides an intuitive visual experience. The ceramic paintings in the Ming and Qing dynasties remarkably demonstrated the urban folk customs, which were mainly reflected in three aspects: Firstly, the character images in the porcelain paintings; secondly, the popularity of the narrative texts; and thirdly, the changes in the glaze colors.

3.1. The Character Images Bear a Strong Imprint of Urban Life

The creation of character images plays a pivotal role in novel writing. In the ceramic paintings of the Ming and Qing dynasties, it became an important creative theme. Many ceramic painting works from the Ming and Qing dynasties drew inspiration from the character images in the popular novels of that time. [5] Due to the social environment at that time, many literati and painters chose to live in seclusion in urban areas. The direct participation of literati and literati painters in ceramic painting, on the one hand, enhanced the cultural taste of ceramic painting, and on the other hand, contributed to the urban flavor of literati ceramic paintings. Thus, in artistic creation, it broke free from the traditional constraints of the Confucian ritual and music culture that had long emphasized "cultivating morality and assisting human relations." They used realistic creative techniques to enthusiastically praise the beauty of secular life. Therefore, the portrayal of character images on porcelain bears distinct marks of life and is closer to the daily life of ordinary people.





As shown in Chart 1, the blue-and-white figure paintings are all selected from the classic character images in the novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties. For example, item 1-1 in the table is a blue-and-white snuff bottle with the figure of Wu Song from the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty, which is collected in the Princeton University Museum. Wu Song holds a spear in his hand and has a ferocious expression, indicating that he is preparing for a battle. The painting vividly shows the characteristics of the character. For instance, items 1-2 and 1-3 in the table are a bowl-shaped censer from the Chongzhen period of the Ming Dynasty. This censer uses Zhejiang cobalt blue to outline the

four main characters from *Journey to the West*—Tang Sanzang, Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie, and Sha Heshang. Sun Wukong is leading the White Dragon Horse. Tang Sanzang is walking with his right hand touching the alms bowl and his left hand leaning on the monk's staff. Zhu Bajie with big ears and Sha Heshang carrying the burden are following behind. The characters have a humorous feature. Sha Heshang's expression is slightly exaggerated. Through the characteristics of the characters, one can imagine the hardships and joys of the four disciples on their journey. As shown in item 1-4 of the table, it is a brush pot from the Tianqi period of the Ming Dynasty, depicting the story of Cao Cao presenting a robe. The character images of Cao Cao and Guan Yu are intercepted. It can be seen that the patterns are delicate and the scene is magnificent. Guan Yu stands on the bridge with his sword horizontally, lifting the robe with his sword, and Cao Cao, wearing an official hat, is closely following behind.

There are some remarkable commonalities among these character images: Their expressions are vivid, and their costumes are natural and casual, obviously designed to meet the actual needs of production and labor at that time; their movements are exaggerated in amplitude, full of a strong flavor of life. Urban folk culture is a kind of culture that aims to showcase the characteristics of ordinary people's production activities, lifestyles, behavioral customs, religious beliefs, ethical concepts, aesthetic tastes, value orientations, etc., and it has distinct folk characteristics.

It can be clearly felt from these blue-and-white character images that, compared with the solemn expressions and gorgeous costumes of the characters in previous figure story paintings, the portrayal of the character images on porcelain in the Ming and Qing dynasties presented a completely different style. They were no longer presented in a stylized way. [6] Instead of being sticking to forms, they were filled with a strong flavor of life, reflecting the urban characteristics of the brushwork. Visually represent the characters in the novel in an intuitive way. This is precisely one of the important features that distinguish the ceramic paintings of the Ming and Qing dynasties from those of previous generations.

Table 1. Arrangement of Character Images in Blue-and-White Ceramic Paintings of the Ming and Qing Dynasties

Part of the Porcelain				
	1-1	1-2	1-3	1-4
Period Shape of the Porcelain Vessel	Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty Snuff bottle	Chongzhen period of the Ming Dynasty Bowl-shaped censer	Chongzhen period of the Ming Dynasty Bowl-shaped censer	Tianqi period of the Ming Dynasty Brush pot
The characters from novels depicted in the painting	<i>Water Margin</i> Wu Song	<i>Journey to the West</i> Tang Sanzang	<i>Journey to the West</i> Zhu Bajie, Sha Heshang	<i>Romance of the Three Kingdoms</i> Cao Cao, Guan Yu

3.2. The Popularity of Narrative Texts





The novels in the Ming and Qing dynasties, with their classic storylines, have become an indispensable source of inspiration in ceramic painting. [7] These novels are long episodic novels developed on the basis of popular novels in the Song and Yuan dynasties. They are written in vernacular Chinese, making the huaben novels more accessible and understandable. This breaks the tradition that novels in the past only used classical Chinese for narration, thus greatly expanding the

audience base of novels. Different from poems, ci-poems, essays and odes that express the feelings of literati, and also different from the classics, histories and academic works that convey moral principles and establish theories, these novels are a kind of commercial culture for the entertainment and leisure of the common people. Ceramic painting reinterprets the story lines in the novels with ceramic pigments, which is more straightforward and easier to understand compared to textual narration. On the one hand, this enriches the creative themes of ceramic painting, and on the other hand, it also promotes the spread of urban culture.

As shown in Table 2, these are all plot elements selected from the classic novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties. For example, in item 2-1 of the table, it is a multicolored plate from the Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty, depicting the plot where Lin Chong captures Hu Sanniang alive. This plate is painted with six colors, namely green, red, yellow, manganese purple, blue enamel, and black. In the middle is a general, and the scene depicts the battle between the soldiers and the rebels. In the picture, the soldiers are holding spears and have fierce expressions, indicating that a fierce battle is taking place. It can be seen that a fierce battle is taking place. Item 2-2 in the table is a six-sided vase with plate-shaped ears, decorated with pink enamel patterns depicting human figures and stories, which was made in the middle period of the Qing Dynasty. Even today, it is still a very eye-catching handicraft. The plot depicted on the body of the vase is carefully selected from Chapter 29 of *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, titled "The Immortal Wu Determines One's Life through Physiognomy". From the mouth of the vase to the bottom foot, it is evenly divided into six prism faces. Each face is exquisitely painted with the stories of the characters from *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. The connecting lines between each picture are outlined with gold color. The colors are bright and harmonious, and the overall decorative layout is rigorous and complete. Item 2-3 in the table is a multicolored plate from the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty. The patterns on this plate are derived from Chapter 8 of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which is titled "Lord Wang Skillfully Uses the Coiling Serpent Stratagem, and Prime Minister Dong Creates a Ruckus in the Phoenix Pavilion". Item 2-4 in the table is a work from the early Chongzhen period of the Ming Dynasty. [8] This vase is selected from Chapter 88 of *Journey to the West*, titled "The Dharma Assembly Is Held in Yuhua When the Monk Reaches Spiritual Enlightenment, and the Heart Ape and the Wood Mother Instruct the Disciples". Although the lines depicting the characters are simple and concise, they perfectly present the dynamic expression of King Yuhua "kneeling down and bowing", as well as the state of the little princes being sincerely convinced and eager to retain the master and his disciples. It can be seen that the ceramic painting at that time had reached a very high level.

The popularity of the plot depicted in ceramic paintings is a remarkable feature of porcelain in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Overall, the paintings on the four ceramic wares listed in the table share some prominent characteristics: The narrative technique is concise and clear, enabling viewers to easily understand and have a clear view at a glance. Through the depiction of time, place, events, as well as the actions, expressions and costumes of the characters, people can quickly identify which novel plots these paintings represent. In terms of composition, these works are often quite rich and full, reflecting the richness of the composition in porcelain paintings at that time. By varying the thickness of the lines, arranging them in a dense or sparse pattern, and creating contrast in the shades of colors, artists skillfully create the effects of foreground and background, demonstrating that they have borrowed and absorbed the composition techniques of woodblock prints. This popular expression is closely related to the cultural background of that time. The prevalence of urban culture made such easy-to-understand patterns more acceptable to the general public, and at the same time, it also met the market demand. Therefore, these works not only showcase the charm of secular entertainment such as literary and artistic qualities, plot elements and humorous fun, but also closely connect with the preferences of ordinary people in terms of aesthetic style.

Table 2. The Arrangement of Plot Elements in Ceramic Paintings during the Ming and Qing Dynasties

Part of the Porcelain	 2-1	 2-2	 2-3	 2-4
Period vessel shape	Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty Plate	Middle period of the Qing Dynasty Six-sided vase	Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty Plate	Chongzhen period of the Ming Dynasty Cylindrical vase
The plot of the novel depicted in the painting	<i>Water Margin</i> Lin Chong Captures Hu Sanniang Alive	<i>The Plum in the Golden Vase</i> The Immortal Wu Determines One's Life through Physiognomy	<i>Romance of the Three Kingdoms</i> Lu Bu Meets Diaochan	<i>Journey to the West</i> The Dharma Assembly Is Held in Yuhua When the Monk Reaches Spiritual Enlightenment

3.3. The Fashionability of the Semantics of Glaze Colors




[9] Before the Ming and Qing dynasties, ceramic decorations mainly featured techniques such as flower carving, scratching, and printing. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the remarkable development of colored glazes made the combination of Chinese painting techniques and porcelain-making craftsmanship more mature. Underglaze-colored porcelain with a strong Chinese style reached a new stage of development, thus bringing an end to the situation where the glaze colors of porcelain before the Yuan Dynasty mainly imitated the appearance of jade and silver. Famille rose, cloisonné enamel, five-color porcelain, etc. in the Ming and Qing dynasties opened a new era for the system of Chinese ceramic decorative art. Looking at the development of aesthetics throughout the dynasties, the art of porcelain pursues an aesthetic concept that is gentle, refined, implicit and reserved, emphasizing the beauty of the natural and spontaneously formed artistic conception, rather than complex carving or straightforward expression. [10] Since the Yuan Dynasty, ceramic painting has gradually developed and reached its historical peak during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The richness, vividness and variety of colors more appropriately met the aesthetic needs of that time. The ceramic works of the Ming and Qing dynasties, with their colorful hues, show us a splendid and diverse world. This magnificent and vivid beauty forms a sharp contrast with the simple elegance and profound beauty of the single-color porcelain that was pursued before the Yuan and Ming dynasties.

As shown in Table 3, the colored porcelain from the Ming and Qing dynasties is selected. Although they are of different types and themes, they all display the unique artistic style of the Ming and Qing dynasties in terms of the presentation of glaze colors. Item 3-1 in Table 3 is a famille rose and gold-traced lion-ear vase from the Daoguang period of the Qing Dynasty, which is currently collected in the Victoria Museum in the UK. With its magnificent colors and exquisite decorations, this lion-ear vase vividly reproduces a classic scene from the popular novel *Water Margin*. [11] Up to now, many houses in Europe still retain large display items of this style. The gorgeous colors and elaborate decorations are not only favored by the domestic people during the Ming and Qing dynasties but also regarded as art treasures abroad. Item 3-2 in the table is a five-color plate depicting the heroes of *Water Margin* from the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty, which is currently collected in the British Museum. The theme is selected from the thirty-six warriors and characters in *Water Margin*. This plate adopts the overglaze color process, with green as the main tone, dotted with different shades of red, and the faces of the characters are depicted by means of line drawing, which portrays the different expressions and characteristics of each person. As shown in Item 3-3 of the table, it is the interior of a

blue-and-white Kongming bowl from the Ming Dynasty. The theme is selected from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The color of this bowl is chosen as blue-and-white pigment, which is used to paint the characters, and the different shades of the blue-and-white pigment are utilized to show the characteristics of the characters.

Overall, compared with the previous periods, the ceramic paintings of the Ming and Qing dynasties have shown remarkable changes in color selection. They exhibit a more modern sense of fashion and are closer to the aesthetic tastes of ordinary people. The craftsmen at that time were highly skilled. They used different brushwork techniques when applying various color materials, which is particularly evident in the use of ink and color. For example, [12] when painting blue-and-white porcelain, they took fully into account special techniques such as water separation and water collapse. In the production of five-color porcelain, they focused on the effect of flat application of a single water-based color material. When creating famille rose porcelain, they adopted the washing and dyeing technique. These exquisite techniques have designed a unique "system of using ink and color" for ceramic paintings, providing more convenient conditions for the expression of glaze colors in the Ming and Qing dynasties and making the forms of expression of ceramic art more diverse and colorful.

Table 3. The Color Representation in Ceramic Paintings during the Ming and Qing Dynasties

porcelain	 3-1	 3-2	 3-3
Period Shape	Daoguang period of the Qing Dynasty Lion-ear Vase	Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty Plate	Ming Dynasty Kongming Bowl
Novel	<i>Water Margin</i>	<i>Water Margin</i>	<i>Romance of the Three Kingdoms</i>

4. CONCLUSION

The characteristics of urban culture presented in ceramic paintings are one of the important features of ceramic paintings during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Looking back through history, significant cultural transformations took place during the Ming and Qing dynasties. There was a shift from the refined to the popular culture, and the popular culture was fully demonstrated. This led to the secularization of the aesthetic trends of ceramics and the value orientation of literary works in the Ming and Qing dynasties, which inevitably brought about changes in the themes and styles of ceramic paintings. Among numerous novels, those vivid character images and captivating plot elements were distilled as the source of inspiration for ceramic paintings. With the help of the high-quality materials at that time and the exquisite craftsmanship of the artisans, these elements were skillfully integrated into ceramic decorations. The porcelain wares with simple and intuitive images, easily understandable artistic narrative methods, and rich and colorful glaze colors were more likely to be loved and accepted by the general public, thus forming the unique style of ceramic paintings in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

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