



## Cognitive Interpretation of Decorative Symbols of Chinese Export Porcelain in Ming and Qing Dynasties

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### Abstract

The Ming and Qing Dynasties were the heyday of Chinese porcelain export. With the export of porcelain, Chinese porcelain and porcelain making technology gradually spread all over the world and became the sign and symbol of Chinese culture. The decorative symbols of Chinese porcelain are rich and diverse, which has had a far-reaching cultural impact on export countries and regions. Therefore, the porcelain exchanges between China and other countries in the world through the “the Belt and Road” are essentially a process of mutual influence and reproduction of the art and culture of different civilizations. By interpreting the process of understanding and accepting the artistic theme and decorative symbols of Chinese porcelain by overseas audiences, this paper discusses the cultural influence of Chinese porcelain on countries along the “the Belt and Road”.

**Key words:** Ming and Qing Dynasties; Porcelain export; Decorative symbols; Cognition

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Porcelain is a great invention of the Chinese nation. Since the Tang Dynasty, porcelain has become an important

commodity in foreign trade. After the rapid development of the Song and Yuan Dynasties, Chinese porcelain in the Ming and Qing Dynasties entered its heyday of production and export. Chinese porcelain, which was both decorative and practical, became an important commodity in early global trade and an important carrier of cultural exchanges between China and the West. The large export of porcelain during the Ming and Qing Dynasties stimulated the continuous development and innovation of the domestic porcelain manufacturing industry. Benefiting from the advantated natural resources and the transportation network in all directions, Jingdezhen in Jiangxi became the porcelain manufacturing center during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The quality, glaze color, shape and decoration of its porcelain led the domestic and foreign porcelain manufacturing industry. Jingdezhen porcelain during this period also became synonymous with Chinese porcelain. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Jingdezhen also had manual workshops dedicated to firing porcelain for export. *Jingdezhen Pottery Records* recorded that “foreign ware can be divided into sliding foreign ware and clay foreign ware... foreign ware is specially sold abroad, most of the merchants are Cantonese, who sell porcelain to Nanyang. The style of the porcelain is ingenious, and there are new patterns every year.”

### 1. MAIN CATEGORIES OF EXPORT PORCELAIN IN MING AND QING DYNASTIES

The export porcelain of Ming and Qing dynasties can be divided into Kraak porcelain, heraldic porcelain, Imariware porcelain, etc., according to the types of porcelain which were sold well abroad in different historical periods. According to the production and drawing technology of porcelain, it can be divided into blue and white porcelain and all kinds of glaze color porcelain.

Blue and white porcelain, one of the mainstream varieties of Chinese porcelain, belongs to the underglaze color porcelain. The original blue and white porcelain appeared in the Tang and Song Dynasties, while the mature blue and white porcelain was fired in the Hutian kiln of Jingdezhen in the Yuan Dynasty. In the Ming Dynasty, blue and white porcelain became the mainstream and reached its peak in the Xuande Period of Ming Dynasty. Export blue and white porcelain has both exquisite durable practical ware as well as pleasant decorative ware. Its use and style evolve with the development of society, and its market development has also experienced the process of gradually changing from the Middle East and West Asia to Western Europe.

Glaze color is painted on the plain tire with high strength, using low temperature color glaze process. The earliest glazed porcelain appeared in the Song Dynasty. The famous glaze color porcelain in Ming Dynasty includes the Red colored glaze in Hongwu period, multi-colored glaze in Xuande period. By the Qing Dynasty, glazed porcelain was further developed. In particular, on the basis of inheriting the firing techniques of the glazed porcelain of the Ming Dynasty, there was innovation and development, so that the porcelain technology in Qing Dynasty reached a more brilliant realm. The plain tri-colour and multicoloured porcelain of the Kangxi Period, the pastel color during the reign of the Yongzheng Emperor, and the enamel color of the Qianlong period are all the fine works of the world-famous glazed porcelain. With the export of a large number of Chinese porcelain to Europe, European merchants began to bring designs to China according to the needs of their own consumers, and then Chinese artisans imitated based on the designs. Samples of customized paintings are mostly oil paintings and prints from Europe, blue and white porcelain with single color can no longer meet the needs of customized porcelain, thus glazed porcelain was exported to Europe in large numbers. Western Europe used to call the painted porcelain sold to Europe during this period “Rose family porcelain”, believing that only the noble rose can be compared with it

## 2. DECORATIVE FEATURES OF EXPORT PORCELAIN IN MING AND QING DYNASTIES

In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the quality and decoration styles of China’s export porcelain varied with the different periods, regions and types of porcelain. However, from the 15th century to the end of the 18th century, China’s export porcelain developed with the times and changed with overseas culture and market factors. It is a dynamic development process from the export of completely Chinese local style porcelain to the integration of Chinese and western cultural styles, and finally to

the customized export porcelain produced according to the requirements of foreign investors. It embodies the customs, religious beliefs and cultural cognition of people from different countries and regions, and reflects the integration of cultural exchange and economic exchanges. Chinese export porcelain tells “China story” with its unique ceramic language, spreads Chinese culture to other countries in the world, and changes the social life and artistic style of western countries.

### 2.1 Decorative symbols of Chinese style

At the beginning, the exported porcelain has strong folk color both in shape and decoration, and these decorative symbols full of oriental color have become the “exotic style” in the eyes of the Westerners, arousing their yearning for the mysterious East.

#### 2.1.1 Traditional Characters

Figure themes have always been the most representative decorative patterns in China’s porcelain decoration, including religious figures, mythological figures, war figures, children, ladies and other theme types. The most favored by the overseas market is the female theme of the “lady” decorative pattern. “Shi” refers to an official, and ladies refer to the women of the ancient official’s family. Paintings depicting the “ladies” appeared in the Jin Dynasty, and prospered in the Tang Dynasty, the term “ladies” first appeared in *Famous Paintings of the Tang Dynasty* by Zhu Jingxuan. The ceramic decoration with ladies as the theme also appeared on the changsha kiln porcelain in the Tang Dynasty. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, with the European market’s love of Oriental female decorative themes, a large number of ladies themed decorations appeared in export porcelain, the ladies hold fans, play zither, visit the garden, or play with babies. Their clothes are fresh and elegant, their looks are dignified and beautiful, and their artistic conception is quiet and leisurely. Most of them are portraits of the real life of women in the court or official families of the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

#### 2.1.2 Landscape Gardens

In the early Ming Dynasty, the landscape garden decoration elements in porcelain only appeared as the background of the figure decoration, so the composition was often scattered, the painting method was not careful, and the people are often bigger than mountains. In the early Wanli period, the blue and white porcelain plate pictures decorated with landscape garden patterns had a far and near level, and there were many landscape elements such as pavilions, pagodas, trees and so on. By the late Wanli period, the landscape painting style of blue and white porcelain was becoming more and more mature, and the techniques of Chinese literati landscape painting could be skillfully applied to porcelain decoration. At the end of the Ming Dynasty and the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, garden patterns for export mostly appeared on plates, bowls, plates and other food utensils. At the

same time, the custom of loving tea in Europe also led to a large number of tea sets and milk cups painted with garden patterns. The landscape patterns of this period further borrowed from the techniques of literati landscape paintings, the composition was exquisite, the painting method was fresh and soft, and the style was clear, bright and clean, so that a “Chinese style” was formed in the eyes of Westerners that “people there are easy-going, often leisurely in quiet pavilions and live in harmony with nature” (Gan, 2008).

### **2.1.3 Flowers, Insects and Birds**

In the history of the development of Chinese ceramic decoration, images such as flowers and plants have always been the carrier of beautiful meanings, and have become metaphorical symbols for people to place beautiful emotions and hopes. It can be said that “since the advent of blue and white porcelain, flowers have always been the most lasting source of inspiration for Chinese artists” (Monkhouse, 2021). Flowers either appear in the center of porcelain, or as decorations and shading. Peony metaphors luxuriance and wealth, plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum of the four gentlemen metaphors elegance and purity, lotus is a metaphor for the temperament of mud without pollution, while pomegranate flower is a metaphor for the good wish of more children and more happiness. Sometimes flowers are decorated with birds and insects, although it is difficult to identify the specific varieties of flowers on export porcelain in the later period, flowers have become a porcelain decorative symbol with great cultural connotation and metaphorical significance.

## **2.2 Decorative Symbols of Foreign Style**

As the shape and decoration of pure Chinese style were divorced from the actual life of Europeans, and China’s understanding of the western world was gradually improved through the export of porcelain, western style decorative elements gradually appeared in the export porcelain from the late Ming Dynasty.

### **2.2.1 Fairy Tales**

Decorative elements based on western mythological stories and mythological figures appeared around the 1730s and 1740s. Greece is the origin of western civilization, and the myths of ancient Greece and Rome have a profound influence on western culture. In the early Qing Dynasty, there appeared a large number of ornaments themed with western myths, such as Pandora’s Box, the Riddle of the Sphinx, and the Sword of Damocles. Most of these porcelains are drawn according to the purchasing requirements of foreign merchants. With porcelain as the carrier, the aesthetic feelings of western romanticism are integrated with porcelain, an ancient oriental art treasure.

### **2.2.2 Religious Allusions**

Christianity was introduced into China by missionaries in the late Ming Dynasty and spread rapidly. During the period of Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong in the

early Qing Dynasty, the number of missionaries sent by European countries to China further increased. Some missionaries even served as officials in the Chinese imperial court. Many of these missionaries were quite accomplished in art and science. For example, Italian missionary Lang Shining came to China in the 54th year of Kangxi period and became a court painter. After three periods of Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong, he taught Chinese painters the techniques of Western painting, it had an important influence on the creation and burning of enamel color in the early Qing Dynasty.

At this time, a large number of custom fired porcelain samples from Europe were based on biblical figures or biblical stories. At first, Jingdezhen craftsmen lacked knowledge of Christianity, and the biblical figures on export porcelain did not look like Western figures and had no difference in image. With the popularity of Christianity in China and the popularity of Western painting techniques, by the first half of the 18th century, the skills of Jingdezhen painters in drawing Western figures had been greatly improved, The figures and costumes are also closer to the western style.

### **2.2.3 Custom Pattern**

At the end of the Ming Dynasty and the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, a large number of Chinese porcelain were exported to Europe. In order to meet the growing overseas demand, there were also some changes in China’s porcelain production and business model. In addition to the previous common batch orders, there was also an order model of customized samples. Merchants clearly stipulated the appearance, size, shape and pattern of the wares in the contract. Craftsmen only need to make them in strict accordance with the requirements of the contract, In Jingdezhen, where porcelain production is booming, there are “foreign ware” workshops specially for the European market, which specially produce these “custom fired porcelain”. Most of the templates brought by these European merchants are wood, metal and glass, and most of them are food and drink utensils that meet the needs of daily life. Among them, the most distinctive is the custom fired porcelain called “heraldry porcelain”.

Heraldic porcelain, also known as badge porcelain, refers to the kind of porcelain that fired in Jingdezhen, craftsmen paint and burn the badges representing European noble families and groups according to the requirements of types, shapes, patterns, decorations, construction period, etc. provided by European purchasers. Heraldry porcelain combines the traditional Chinese porcelain making process with the elegant decorative style of Western Europe at that time. It is favored by European upper class society, and even becomes an item used by European royal families and nobles to show off and compare. The 18th century was the peak of custom-made heraldry porcelain. According to the literature, China exported 600,000 pieces of various types of Heraldry

porcelain to Europe in the 18th century, most of which were sold to Britain.

### 3. COGNITIVE INTERPRETATION OF DECORATIVE SYMBOLS OF EXPORT PORCELAIN IN MING AND QING DYNASTIES

After arriving in East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, North Africa and European and American countries via the maritime Silk Road, the artistic theme and decorative symbols of Chinese porcelain have gradually been recognized and accepted by foreign societies, and integrated with local culture, social customs and religious beliefs. Sometimes they are also imagined, interpreted and reinterpreted, becoming elements in literary works, art works, other commodities or artistic and cultural products. China's export porcelain has both material and spiritual two-way cultural characteristics. Its delicate structure, beautiful posture and profound artistic conception can be called the perfect integration of man and nature. It is an important messenger and media for the spread of Chinese culture.

#### 3.1 Cognitive Interpretation of "Character Theme" Decoration

Before the Mongolian Empire opened up the Eurasian trade route in the 13th century, Europe understands of China and even the eastern world was a blank. Although Marco Polo and European missionaries only brought back some exaggerated descriptions from China, they aroused the curiosity and longing of westerners for the East. With a large number of Chinese porcelain exported to Europe in the 17th century, Chinese characters, clothes and secular life scenes of Chinese people were displayed in front of the west through porcelain patterns, and became a "foreign style" that swept Europe. For example, the idea of fighting against feudal secular ideas and daring to pursue beautiful love conveyed in the romance of the *West Chamber* coincides with the western audience's pursuit of romanticism. The image of Monkey King yearning for freedom and equality and full of struggle spirit in *Journey to the West* is consistent with the spirit of Western society pursuing freedom and democracy. The heroic images of eliminating tyranny, pacifying the public and upholding justice in the story of *Water margin* are in line with the western society's worship of individual heroism... The decorative themes of these eastern elements, the story content and cultural connotation behind them are gradually integrated with the western ideology, so they are accepted and loved by the western people.

#### 3.2 Cognitive Interpretation of "Landscape Garden" Decoration

The "landscape garden pattern" in Chinese porcelain is not only the embodiment of the ideal life of Chinese traditional literati, but also the embodiment of Chinese

excellent garden design techniques. With the export of Chinese porcelain, the decoration of the theme of "landscape garden" on porcelain, including the decorative elements of landscape, flowers and trees, pavilions and so on, has also been introduced into the west, bringing a brand-new idea of the integration of man and nature to Europe, which led to the emergence of the natural garden and forest landscape in Europe in the 18th century. Therefore, it can be said that Chinese export porcelain is an important medium for the cultural exchange between Chinese and Western gardens, and has rich cultural connotation and research value.

The pavilions, terrace, towers and bridges in Chinese porcelain became the symbols of the new British gardens in the first half of the 18th century, and had a far-reaching impact on the gardening art in the style of natural gardens and picture gardens in Britain. Sir Chambers, the British architect, built a Chinese octagonal tower in the Hill Garden of the British Royal Botanical Garden. The tower is 18 stories high, the tower body is decorated with 80 dragons. It is solemn and simple and is very magnificent in the green forest. The Chinese tower, a collection of Chinese decorative elements, has formed a strong contrast with other buildings in the garden in its towering image, which has triggered an upsurge of imitating Chinese style gardens in Europe. In his book *On Oriental Gardening*, Chambers explained his experiences of visiting Guangdong gardens in his early years and the European views on Chinese gardens at that time. In the 18th century, France set off a "China fever" under the background of the big bourgeois revolution. Chinese pavilions appeared in a large number of art works such as printmaking and oil painting. The British Chinese garden published by French architect Le Rouge analyzed the structural layout of Chinese gardens, showing the western understanding of Chinese gardens at that time.

#### 3.3 Cognitive Interpretation of "Flowers, Insects and Birds" Decoration

Flower patterns are the most common decorative elements in the decorative theme of exported porcelain. Most of them appear as side decorations, including leaf curling flower patterns, twig wrapping flower patterns, twig flower patterns, etc., which are colorful. Chinese people often have auspicious implications for the use of flower themes, which reflects the traditional Chinese culture. At that time, due to the European pursuit of Chinese culture, they had a novel attitude to accept the Chinese implications of flowers or anything else. Therefore, flower themed decoration accounted for a large proportion of export porcelain. This fresh, soft, slender and exquisite curve shape triggered the European "Rococo" artistic style.

Influenced by the decoration of Chinese flowers, insects and birds, flower patterns of local style often appeared in foreign imitated porcelain, such as the plant

patterns in Japanese kakiemon porcelain, the “German flowers” in German Meissen porcelain, the “British flowers” drawn by Chelsea porcelain factory, etc.

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#### 4. CONCLUSION

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With the help of rich decorative content narration, Chinese exported porcelain has spread Chinese traditional culture to all parts of the world. The artistic theme and decorative symbols of Chinese porcelain have gradually been accepted by foreign societies and sometimes reinterpreted, becoming elements in literary works, art works, other commodities or artistic and cultural products. Therefore, China’s export porcelain is not only a commodity, but also a carrier of rich cultural connotation, which has had a far-reaching impact on the culture, art, religion, economy and social life of the export countries and regions.

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