

Research on Expression Rules of Characters on Porcelain of Imperial Kiln of Ming & Qing Dynasties*

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The Jingdezhen Ming and Qing Imperial Kiln Factory, as a private kiln exclusively for the royal family, the inscriptions on its porcelain were important carriers that embodied the will of the monarchy, the continuation of craftsmanship, and cultural exchanges. This article studies the development patterns of the inscriptions on imperial kiln porcelain, and the results show that under the dominance of the monarchy, standardization and exclusive monopoly shaped the normative system of the marks; cultural demands drove the function of the inscriptions to evolve from the practical orientation of the Song and Yuan periods to the integration of aesthetic and cultural elements in the Ming and Qing periods; the synchronicity of the inscriptions' craftsmanship and the porcelain-making technology achieved the unity of function and form. These inscriptions are not only the key basis for dating and identifying porcelain, but also directly record the management system of the imperial kilns during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, cross-cultural exchanges, and the aesthetic trends of the times. The research on these inscriptions provides important support for the exploration, protection, and utilization of the historical and cultural value of the imperial kiln factory.

Keywords: imperial kiln factory, porcelain, characters

Introduction

Jingdezhen Yushan Imperial Kiln Factory was a royal kiln that exclusively produced porcelain for the imperial court during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. It is hailed as the “crown jewel” on the porcelain kingdom’s “crown” and the “root” and “soul” of Jingdezhen’s ceramic culture. Its production history is long, and the porcelain it produced not only represents the highest level of porcelain-making technology at that time, but also carries the will of the royal family and the characteristics of the era’s culture. The porcelain text of the imperial kiln factory serves as a form of cultural carrier with diverse expressions and rich connotations. These texts are manifested on the objects in various forms, such as being engraved on the bottom of the vessel, written on the body of the vessel, or integrated into the decorative patterns. The appearance of these texts on ceramic objects

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has a long history. As early as the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, pottery already had text patterns, and the Majiayao culture featured a decorative style combining text and patterns. By the Tang and Song Dynasties, all kilns across the country entered the era of ceramic decoration with text, and in the Song Dynasty, the Jingzhou Kiln began to widely use complete text decoration, opening up a new field of ceramic decoration (Zhang & Yuan, 2016). In the Yuan Dynasty, the center of porcelain production across the country began to shift to Jingdezhen. By the Ming Dynasty, with the establishment of the imperial kiln factory, Jingdezhen became the national center of porcelain production, and the text on porcelain achieved significant richness and development in terms of function, decoration, and cultural connotation (Wang, 2017).

The ceramic text of the imperial kiln factory during the Ming and Qing Dynasties followed the manifestation pattern from function to decoration and then to cultural inheritance. Types such as signature marks, auspicious patterns, and poems and inscriptions had their own emphases. Some indicated the place of origin, some conveyed meanings, and some added elegance. Its logic was in line with the development of ceramics. From simple symbols in the early days to Tang and Song poems and Ming Dynasty signatures, with the evolution of porcelain-making technology and social needs, it not only served practical identification but also accumulated the aesthetic sense and cultural memory of the era, forming an evolutionary trajectory of “practical first-aesthetic empowerment-cultural refinement”.

Standardization and Exclusivity Under the Dominance of Imperial Power

The construction and use of the textual system for porcelain produced by imperial kiln factories during the Ming and Qing Dynasties were always subject to the dominance and control of imperial power, resulting in a dual characteristic of standardized production and exclusive monopoly (Wang, 2017). The script style for dating inscriptions, the position of inscriptions, and the painting techniques all had strict regulations. For instance, in the Yongle period, the only standard was four-character seal script, and after the Xuande period, it was fixed as a six-character double-line format. Any imitation by civilian kilns was considered an infringement and would result in severe punishment. The unearthed rejected porcelain with inscriptions from the imperial kiln sites was deliberately broken, directly confirming the imperial power’s monopoly on the symbolic rights of writing (Zhou, 2008). Under the dual constraints of standardized production and rigid control, the inscriptions on porcelain became a direct projection of imperial will in the material culture domain, strengthening the symbolic expression of the hierarchical order and imperial authority. The writing of imperial kiln factory inscriptions was issued by the court, and artisans were not allowed to make any alterations. A single character difference could lead to the destruction of the entire batch of porcelain. This extreme control over textual details not only reflects the direct intervention of imperial power in the production of craftsmanship but also transforms the inscriptions on porcelain beyond their practical functions, turning them into a manifestation of political power. Each inscription is a sacred inscription of the imperial power on the object, highlighting the comprehensive control of centralization over cultural symbols.

Type Iteration Driven by Cultural Demands

The porcelain inscriptions of the imperial kiln are the carrier of the integration of Chinese ceramic culture and the art of writing. They carry significant cultural value. The transformation of their functional form is deeply coupled with multiple factors such as the political orientation of the era, the economic foundation, cultural trends, aesthetic preferences, and the will of the emperors (Hu, 2022). Initially, the inscriptions appeared on porcelain

as a core attribute of functionality, existing merely as symbols for recording information, fulfilling basic practical functions such as dating, indicating the place of origin, and identifying the kiln. With the development of society and the iterative upgrading of cultural demands, the inscriptions on porcelain gradually broke free from the constraints of “single symbols”, and their application types became increasingly diverse. Their functions achieved a systematic leap from “practical tools” to “artistic carriers”, which not only reflected the expansion of the application scenarios of the inscriptions in the porcelain decoration system but also endowed them with multiple value dimensions beyond information recording. They are an emotional carrier that conveys wishes for longevity, health, and peace, as well as a medium for cross-regional and cross-ethnic cultural exchanges. They are also decorative patterns that conform to the aesthetic standards of the times. The transformation from a practical orientation to an aesthetic orientation, the expansion of the form from symbols to patterns, and the cultural compatibility from local writing to diverse writing all directly reflect the progress of porcelain-making technology and also explain the political system, cultural ideology, and social trends of a specific era (Zhang, 2022).

The Principle of Technology Adaptation in the Process of Evolution

The development of porcelain inscriptions is closely linked to the advancement of porcelain-making techniques. The maturity of the blue-and-white porcelain technique promoted the development of blue-and-white inscriptions, making them increasingly the main form of inscriptions and gaining favor from imperial kiln factories due to their unique artistic effects and stable firing processes. The rise and application of enamel colors and pastel colors in the Qing Dynasty further facilitated the development of the enamel and pastel porcelain inscriptions' enamel decoration style towards greater richness and diversity, with more brilliant and varied colors, significantly expanding the artistic expression space of ceramic decoration (Jiang, 2015). At the same time, the popularization and improvement of mold printing techniques also met the strict requirements of large-scale production for the uniformity and regularity of inscriptions, and enhanced production efficiency and product consistency. It is worth noting that the layout position of inscriptions on the objects and the actual functions of the objects also formed a cleverly adapted relationship. For example, the inscriptions on daily-use utensils such as bowls and plates are mostly located at the bottom of the objects, which not only ensures the convenience of use but also avoids the interference of the inscriptions with the specific functions; while the inscriptions on display and decorative objects such as bottles and jars present different characteristics, they can be flexibly distributed on prominent positions such as the shoulders and the abdomen, which not only fully demonstrates the readability of the inscriptions but also enhances the overall aesthetic and ornamental value of the objects, facilitating the perfect integration of the practical value and artistic value of the objects.

Conclusion

The inscriptions on the porcelain produced by the imperial kiln factories during the Ming and Qing Dynasties can be mainly classified into functional designations and decorative inscriptions. Their forms include dating marks, ethnic scripts, production identifiers, poems and prose inscriptions, etc., possessing both practical and aesthetic value. These inscriptions provide crucial evidence for dating and identifying the authenticity of porcelain pieces, and also carry multiple historical information such as the management system of the official kilns, the transmission of craftsmanship, and cultural exchanges. Their manifestation patterns follow the standardized and exclusive principles under the rule of the monarchy, as well as the iterative type changes driven by cultural

demands and the synchronous adaptation of the text craftsmanship and porcelain-making techniques. At the same time, the attribute of cross-cultural communication is vividly demonstrated through foreign and ethnic scripts, while auspicious characters reflect the changes and development of folk customs and aesthetics.

The remaining inscriptions of imperial kiln factory porcelain are spiritual symbols of ceramic culture, possessing diversified values. Their collection and research provide precious materials for in-depth understanding of the production system, cultural connotations, and social background of the imperial kiln factories during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Through the sorting and analysis of these inscriptions, not only can the evolution trajectory of porcelain factory inscriptions from practical designations to artistic decorations and then to cultural inheritance be clarified, but also the key roles played by the imperial will, cultural demands, and craftsmanship techniques can be further revealed.

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