

## On the Humanistic Impression in the Ornamental Patterns of Ming Ceramics

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**Supported by** 2017 Jiangxi University Humanities and Social Science Research Project “On the Humanistic Features Reflected from the Ming Ceramics in the British Museum” (Number: YS17118).

Received 9 March 2022; accepted 29 May 2022

Published online 26 June 2022

### Abstract

Using the research methods and means of art, sociology and literature, this paper, taking the Ming ceramics in the British Museum as an example, expounds the the humanistic features in the ornamental patterns of Ming Ceramics from the following perspectives: folk stories, religious ideology, and the life of common people. Findings of the paper: the realistic approach in folk story pattern, the popularization of the religious ideology pattern, and the vitality shown in the picture of people's daily life, all of which not only are a reflection of the popularization of the Ming ceramic decoration but also the solidification of the living conditions of the age.

**Key words:** Ceramics; Ornamental pattern; Popularization; Ming dynasty

Hou, X. H. (2022). On the Humanistic Impression in the Ornamental Patterns of Ming Ceramics. *Canadian Social Science*, 18(3), 69-73. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/12569>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12569>

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Ming Dynasty of China (1368-1644) enjoyed social stability and economic prosperity. Due to gradual economic recovery and continuous expansion of domestic and foreign trade markets, the development of decorative arts, painting, calligraphy, ceramics and other fields of

humanities and arts was flourishing (Ye, 2011). Under such social and artistic background, the ceramic production entered an unprecedented age of development after the Song Dynasty. There were not only official kilns or imperial kilns for the imperial court to produce tribute porcelain, but also a large number of civilian kilns to meet the needs of other social classes. The quantity and quality of ceramic works were greatly improved compared with that of the Yuan Dynasty. Before the Ming Dynasty, the theme of ceramic ornamental pattern was still based on simple pattern, and themes about characters, stories and scenes occasionally appeared in decoration. However, the technique of expression was simple and short of variety. In the Ming Dynasty, the artistic expression forms of literati painting, printmaking and silk weaving were widely applied to ornamental patterns of porcelain, raising the ceramic aesthetics to a new height (Wang, 2020).

Taking the Ming ceramics in the British Museum as the research object, this paper explores the humanistic characteristics of the Ming Dynasty reflected in the decorative patterns of those ceramics. The article will elaborate the social and humanistic picture in the decorative patterns of Ming porcelain from three aspects: the folk stories, the religious and philosophical stories and the daily life of ordinary people.

### 2. FOLK STORIES IN THE ORNAMENTAL PATTERN

Folk tales are common themes in ceramic decoration. Legend is one of the eternal topics that people talk about after dinner. Ornamental porcelain requires not only beautiful shape and dazzling glaze color, but also fantastic ornamental design with rich cultural connotation. Taking into consideration of the shape or function of objects, artists often create appropriate decorative patterns to increase the artistry of works, so as to improve the aesthetic value of ceramic art works.

Folklore has been passed down from generation to generation and is widely known. Being closely related to life is one of the most distinct features of it. It usually comes from life itself, but is not limited to life, and its plot and content are usually within what people consider to be true and reasonable. Folk stories painted on ceramic art works, not only increase the artistic charm of the works, but also transmit traditional Chinese culture. Through the decorative patterns on the porcelain, audience can not only appreciate the connotation of the work more deeply and accurately, but also understand the cultural characteristics of the age that it reflects. Therefore, folk tales in the decorative patterns of ceramic works are the best text for people to understand China's long history and splendid culture.

### 2.1 The Love Story of Xiangru



Plate 1  
Celadon Jar

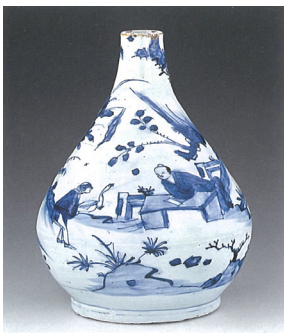


Plate 2  
Vase in Blue and White

In the above jar, a touching love story is depicted through the ornamental pattern. The decoration section on the right side of the body of the jar tells the story of Sima Xiangru, a writer and politician of the Han Dynasty, who though first was not valued by the Emperor of his age, then through hard-work, was promoted to be an official of high rank, and realized his original dream of being an official with great power. Plate 1 depicts two figures, a man and a woman, on the right side of the body of the jar. The man is writing on a bridge banner with a pen. The word "Sheng Xian" is clearly visible. Beside the man is a gentle lady, and the woman is holding an ink-stone. These two characters are Sima Xiangru and Zhuo Wenjun. The story of "Xiangru Bridge" is widely spread among the people. The bridge is in the suburb of Chengdu, Sichuan

province. The first time when Xiangru passed the bridge, he wrote down on the bridge the words "I would never go across you without sitting in a chariot!" (Ni, 2008). Now, he, with a mission assigned by the Emperor, will go to the bridge again. This time, with power in hand, Xiangru will realize his wish written on the bridge. What's more, this time he will go there with his beautiful wife.

### 2.2 The story of Wang Xizhi

Legend story of scholars is another common theme of ceramic design decoration. Plate 2 describes a garden scene on the body of a vase in underglaze blue decoration. The scene depicts a scholar lounging at a desk in a garden, seemingly observing a white goose brought by a servant. The literati wore the typical cross-collared robe, while the servants wore short robes and trousers. There are some plants and rock in the lower part of the vase. The two figures stand opposite each other and seem to be talking to each other. This scene tells the story of Wang Xizhi, a famous calligrapher in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, who loved a goose very much. About Wang Xizhi's love of goose, there are some stories. One goes like the following. There was a lonely old lady who kept a goose that whistled wonderfully. When Wang Xizhi heard about it, he sent someone to buy it, but the old lady refused to sell it. So Wang Xizhi invited his friends to have a look at the goose together. When the old lady heard that Wang Xizhi was coming, she killed the goose and prepared to entertain the great calligrapher. However, when Wang Xizhi arrived, he saw the goose was dead and felt very upset. You can see how much he loves geese. Another one goes like the following. An old Taoist priest who wished for a copy of Wang Xizhi's *Huangting Scriptures*. However, he knew that Wang Xizhi was a famous person, so how could he give his calligraphy to an ordinary person like him? Later, the Taoist priest learned that Wang Xizhi loved geese, so he carefully fed a flock of them and set them free every day at the spot where Wang Xizhi was walking with his friends. One day, Wang Xizhi "came across" a flock of white geese and was so surprised that he wanted to buy them. The Taoist priest said, "If you just write me a copy of *Huangting Scriptures*, I will give you all the geese as a gift." Wang Xizhi finished writing happily, and returned with the geese happily.

From the above analyses, we can see both the love story of Xiangru and the funny story of Wang Xizhi show the humanistic flavor in the ornamental pattern of Ceramics in the Ming Dynasty. In addition, we can see such style was fairly popular of that age.

## 3. THE RELIGIOUS STORIES IN THE ORNAMENTAL PATTERN

Religious theme is another eternal subject of ceramic decorative patterns. Religious philosophy is not only the spiritual sustenance of people in a society, but also

the externalization of their spiritual world. Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism were popular in the Ming Dynasty. Taoism has the most stable position and was pursued to a very high degree in the Ming Dynasty. It became popular in the Ming Dynasty with the highest participation of ordinary people. In the mid-Ming Dynasty, Taoism, especially with Emperor Jiajing's belief in it, reached an unimaginable level. The whole social atmosphere was immersed in the superstitious activities of "alchemy pill" and "seeking immortality". Many social activities and utensils were labeled with Taoist elements (Li & Cheng, 1984). During this period, the depiction of Taoist fairy stories and Taoist activities by ceramic pattern decoration showed the trend of popularization: the theme of the pattern is clear, the story is influential, and the preaching is obvious. Buddhism was introduced into China since the Tang Dynasty and took root in Chinese society since then. The teachings advocated by Buddhism and related symbols, such as vajra pestle, which symbolizes the invincible wisdom and true Buddha nature, were easy to see in ceramic ornaments. Buddhist saints, lotus, which symbolizes purity also frequently appeared. Confucianism, founded by Confucius, has influenced China for thousands of years. Confucianism advocates benevolence, justice, loyalty, filial piety and social harmony. In traditional Confucian philosophy, having many children -- especially sons -- is the key to starting a family, carrying on the family line, and conforming to etiquette. Such thought is reflected in the ornamental patterns of porcelain, with the auspicious "One Hundred Children" -- one of the best. The picture shows people's yearning for more children, more wealth and more happiness.

### 3.1 Taoist Liu Hai



Plate 3  
Plate in Blue and White



Plate 4  
Celadon Figure

Taoism is committed to helping others and bringing wealth and good luck to the world. Taoist immortals are active in ceramic decorative patterns, such as the Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea, All Immortals Celebrating Birthdays, and the Two Hehe Immortals, etc. Immortals are the symbol of longevity, the embodiment of wealth, or the symbol of family harmony. Various Taoist immortals and stories related to Taoist teachings frequently appear in the decorative patterns of ceramic art works. These patterns are not only beautiful, lifelike, but also have profound meaning. These patterns not only achieve the purpose of preaching, but also become the embodiment of Taoist teachings. Liu Hai, a Taoist immortal, a symbol of wealth and success, is also often found in decorative patterns on porcelain.

Plate 3 depicts a young - looking fairy dancing barefoot under a plum tree. He wears a gourd and has a string of coins wrapped around his belt. The toad that accompanies him also has gourds tied to its back. The picture is extremely vivid and lively. The immortal is Liu Hai, the benevolent Taoist immortal. Legend has it that Liu Hai lured his three-legged god toad out of a well with a string of coins as bait. Toad and Liu Hai have been inseparable ever since. The story of Liu Hai and the gold toad is widely spread among the people: Liu Hai was born in a poor family. Therefore, to take care of his mother, he had to do all the housework including washing, cooking among others. He often went to the nearby mountains to cut firewood and then sold them to buy rice. In this way, he maintained a living with his mother. Liu Hai uses a white bead as bait to fish in a loofah well. A golden toad bit the bait and jumped out of the well. Then, Liu Hai took advantage of the opportunity to ride on the toad's back and fled to the sky as an immortal (Harrison-Hall, 2001).

### 3.2 Maitreya

Maitreya is also called the Cloth Bag Monk because his big belly looks like a big bag. Since it was introduced into China in the late Western Han Dynasty, Buddhism has become the most popular religion in China. Buddhism holds that all beings are equal and can become Buddhas. At the same time, it also warns the world not to behave badly, but to be kind to others and help others. It means that people should not do any evil deeds in the world, but to do all the good deeds in the world so as to make their mind get purification. Guided by this doctrine, Buddhists believe in compassion, good deeds, and good karma. Maitreya Buddha, also known as Cloth Bag Monk, is the most representative image of Buddhist saints. Plate 4 is a celadon figure sculpture. Celadon is not only favored by the Chinese, but also is preferred by people in the Korean Peninsula, Japan and other places. One reason is that the color and texture of celadon are just like jade. This caters to the psychology of "jade worship" of the Chinese people (Fang, 2005). The statue figure is the Maitreya Buddha that people love a lot. The sculpture



portrays a Maitreya who has a round face and fat cheeks, big ears hanging down his shoulders. His eyebrows seem flying and his eyes smiling. His mouth is wide open like an ingot. He wears a monk's robe, exposing his breasts and Buddha beads around his neck. The statue is lifelike, shaping the image of Maitreya: "A big belly to hold everything especially the difficulties in the world; a hearty laugh to laugh at all those ridiculous men". Its standing posture also contains the Buddhist wisdom of "laying down the cloth bag will lead to an easy life". Maitreya Buddha's smiling face, narrowed eyes and round belly not only symbolize wealth, but also the Buddhist wisdom of smiling on life.

### 3.3 "The One Hundred Sons Pattern"



**Plate 5**  
**Jar in Blue and White**

In the feudal society of ancient China, male offspring means a lot to every family. On the one hand, in the patriarchal society, the number of descendants is a symbol of the rise and fall of the family. As the main labor force of the family, male adults are more conducive to the development of the family and the expansion of the clan. On the other hand, the concept of more sons leading to more blessings is also influenced by the concept of ancestor worship. Only by extending the offspring can they serve the ancestors, and in turn, only the ancestors can protect the descendants better, so having more sons will bring more blessings.

Plate 5 shows a magnificent covered jar. On its body, a picture of 100 children playing is shown. There are sixteen boys frolicking in the garden in the picture. The boys are playing various games: One is riding a toy horse; Another is holding a large lotus leaf over his head like an umbrella; One is choosing an arrow from his quiver; Three children are sitting at a table; A boy is holding a bottle with coral in it; Another is holding a large fan with a long handle to provide shade for his companions; A child is rolling up his sleeves, as if ready for a fight; One is holding a fruit in his hand, another a cane; A baby is crawling up to a book while a boy is reading at a table. Another is pulling a string attached to the toy car. The whole pattern is centered on the hundred sons, showing the secularization of Confucian thought and its influence on people's life. Children seem to be playing at random,

and many of the games are symbolically important. For example, the sugar cane represents a life getting better and better. The boy holding sugar cane expresses his family's yearning for a bright future of him. Riding a toy horse is a symbol of a bright political career, a successful official. The picture of a baby crawling towards a book symbolizes reading, taking the imperial examinations, winning the title in the imperial examinations, and then gaining high position in the government and bringing honor to the family. Archery represents a man who is strong and skilled in martial arts and can ride horses to fight. The combination of archery and reading represents the military strategy advocated by Confucianism. The whole picture, through the various games played by the boys, reflects the society's yearning for boys, obsession with the transmission of family lineage, and pursuit of having more sons and more happiness, which is the best confirmation of Confucianism.

## 4. DAILY LIFE IN ORNAMENTAL PATTERN

### 4.1 Leisure Activities of Literati



**Plate 6**  
**Bowl in Blue and White**



**Plate 7**  
**Jar in Blue and White**

Thanks to the political stability of the Ming Dynasty, descriptions of leisure activities increased in decorative arts and literary works, reflecting their importance at that time. The public was no longer inclined to the stiff patterns and plain decoration of artworks (Zhao, 2014). Therefore, colorful leisure activities become a common theme in the ornamental patterns.

After about 1550, celebrities began to enjoy ever more extravagant banquets and expensive restaurants became popular in big cities. Along with the rise of some social leisure activities, such as boating, picnic, playing musical instrument and so on. People usually get together to drink wine and eat delicious food while chanting poetry, playing musical instrument or playing chess or even admiring the moon. In the early Ming Dynasty, people were fascinated with relaxing and playing in nature. In the daytime, people often go hiking in the mountains to enjoy the beautiful scenery, and in the evening, they would like admiring the moon. Colorful leisure activities provide continuous materials for ceramic art creation and enrich the decorative patterns of porcelain.

Plate 6 shows a heavily potted bowl in blue and white and with unique shape. The decorative patterns on the outside wall are exquisite, realistic and natural. The front view of the bowl shows three men under the awning. Two of them are sitting at a table with wine cups on it, and the other is approaching them with a wine cup. A boatman and a woman stood at the stern of the boat. This picture shows Su Shi, also known as Su Dongpo, an intelligent and talented writer in the Northern Song Dynasty. It's supposed to take place in the summer of 1082. At that time, Su Dongpo was exiled to Huangzhou, Hubei Province. The picture depicts he and his friends enjoyed themselves on a boat near Huangzhou. Perhaps it was such a life that led Su Dongpo to write his famous ode to the Red Cliff.

#### 4.2 The Leisure Life of Scholar Officials

The scholar officials constitute an important social class in Ming Dynasty. They are not only the direct participants of national politics, but also the creators and inheritors of culture and art. Their cultural literacy also determines that they are the inheritors and creators of literature, calligraphy, painting, seal cutting, and antique collection. The entertainment and leisure life of the scholar-official stratum in Ming Dynasty is not only varied, but also has high cultural and artistic accomplishment.

The decorative pattern of plate 7 presents the life of the scholar-official class in the Ming Dynasty. In the body of the jar, the decorative pattern lines are clear and delicate, and the whole picture is quite lively: there are three men in a pavilion, among whom one is a scholar and the other two are waiters. A waiter's right hand is pointing out of the window, and the scholar official is looking in the direction the waiter is pointing. Another waiter holds a bottle in his hand. A third man is waiting downstairs at the half-ajar front door. Outside the pavilion, three

visitors with servants are riding up, followed by a crowd of servants.

No matter Su Shi's boating and drawing, or the leisurely life of the scholar official, all vividly show the public's yearning for the leisure life style of literati in the Ming Dynasty and the fresh scene of the daily life at that time.

As a result, all those are shown in the ornamental pattern of ceramics in the Ming Dynasty.

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## 5. CONCLUSION

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Ceramics is an important cultural heritage of mankind and still adorns the lives of modern people with vivid forms and strong cultural meanings. The development of decorative patterns changes with the development of ceramic production. Since its birth, image began to help our ancestors to understand the world, beautify life, and then played the role of "cultivating and help people" (Wu, 2008). The image or decorative pattern increases the artistic flavor of ceramic art works and improves their artistic value. The ornamental patterns of Ming dynasty porcelain present a wide range of themes: depicting the scenes or characters of legends, presenting the stories of religious figures, or showing the various aspects of people's life. A wide range of themes have profound implication and tend to popularize the characteristics. Through the legends and folk life in decorative patterns, ceramic art works complete the inheritance and innovation of traditional Chinese culture.

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