

# Traditional and Contemporary: Meaning and Value of the Study on the Ming Dynasty's Ceramic Appreciation Literature

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**Abstract**—From the perspectives of cultural inheritance and contemporary life, this paper made a system analysis on the appreciation literature study of Ming Dynasty's ceramic works: firstly, it is beneficial to the excavation and arrangement of Chinese traditional ceramic design ideas; secondly, it contributes to the understanding of Chinese traditional literati aesthetic standard and value standard; thirdly, it is good for the understanding of the time spirit and the lifestyle in Ming Dynasty; Fourthly, it has necessary care for the aesthetic pursuit of contemporary society.

**Keywords**—Ming Dynasty; ceramic appreciation; literature; value

## I. INTRODUCTION

In China ("CHINA" means the country of ceramics), ancient ceramic wares, which are of great remains (with long historical span, large space and various types of use), and also have a great number of historical documentary records with a great influencing scope, are the important carriers of Chinese traditional design ideas. On the basis of the ceramic production and the lifestyle at that time, it is of great value to study on ceramics and ceramic appreciation literature, which will be sorted out in this paper from four aspects.

## II. THE STUDY ON CERAMIC TEXT RECORDS BENEFICIAL FOR THE UNDERSTANDING OF CERAMIC DESIGN IDEAS

Chinese ceramics has a continuous history of over ten thousand years, and its brilliant achievements are called as "the incomparable in the entire human design history and handcraft industry history", and it contains abundant "design ideas". There are mainly three existing forms of ceramics: ceramic objects, ceramic images and ceramic text records. We can regard ceramic images and ceramic text records as the description and comments of ceramic objects. For example, the picture and text descriptions in *Picture Map of Famous Ceramic Works from All Dynasties* are unified in the ceramic objects they represent. However, ceramic objects, ceramic images and ceramic text records are not completely unified. A ceramic object, shown as a kind of ware shape, material, texture, color, etc., is a kind of space structure, limited by the

realistic conditions, such as crafts and techniques as well as usage for life. A ceramic image, shown as a kind of planar pattern, line and color, is a plane structure, usually taken as a formal depict of a ceramic object. A ceramic text record, shown as a kind of text description and directly pointed as "a kind of information passing" of its recorder, not only provides a pattern of ware duplication, but also takes ceramic works as a kind of significance to be emphasized, to reach the solidification, recommendation and emphasis of a life attitude. From the three ceramic structural forms, ceramic historical text records undoubtedly have a more direct, specific and comprehensive understanding of ceramic design ideas and people's life attitude at that time, which is the reason why ceramic text records are taken as the main objects of study and ceramic objects and ceramic picture maps are taken as references.

## III. CERAMIC APPRECIATION LITERATURE REFLECTING THE CERAMIC CULTURE AND STANDARD OF VALUE AT THAT TIME

From the historical development, ceramic-related text records can be traced back to the pre-Qin period, when "solid" and "tile" were recorded. Until Qin and Han Dynasties, there were records of "mixing mud and water into clay", "potter's wheel", "the potteries produced along riversides are not rough" and "hitting urns and knocking fous", etc. Although *Ode of Big Sheng* chanted about the beauty of "faint green colored celadons", the content of the ode is mainly "discussing objects according to things". Till Sui and Tang Dynasties, drinking teas was very popular among people. Lu Yu commented on the wares of various kilns in *The Book of Tea* (which could be regarded as the start of ceramic appreciation); the poems about tea cups and small tea cups chanted due to tea activities were of a great number (according to the materials available, there were around 30 records about porcelains from Yue kilns in Tang Dynasty, 13 of which were about drinking teas). Moreover, there was *Kiln Wares Inscription*, called as the "Four Virtues" of kiln wares ode. The culture meaning of ceramics was growing stronger. In the period of the Five Dynasties, it was often recorded that Emperor Yue Mr. Qian paid tribute of ceramic works to other emperors, and records of

“olive green porcelain” were largely made in the note-taking in Song Dynasty. According to the records by Song people, the “devices” for tea drinking preferred “tea cups from Yue kilns” more than “small tea cups from Jian kilns”; the royal family “valued copper porcelains more than gold and silver”, and “wares from official kilns” were frequently mentioned in environmental description texts; however, in the period of Song Dynasty when metals and stones as well as pursuing ancient styles were popular, there was merely no record about ceramic works in metals and stones texts. The “ceramic works from Ru, Ding, official and Ge kilns” were already “antiques”, but due to the unlimited spread of fake ones, so they could not be “collected for playing”. In the early period of Ming Dynasty, *Essential Criteria of Antiquities* (Cao Zhao, 1338) had enrolled “kiln wares” into thirteen categories of antiques as the ninth one, and took ceramics as a big category for the appreciation conversant with ancient styles for the first time. Appreciation literature emerging after that were: *Eight Books about Amusement and Health Care* (Gao Lian, 1591), *Qingmicang* (Zhang Yingwe, 1595), *Bottle and Flower Map* (Zhang Qiande, 1595), *Things After Retirement* (Tu Long, 1606), *Records of Amusement Things* (Wen Zhenheng, 16c10s-20s), etc. Ceramics had become as an important category of “Qing antiques”. In the period of Qing Dynasty, the specialized books about ceramics came out constantly, among which the appreciation of Song and Ming ceramic works usually followed Ming people’s theories with expending appreciation objects from famous kilns to other kilns. As for ceramic text records, the content of ceramic appreciation “occupied a certain proportion. On the one hand, this kind of appreciation texts not only expressed people’s aesthetical taste at that time, but also deeply reflected the general value measure and standard at that time. The aesthetical standard is not only the measure for aesthetics but also the standard of function and ethics, etc.”

#### IV. CERAMIC APPRECIATION LITERATURE REFLECTING THE TIME SPIRIT AND LIFESTYLE AT THAT TIME

The phenomenon worth considering is that the time when a great number of ceramic appreciation literature was printed and published was around 1600. During the time, it can be described by Professor Li Yanzu’s words that “the society was in transformation period. One distinguishing feature is the development of commodity economy and the upsurge of civil consciousness. Based on the social economic development in the middle period of Ming Dynasty, the late Ming Dynasty had big changes on every aspect, such as politics, economy and culture. On the aspect of politics, the government was corrupted with political factions and even “the destroy of the whole world”. The ideological circle already emerged from the dullness and rigidity of the ancient precepts in the early and middle periods of the Ming dynasty, taking Wang Yangming’s philosophy of mind as a representative and advocating individual consciousness and freedom from the theory.” Economically, the national market rose up, with the prosperity and development of trade and the rise of cities, and “public awareness was strengthened” (Li Yanzu, 2009). In this era full of life with cultures full of “vitality” and “diversity”, literati and scholars who lived in elegant rooms, used elegant wares and appreciated elegant antiques, forming an elegant lifestyle,

which advocated elegance, followed natural laws, deleted complication and luxury, outstood talents and feelings, and stressed tastes (this kind of lifestyle can be seen dispersedly in various texts). That cultivated their extraordinary “artistic taste” and “appreciation ability”. At the same time, this extraordinary taste and appreciation ability promoted their life taste in return, and “transformed their property into spiritual enjoyment”. According to this kind of historical conditions, it is not difficult to understand the reason why a great number of ceramic appreciation literature were published in this period of time. We can even think that the ceramic appreciation texts were the historical reflection of the dramatic time spirit changes in the late Ming Dynasty as well as the “mirror image” of people’s elegant lifestyle in late Ming Dynasty. Then, combining the ceramic appreciation texts with the literati life of the late Ming together to study is of possibility and feasibility.

#### V. THE UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE TASTE CARING ABOUT THE PURSUIT OF CONTEMPORARY AESTHETIC LIFESTYLE

In today’s society, with the development of free economy and the rise of consumer culture, people have stronger demands for an artistic life. In view of this, the word “lifestyle” has become particularly popular in advertising, news and design discourses. On the one hand, it emphasizes the connection between style and life; on the other hand, it also indicates this kind of connection is no longer organic and unconscious, but artificial and conscious. In fact, a superior lifestyle, on the one hand, depends on a good living environment and elegant daily wares; it, on the other hand, relies on the good aesthetic view and life taste. The reason why designers carry out design activities is to create a better life. However, designers, theoretical researchers tend to focus on the problems on the aspect production (which is the aspect of goods supply), such as the analysis on designers, designs, manufacture and products. no enough attention was given to another equally important aspect, which is the importance of users and consumers (including the concept and lifestyle of consumers). Through the interpretation of the appreciation literature, the life taste and aesthetic standard between the literati in the late Ming Dynasty were revealed and then the relationship between ware styles, life taste and the social class was analyzed, which can be regarded as a kind of concern on the design-related consumer cultures and lifestyle.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

From the perspective of material culture, wares not only have use value and exchange value, but also reflect the society at the same time, life and cultures, etc., with inseparable social value and cultural value. The appreciation of wares is the direct “mirror image” of the lifestyles, aesthetic tastes, values, cultural pursuits, and social responsibilities of people (especially literati). In the ceramic appreciation texts, literati, through their own excellent culture accomplishment, “aesthetic ability” and “appreciation ability”, will lift the use and appreciation of ceramic works from the practical level to theoretical and cultural levels, undoubtedly indicating Chinese traditional design ideas. In view of this, through the analysis of the ceramic appreciation texts, this paper, as a basic research to

sort out the design ideas and concepts in the Period of Ming Dynasty, has an important significance for China's current design discipline construction and a certain value for the inheritance, development and display of Chinese traditional culture.

Based on the progress of society, the development of economy and the abundance of material, people's demands for an artistic and poetic daily life are constantly highlighted, and the aesthetic factors, taste factors and cultural factors of design are paid more and more concerns and attention. Literati in the late Ming naturally integrated their profound cultural accomplishment and artistic cultivation into a life with taste, and chose, arranged, used and appreciated wares with "elegance" by personal "talents and interests", and built up a poetic life by the "elegance" in turn, to achieve personal

"talents and interests". That not only has an enlightening effect on designers, but also provides a certain reference value on the current pursuit of a poetic life.

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