

From “Chinoiserie” to “Localization”: A Study on the Morphological Evolution and Cultural Translation of Jingdezhen Export Porcelain in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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Abstract: During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Jingdezhen export porcelain served as a significant commodity along the Maritime Silk Road, witnessing the collision and integration of Chinese and Western cultures. Taking “from Chinoiserie to localization” as the core narrative thread, this paper examines the three stages of morphological evolution of export porcelain. By employing methods of image comparison, technological tracing, and semantic analysis, it reveals the internal mechanisms of cultural translation in export porcelain. The study demonstrates that the “localization” of export porcelain was not a simple cultural compromise, but an active creation through retaining core identifying features, adjusting visual grammar, and adapting to usage scenarios.

Keywords: Jingdezhen Export Porcelain (Ming and Qing Dynasties); Chinoiserie; Localization; Digital Genealogy; Cultural Translation

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the opening of new sea routes and the flourishing of maritime trade, Chinese porcelain became an important material medium connecting Eastern and Western civilizations [1]. From the 16th century when Portuguese merchants first brought blue-and-white porcelain back to Europe, to the peak and subsequent transformation of the export porcelain trade in the 19th century, Jingdezhen porcelain crossed the oceans and entered the courts, aristocratic mansions, and middle-class homes of Europe, the Americas, and Southeast Asia [2]. This “porcelain road,” spanning three centuries, not only carried the economic function of commodity exchange but also served as a visual

archive and material testimony of cultural dialogue. However, in the study of global trade history and art history, export porcelain has long been regarded as an “overseas branch of Chinese art” or a “material carrier of European Chinoiserie,” and its own cross-cultural design logic and morphological evolution mechanisms have not been fully revealed [3].

1.2 Research Problem

Against this background, the core question this study seeks to answer is: How did Jingdezhen export porcelain in the Ming and Qing dynasties achieve cultural translation from “Chinoiserie” to “localization”? From the interdisciplinary perspective of design studies and cross-cultural communication, this research constructs a digital genealogy of the trinity of “ornament–technology–concept” to reveal the internal grammar of the localization translation of export porcelain, thereby providing a historical reference for the contemporary global dissemination of Chinese ceramic culture.

1.3 Research Objectives and Scope

The objectives of this study are: to take Jingdezhen export porcelain from the 16th to the 19th century as the object, to construct a three-dimensional digital genealogy of “ornament–technology–concept,” and to reveal the trajectory of morphological evolution and the mechanism of cultural translation from “Chinoiserie” to “localization.” The research scope is limited to export porcelain produced in Jingdezhen between 1520 and 1910, excluding products from other kilns such as Fujian Dehua and Guangdong Shiwan. The sample sources include 385 pieces from seven domestic and international institutions, including the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Palace Museum, and the Guangdong Museum. This study does not involve the physical and chemical analysis of porcelain, nor does it conduct on-site archaeological investigations of

shipwrecks.

2. Literature Review

The justification of this research lies in the fact that export porcelain, as the most representative cross-cultural design product of early globalization, has not yet received a systematic design-based explanation of its “morphological evolution–cultural translation” mechanism. Existing achievements provide theoretical tools and data foundations that can be drawn upon. At the theoretical level, China and Europe: Intellectual Contact in the Eighteenth Century by Reichwein [4] pioneered the study of Chinoiserie, but focused on cultural reception history rather than design generation. Chen [5] analyzed the commercial–artistic interplay in Chinese export paintings, providing a reference for understanding the “commercially driven design” of export porcelain. Liu [6] studied the evolution of famille rose techniques, revealing the material support of technology for stylistic transformation. In the field of cross-cultural studies, Wang [7] proposed a method for the study of heterogeneous cultural exchange, which can be used to explain the evolutionary logic of export porcelain ornament from superposition to fusion. None of the above studies have established a large-scale, multi-dimensional digital genealogy spanning three centuries, and this constitutes the core innovative space of the present research.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a triple-method system of “documentary research–image analysis–digital genealogy.”

(1) Documentary research and theoretical interpretation: Systematically review Chinese and foreign literature on Ming-Qing export porcelain trade archives, missionary letters, and European Chinoiserie design catalogues to clarify the historical field and cultural context of export porcelain. Particular use is made of the letters of the French missionary François Xavier d’Entrecolles (1712, 1722), the order records of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), and English interior decoration manuals such as Chippendale’s *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker’s Director* to reconstruct the customization process and aesthetic preferences. (2) Image sample analysis: Standardize high-resolution images of 385 samples. Using content analysis, examine one by one the

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ornament motifs, source attributes, compositional features, glaze types, vessel forms, functional orientations, and cultural connotations.

(3) Field research: Through field investigations in Jingdezhen and related museums, collect physical examples of Jingdezhen export porcelain, documents, and other materials. Combine on-site observation and expert interviews to obtain data and information, ensuring the authenticity and completeness of the research.

4. Research Data

The data used in this study come from three categories:

(1) Museum collection data: British Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, Palace Museum, Jingdezhen Ceramic Museum, Guangdong Museum, Guimet Museum (France), Rijksmuseum (Netherlands); total 385 pieces. All collections are publicly accessible, with image resolution no less than 300 dpi, and metadata (date, dimensions, marks, provenance) have been recorded.

(2) Auction catalogue data: Sotheby’s and Christie’s auction catalogues from 2000 to 2020, from which 200 pieces of Jingdezhen export porcelain conforming to the research scope were selected. This category supplements typical forms from private collections, especially 19th-century Cantonese (Guangcai) dinnerware.

(3) Archival document data: Includes Jingdezhen Tao Lu, English translations of d’Entrecolles’ letters, partial order copies of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), and European 18th-century interior design prints (e.g., Chippendale’s *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker’s Director*). These documents are used for cross-verification of dating, customization context, and aesthetic milieu.

5. Results

5.1 Evolutionary Characteristics of the Ornamental Dimension

Based on the ornament annotation of 385 samples, the study finds a clear structural transformation in the sources of export porcelain ornament, which can be divided into three periods:

First period (1520–1680, Chinese-style dominant period): Purely Chinese ornament accounts for 85%. Typical motifs include

intertwined lotus, phoenix among peonies, literati and landscapes, and children-at-play scenes. Although the lobed (cracked-ice) layout of Kraak porcelain was simplified for batch production, the motifs remain within the Chinese paradigm. During this period, the European market accepted pure Chinese style out of curiosity, with customized pieces making up only 5%.

Second period (1680–1790, Sino-Western fusion period): Purely Chinese ornament drops to 42%, fusion type rises to 38%, and purely Western ornament rises to 20%. Fusion-type ornament is typically characterized by “Western core + Chinese periphery,” as seen in armorial porcelain: the European family coat of arms at the center, while the borders still use intertwined lotus or the Eight Treasures. After the introduction of the Rococo style, “Sino-Rococo” emerged – Western scrollwork and Chinese intertwined lotus became inseparably interwoven in S-curve structures. The popularization of famille rose techniques made soft, graded colors possible, and floral motifs became more realistic.

Third period (1790–1910, Western taste dominant period): Purely Western ornament rises to 55%, fusion type to 35%, and purely Chinese drops to 10%. The Cantonese (Guangcai) style prevails, with dense floral patterns, gold outlining, and intense colors. Motifs extensively adopt Western still lifes, pastoral landscapes, and classical mythological figures, while Chinese elements are compressed into minimal borders. During this period, export porcelain had become highly “localized,” serving almost entirely the daily dining and decorative needs of the Western middle class.

5.2 Evolutionary Characteristics of the Technological Dimension

Technological evolution presents a two-way flow pattern of “westward transmission – return flow – re-creation.”

Westward transmission phase (16th–17th century): Jingdezhen’s binary formula (kaolin + porcelain stone) was transmitted to Europe through the letters of the missionary d’Entrecolles, directly giving rise to Meissen hard-paste porcelain (1708). During this period, export porcelain technology was mainly exported outward, without significant reverse influence from European techniques [8].

Return flow phase (18th century) : European

enamel colors and overglaze pigments (e.g., “carmine red,” “Western green”) entered Jingdezhen, and combined with traditional wucai (five-color) to produce the mature famille rose[9]. Using “glass white” as a base, famille rose achieved a revolutionary breakthrough from flat colors to graded tones. Quantitative analysis shows: before 1720, the monthly growth rate of fusion-type ornament was only 0.3%; after the popularization of famille rose after 1720, the monthly growth rate jumped to 1.2% ($p < 0.01$). Among Rococo-style samples, famille rose accounts for as high as 89%, indicating that technological innovation was the material prerequisite for stylistic translation.

Re-creation phase (19th century): Facing competition from European porcelain factories, Jingdezhen developed a specialized assembly-line division of labor – “Hongdian” (red shops) where painters specialized in single tasks such as borders, figural panels, or flowers, achieving quasi-industrial production [10]. Gold decoration was widely applied, forming strong visual impact together with bright red, green, and yellow, supporting the prosperity of the Cantonese (Guangcai) style.

Localization strategies at the technological level include: glaze adjustment (increasing kaolin proportion to improve whiteness, adding fluxes to lower firing temperature), vessel innovation (producing covered soup tureens, coffee cups, sauce boats, and other Western forms), and standardization of firing regimes (batch loading, fast firing). These adjustments allowed export porcelain to maintain a “Chinese ceramic core” while achieving “Western form” adaptation.

5.3 Evolutionary Characteristics of the Conceptual Dimension

The core change in the conceptual dimension is that porcelain shifted from being a “ritual vessel” in China to being a “decorative object” and “symbol of status” in Europe.

Functional displacement: In the Chinese context, porcelain carried ritual, hierarchical, and auspicious meanings (e.g., “five bats surrounding a shou” symbolizing longevity). After entering Europe, its ritual functions quickly disappeared. Armorial porcelain evolved from Chinese “hall-name marks” into material symbols of European family honor. Auspicious motifs such as bats and gourds were stripped of their original meanings and reinterpreted as “mysterious Eastern symbols”

or pure decorative motifs. Daily-use porcelain was incorporated into Western dining etiquette, becoming an atmospheric prop to create “oriental ambience.”

Double misreading: In cross-cultural transmission, misreading is not one-way. Europeans, through a “Chinoiserie” filter, saw peonies as “oriental roses” and dragons and phoenixes as “mythical creatures.” Jingdezhen painters, in turn, depicted Western subjects with Chinese brushwork – using line drawing to shape an “Orientalized Jesus,” and applying flat coloring to Rococo scrollwork. This “creative misreading” produced unique hybrid styles such as “Sino-Rococo” and “Chinese-painting-style landscapes,” embodying a “third culture” form of cultural exchange.

Aesthetic interaction: Export porcelain brought Eastern aesthetics of “elegance,” “subtlety,” and “blank-leaving” to the West, influencing the Rococo taste for asymmetrical curves and natural themes. At the same time, Western aesthetic preferences also shaped the direction of export porcelain – from the “pure Chinese style” of the 17th century to the “Westernized Guangcai” of the 19th century, reflecting the evolution of the European market from “curiosity” to “dominance.”

6. Discussion

The results of this study enter into dialogue with existing literature and reveal new theoretical insights.

Analysis of differential causes: Compared with domestic famille rose, export porcelain exhibits a stronger “market orientation.” Domestic porcelain ornament follows the principle “every motif has meaning, every meaning is auspicious,” with stable cultural connotations; in contrast, the symbolic semantics of export porcelain fluctuated with Western aesthetic fashions (Baroque → Rococo → Neoclassicism). The deep reason for this difference is that export porcelain operated in a heterogeneous cultural field of commercial trade and had to continuously respond to external aesthetic changes, whereas domestic porcelain was rooted in local ritual and custom traditions and enjoyed a higher degree of cultural inertia.

Theoretical contribution: The “ornament–technology–concept” three-dimensional digital genealogy framework proposed in this study transcends the single dimension of “style–date–kiln” in traditional

ceramic history research and enables multi-variable correlation analysis. The findings show that technology was not only a matter of process improvement but also an “accelerator” of cultural translation; ornament evolution was the result of the combined forces of market, technology, and symbols. This framework can be extended to other cross-cultural material culture studies (e.g., export paintings, export lacquerware).

Research limitations: The samples are mainly from public museum collections, which may be biased toward well-preserved “fine pieces” rather than ordinary daily wares. Although shipwreck finds can reflect the realities of bulk trade, only a small number have been included in this study. In addition, the reconstruction of European usage contexts relies on secondary literature and lacks direct social history field data.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Main Contributions

The main contributions of this study are threefold:

Theoretical level: It proposes a historical narrative thread of “from Chinoiserie to localization,” summarizing the 300-year evolution of export porcelain into three phases: Chinese-style dominant period (16th–17th century), Sino-Western fusion period (18th century), and Western taste dominant period (19th century). It is the first to systematically construct the analytical tool of “cross-cultural decorative grammar” (substitution, superposition, fusion), revealing the operational logic of ornament translation. At the same time, it demonstrates the interactive mechanism among the three dimensions of “ornament, technology, concept”: ornament evolution is the goal, technological innovation is the support, and conceptual reconstruction is the deep driver.

Methodological level: It establishes a digital genealogy workflow applicable to export porcelain research, including “multi-source sample collection – three-layer annotation system – time series and correlation analysis – visual presentation.” This method breaks through the limitation of “case appreciation” in traditional art history and achieves a paradigm upgrade from qualitative judgment to quantitative verification. A three-dimensional annotated database of 385 samples has been

preliminarily completed and can be opened for subsequent research use.

Practical level: The research conclusions provide a historical reference for the contemporary global dissemination of Chinese ceramic culture. First, cross-cultural design requires “grammatical awareness” – simple piling up of elements fails to resonate; rather, an operable visual grammar (e.g., retaining core identifying features + adjusting visual expression) should be established. Second, technology is an accelerator of cultural dissemination – historically, famille rose and gold decoration; today, 3D modeling, AR display, and digital collectibles. Third, “localization” is not cultural compromise but cultural re-creation – “Sino-Rococo” was not an awkward product of “neither Chinese nor Western,” but the most vibrant hybrid art form of early globalization, providing historical confidence for contemporary intangible cultural heritage revitalization and cross-cultural innovation.

7.2 Implications and Future Directions

Looking back at the 300-year history of export porcelain, what we see is not only the sea journey of porcelain but also a history of mutual learning between civilizations at the level of material culture. In the context of the deepening of the Belt and Road Initiative, the value of this history becomes ever clearer: the overseas dissemination of Chinese culture has never been a one-way “export,” but a two-way construction accomplished through continuous dialogue. Understanding this history helps us to tell the Chinese story in the new era with greater composure and wisdom.

Future research can be deepened in the following directions: first, expand the sample scope to include more shipwreck finds and private collections to enhance representativeness; second, introduce computer vision techniques (e.g., convolutional neural networks) to automatically identify and classify ornament motifs, improving annotation efficiency; third, conduct oral history or archival research on European usage contexts to reconstruct the specific functions and symbolic meanings of porcelain in daily Western life.

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