

On the Influence of Islamic Culture on Chinese Porcelain in the Ming Dynasty

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Abstract

The Ming Dynasty saw Chinese porcelain profoundly influenced by Islamic culture, particularly in motifs, forms and colors. Imperial kilns at Jingdezhen incorporated Islamic-inspired designs, such as geometric patterns and Persian or Arabic inscriptions, to cater to both domestic and Islamic needs, reflecting the vigorous Sino-Islamic cultural exchange in this period. Folk kilns, initially focused on practicality of wares, adopted Islamic styles gradually as trade flourished. This cross-cultural exchange enriched Chinese ceramics, blending traditions and fostering innovation that underscored the enduring impact of Islamic aesthetics on Ming porcelain.

Keywords

Islamic culture, porcelain, China, the Ming Dynasty.

1. Introduction

Following the Yuan Dynasty when the combination of Islamic taste and the traditional Chinese technique had created a new style of ceramics, the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) inherited this legacy and prompted a flourishing of porcelain production that has come to be recognized as one of the greatest achievements in the history of ceramics. Unlike the economically motivated production of blue and white porcelain in the Yuan Dynasty, the development of the Ming porcelain can be attributed in part to emperors' preference for Islam in the Ming Dynasty, which in turn facilitated the integration of Islamic culture into blue and white porcelain of this period [1]. Among the various influences that contributed to the development of Ming porcelain, the impact of Islamic culture has been widely acknowledged. This essay will explore the ways in which Islamic culture influenced Chinese porcelain during the Ming Dynasty, focusing on the motifs, colors and forms used in Islamic-influenced ceramic pieces.

2. Islamic influence on the style of Chinese porcelain

Islamic culture had a profound influence on the design and decoration of Chinese porcelain in the Ming dynasty. According to the existing documents, the ornamentation of Islamic style on Chinese porcelain can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty[2]. When the "Silk Road" became a regular route from China to Europe, Chinese ceramics were able to reach Islamic regions, where merchants also brought Islamic decorative art back to China to change the shape and decoration of Chinese ceramics. Islamic-inspired motifs, such as arabesques, geometric patterns, and stylized foliage, were commonly used in the decoration of Ming dynasty ceramics, reflecting the tastes of Islamic consumers. For example, the pomegranate is a significant symbol of fertility and blessings within Islamic culture. It is mentioned in the Quran as a symbol of divine favor, reinforcing its significance in both religious and cultural contexts. The fruit's numerous seeds symbolize abundance and fertility, making it a common motif in art and decoration[3]. Ming dynasty porcelain decorated with pomegranate motifs can be found in various pieces produced at Jingdezhen. The incorporation of such symbols not only enhanced the aesthetic appeal of the

ceramics but also imbued them with deeper cultural meanings that resonated with diverse audiences.

The Islamic influence on the form of Chinese ceramics, particularly during the Ming Dynasty, represents a fascinating intersection of cultural exchange that significantly reshaped traditional pottery. As noted in one study, “the manufacturing skills of blue-and-white porcelain in the Ming Dynasty were greatly impacted by Islamic culture and presented new cultural and artistic characteristics” [4]. Actually, the shapes and styles of blue and white porcelain in the Ming Dynasty clearly exhibit significant Islamic influences from the outset. Prominent examples are flat flask, moon flask, flared bowls, globular vases, kundika, cylindrical flower stands, and other utensils commonly used by Muslims such as ewers and plates[1]. Most early Ming blue and white porcelain can be traced back to ancient metal, glass, or ceramic artifacts from West Asia or the Middle East. This phenomenon persisted well into the mid-Ming period and beyond. The blending of these forms illustrates how Chinese artisans responded to external influences while maintaining their unique craftsmanship. Additionally, the evolution of ceramic production techniques during this time allowed for a more systematic approach to creating these new forms, reflecting a broader trend of cross-cultural interaction.

Finally, Islamic culture significantly influenced the color of Chinese porcelain during the Ming Dynasty, most notably through the adoption of cobalt blue, a pigment imported from Persia and referred to in China as *huihuiqing*, which means “Muslim blue” in Chinese[5]. This vibrant pigment became central to the creation of the special blue-and-white porcelain, allowing Chinese artisans to craft intricate underglaze designs that would become an iconic feature of Ming porcelain. The introduction of cobalt blue not only transformed Chinese ceramics aesthetically but also enabled the production of export wares that catered specifically to the tastes of Islamic markets. Blue holds deep cultural and symbolic significance in Islamic art, often representing spirituality and beauty[6]. Chinese potters paired this bold color with Islamic-inspired motifs to create a unique fusion of Chinese and Islamic styles. This exchange illustrates the dynamic cultural and material influences facilitated by trade, where Islamic preferences shaped the visual identity of Chinese porcelain and enhanced its global appeal during the Ming Dynasty.

3. Influence of Islamic culture on the Imperial kilns

As the imperial kiln porcelain wares were generally not used for export, the decoration of Arabic or Persian on the imperial kiln porcelain can be deemed as a mere reflection of the unique court culture at that time. The imperial kilns were set up to produce high-quality porcelains with appropriate motifs, forms and colors to cater to the preference of the emperors. So in the early and mid-Ming Dynasty, the main consumers of blue and white porcelains were the royal members[1]. In other times ceramics with Islamic decorations were made for different purposes, including export to the Islamic world and domestic use by Muslims.

During the Ming Dynasty, a period marked by cultural openness and tolerance, Islam experienced significant growth in China. The emergence of the Hui nationality can be a good example. The rulers of the Ming Dynasty, particularly Emperor Zhengde, fostered an environment that allowed the Muslim community to thrive. Historical records reveal that the Ming emperors constructed numerous mosques as a gesture of goodwill towards Muslims and appointed them to important positions within the imperial court[1]. This respect for Islam extended beyond mere tolerance; it manifested in a cultural assimilation that profoundly influenced Chinese art and craftsmanship, particularly in the realm of porcelain.

Emperor Zhengde’s eclectic approach to religion was instrumental in this cultural exchange. While he was knowledgeable in Sanskrit and Buddhism, his official porcelain production rarely featured Buddhist motifs. Instead, the influence of his Hui eunuchs and favored officials is

evident in the ceramics produced during his reign[7]. These officials likely played a role in shaping the aesthetic direction of blue and white porcelain, which became increasingly infused with Islamic elements. Notably, many pieces from the Zhengde period are adorned with Arabic and Persian inscriptions, all bearing the official six-character mark that indicates their imperial origin. The Palace Museum houses a blue and white bowl, whose exterior is entirely adorned with blue floral patterns. The design features six circular openings, each containing an Arabic inscription that reads, “The reign of the king is eternal, and prosperity increases each day” [2]. Additionally, during the Zhengde period, it was common to find porcelain decorated with entire passages in Arabic or Persian. Examples include the red-painted plate in the collection of the National Palace Museum in Taipei, the blue-and-white screen held by the British David Foundation, and the large plain three-color plate owned by Mr. Han Huai-zhun[2]. In these pieces, the inscriptions serve as the main decorative elements, a style not frequently seen in porcelain from other periods.

The Zhengde period is thus recognized as a pivotal moment in Chinese ceramic history, characterized by a marked preference for Islamic art. Unlike earlier periods, such as the Tang Dynasty, where ornamental inscriptions were relatively simple, Zhengde ceramics often feature longer passages from the Quran and Hadiths. This shift indicates not only an aesthetic evolution but also a clear religious purpose behind these decorations, showcasing how Chinese artisans tailored their craft to resonate with Islamic beliefs while enriching their own artistic traditions.

4. Influence of Islamic culture on folk kilns

During the early Ming Dynasty, official kilns produced blue and white porcelains that exhibited notable Islamic influences, reflecting the era’s imperial preferences and certain foreign trade dynamics. Some porcelain shapes were inspired by West Asian designs, and specific pieces were crafted for religious purposes. In contrast, civilian kiln productions for a long period of time during the Ming Dynasty seldom incorporated Islamic or religious elements, adhering instead to the strict hierarchical norms of the time. For instance, ceremonial items like incense burners and tripods (*ding*), reserved for royal sacrificial rituals, were substituted with more utilitarian objects, such as bowls, for commoners. The aesthetic preferences of the general populace reflected in the folk kiln wares were deeply rooted in daily life, emphasizing practicality and reflecting indigenous cultural traits. It wasn’t until the Xuande period that civilian kilns began to mirror official kiln styles, leading to the integration of West Asian cultural and religious influences into their wares[8].

As imperial kilns actively responded to the Islamic influences, local potters, though at a much lower rate and much later time, began to incorporate elements of Islamic design and aesthetics into their ceramic production. As it happened, Islamic motifs, such as geometric patterns and floral designs, eventually made their way into the ceramics produced by folk kilns. These adaptations were often less formal than those seen in imperial kilns, allowing for a more eclectic mix of styles that resonated with local traditions while embracing foreign influences. For instance, the decorative elements in folk kiln porcelain frequently included interlacing floral scrolls and motifs inspired by Islamic art, showcasing a blend of cultural influences that enriched the local ceramic tradition. Though the folk kiln porcelains were mainly aimed at the domestic market especially during the first stage of the Ming Dynasty, there were still imports to the Islamic regions after the Portuguese arrived in China. That is probably the reason why there were lotus vases, seven-hole flower holders and plum blossom jars, all with Persian inscriptions found in the folk kilns[9].

However, during the Ming Dynasty, the imperial court maintained a long-standing rigorous control over decorative practices in ceramics, especially those produced by the official kilns at Jingdezhen. Only these imperial kilns were tasked with creating porcelains that adhered to

specific standards and motifs sanctioned by the court. The restrictions on folk kilns ended as Emperor Wanli issued the imperial edict to officially prohibit the government-run kilns due to the poor operation mode and revolt of the potters[9]. Without the pressure and restriction they had suffered from the imperial kilns, the folk kilns began to prosper. The high-quality imported cobalt pigment and the motifs, which used to be prohibited from folk kilns, were widely used throughout the whole industry, along with the influence of Islamic culture. This cross-cultural dialogue enabled civilian potters to experiment with new styles and decorative techniques that enhanced the aesthetic appeal of their wares.

5. Conclusion

The cultural exchange between China and the Islamic world during the Ming Dynasty significantly influenced the forms, designs, and techniques of Chinese porcelain. This interaction was driven by both artistic inspiration and economic motivation, as Chinese artisans sought to create unique porcelain pieces that appealed to Islamic tastes. The influence of Islamic aesthetics is evident in both wares produced at imperial kilns and those crafted in folk kilns, showcasing a widespread adoption of these styles across various levels of society. Overall, the Islamic influence on Chinese porcelain during the Ming Dynasty underscores the importance of cultural exchange and highlights how different cultures can profoundly impact one another, leading to innovative artistic expressions that enrich both traditions. This fusion not only enhanced the aesthetic value of Chinese ceramics but also fostered greater understanding between diverse cultures.

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