

An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Auspicious Chinese Character Motifs on Ming and Qing Dynasty Ceramics: From Form to Cultural Connotation

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Abstract

This paper examines auspicious Chinese character motifs on Ming and Qing dynasty ceramics through an interdisciplinary approach integrating iconography, philology, and folklore studies. Focusing on representative ceramic examples, it analyzes the interaction between form, craftsmanship, and cultural meaning, revealing a clear evolutionary trajectory: from symmetrical and standardized designs in the Ming dynasty to more diverse and dynamic forms in the Qing, from monochrome blue-and-white ware to multicolored decorative techniques, and from imperial ritual symbolism to expressions of everyday aspirations. The study argues that these motifs visually reflect the social structure and collective psychology of Ming–Qing society and proposes “form translation, semantic adaptation, and cultural inheritance” as a viable framework for the contemporary revitalization of traditional decorative motifs.

Keywords

Ming and Qing ceramics; auspicious Chinese character motifs; interdisciplinary analysis; morphological evolution; cultural connotation.

1. Introduction

The integration of ceramics with Chinese characters—the core symbols of national culture—has created a unique and compelling artistic expression system. As the crystallization of this fusion, auspicious Chinese character motifs embody the ancient people's aspirations for a good life and their pursuit of aesthetic ideals. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, such motifs reached their artistic peak, becoming a classic paradigm that combined practicality, artistic vitality, and cultural significance. First outlines the fundamental characteristics and material bases of auspicious Chinese character motifs on Ming and Qing ceramics to deepen understanding of this artistic form. It then examines their morphological evolution and cultural connotations through detailed analysis of specific ceramic samples. Subsequently, it discusses the aesthetic and cultural value of these motifs from the perspectives of artistic creation and cultural transmission.

2. Research Background

The artistic value of using auspicious Chinese characters in ceramic design is as significant as its historical and social value. However, current research on their application in Ming and

Qing ceramics remains relatively limited and unsystematic, particularly regarding the deeper connections between motif evolution, social culture, and technological innovation. Existing scholarship presents several limitations. On one hand, many works focus only on partial perspectives. For instance, Ye Zhemin's *History of Chinese Ceramics* (2006) provides a comprehensive overview of Ming and Qing ceramic styles but lacks specific discussion of auspicious character motifs, failing to highlight their unique significance. On the other hand, some studies remain superficial. Yao Caoxian (2018), for example, categorizes auspicious characters simply as a subgenre of general decorative motifs without examining their morphological design or cultural implications in depth, thus limiting analytical depth and interpretive richness.

3. Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology combining literature analysis, visual examination of ceramic artifacts, and comparative analysis. Representative samples from major museum collections, including imperial and folk kiln products, serve as the primary visual materials. The analysis focuses on three interrelated dimensions:

- (1) Form – character style, line quality, composition, and color;
- (2) Craftsmanship – ceramic techniques and material conditions;
- (3) Cultural meaning – ritual, social, and symbolic functions.

4. Findings

The following study begins with the differences in morphological characteristics across different eras, gradually delving into the interrelationship between craftsmanship and technology, the social function of cultural connotations, and ultimately revealing the socio-psychological changes and contemporary value behind the patterns, presenting a comprehensive overview of the research findings on auspicious Chinese character patterns on Ming and Qing ceramics.



4.1. Morphological Characteristics and Evolutionary Patterns of Auspicious Character Motifs in Ming and Qing Ceramics

The morphological evolution of auspicious Chinese character motifs during the Ming and Qing dynasties consistently revolved around three core logics: standardization of character form, technological adaptation, and aesthetic transformation. This process demonstrates a clear shift—from the regulated formalism of the Ming dynasty, constrained by ritual hierarchy, to the diversified creativity of the Qing dynasty, driven by secular needs. The differences in form reflect not only aesthetic transformation but also the social and technological conditions of their respective periods.

4.1.1 Evolution of Character Forms: From Canonical Adherence to Creative Reconstruction

The auspicious Chinese characters on Ming dynasty ceramics strictly adhered to the original norms of philology, with seal script and regular script as the absolute mainstream, emphasizing the orthodoxy of the "Six Scripts" system. Core characters such as "福" (fortune), "寿" (longevity), and "喜" (happiness) on official kiln wares were all based on the *Shuowen Jiezi* (Explaining Simple and Compound Characters), reflecting the ritual aesthetic of order as authority. For example, the "福如东海" (Fortune as Vast as the Eastern Sea) four characters on the rim of a Wanli blue-and-white polychrome dragon and phoenix plate, with their regular and symmetrical strokes, demonstrates the strict adherence of Ming dynasty official kilns to the original texts and ritualistic connotations (Figure 1). Although folk kiln wares occasionally showed simplification, the core structure of the characters did not deviate from the original framework, maintaining the regularity of their main forms, reflecting the widespread acceptance of the orthodoxy of the written language in Ming society.



On Qing dynasty ceramics broke free from the constraints of original texts, presenting a diverse pattern of both orthodoxy and variation. Official kilns continued the orthodox forms of seal script and regular script, but with more refined details, highlighting the imperial monopoly on cultural orthodoxy. Folk kilns, on the other hand, focused on the economic efficiency and visual decorative appeal of writing, creatively reconstructing the characters. Some characters even deviated from philological norms, evolving into independent visual symbols. For example, Figure 2 shows a Qing Tongzhi yellow-glazed famille rose butterfly and eight-happiness pattern plate. The double "happiness" characters are painted in red, symmetrical in shape and incorporating geometric modifications, combined with butterfly patterns, reflecting the creative reconstruction of Chinese characters by Qing dynasty folk kilns. This variation in character form was not arbitrary, but rather a rational innovation based on technological adaptation and folk needs. For instance, to adapt to molding techniques, the folk kiln "happiness" character was simplified into a geometric outline, ensuring both efficiency in mass production and enhanced visual recognizability.

	
<p>Figure 1. Ming Wanli Blue and White Colorful Dragon and Phoenix Pattern "Fortune Like the East China Sea" Plate, collected by the Palace Museum in Beijing</p>	<p>Figure 2. Qing Tongzhi Yellow Glazed Pink Butterfly Eight Happiness Pattern Plate, collected by the Palace Museum in Beijing</p> <p>4.1.2 Compositional Layout: From Central Dominance to Pluralistic Balance</p>

4.1.2 Composition and Layout: From Central Domination to Multi-faceted Balance

In Ming dynasty ceramics, the compositional structure of auspicious Chinese character motifs

was overwhelmingly governed by the principle of central symmetry, embodying the hierarchical order of imperial authority and ritual ideology. Plates and bowls typically positioned a single auspicious character at the geometric center of the vessel, encircled by subsidiary motifs such as lotus petals, cranes, or auspicious clouds, thereby constructing a “center–radiation” visual schema. For instance, in the Ming Jiajing blue-and-white wucaai plate with auspicious character design, the central fu (福, blessing) in regular script is painted in cobalt blue, surrounded by the four characters zhong (忠, loyalty), xiao (孝, filial piety), lian (廉, integrity), and xun (勋, merit), along with various auspicious patterns. This configuration exemplifies the archetypal Ming-style “center–radiation” symmetrical composition (Fig. 3), emphasizing the visual and symbolic supremacy of a single focal character. Vessels such as vases and jars, on the other hand, often adopted a vertical symmetry layout, arranging Chinese characters along the central vertical axis of the body, with auxiliary patterns placed above and below. This “primary–secondary hierarchy” in spatial organization visually reinforced the strict social stratification and moral order characteristic of the Ming period. Such a compositional mode privileged a singular visual and ideological focus, where accompanying motifs served merely as ornamental complements. The auspicious character at the center functioned as a visual manifestation of textual and cultural authority, symbolizing the centralization of power and the dominance of Confucian ritual ideology in Ming artistic expression.

	
Figure 3 Ming Jiajing Blue and White Colorful Lucky Chinese Character Plate, collected by the British Museum	Figure 4 Qing Tongzhi Pink Double "Xi" Character Fruit Plate, Collection of the Palace Museum in Beijing

The composition of auspicious Chinese characters on Qing dynasty ceramics broke away from the single-center model, developing into a multi-faceted and balanced visual logic. Official kiln wares retained some symmetrical compositions, but the narrative aspect of auxiliary patterns was enhanced, forming a pattern of symbiosis between image and text. The characters were no longer isolated symbols, but rather worked together with the patterns to construct a cultural narrative. Folk kiln wares innovated various forms such as scattered compositions, circular compositions, and openwork compositions. For example, on a Tongzhi period famille rose fruit plate with double "happiness" characters, the double "happiness" characters and butterfly patterns were scattered, creating a dynamically balanced visual effect (Figure 4). Some plates adopted a circular composition, with the Chinese characters arranged equidistantly along the edge of the vessel, echoing the central pattern and reflecting a secular aesthetic of "equality for all." This compositional transformation is essentially a visual projection of social structural changes, reflecting the dissolution of hierarchical order and the pursuit of diverse aesthetic needs among the urban class under the development of the

commodity economy in the Qing dynasty.

4.1.3 Color Expression: From Monochromatic Monopoly to Multicolor Carnival

The colors of auspicious Chinese characters on Ming dynasty ceramics were predominantly monochromatic, reflecting a strong hierarchical system based on ritual. Official kilns strictly adhered to a color monopoly system; yellow glaze was reserved exclusively for the imperial family, used only for important occasions such as court sacrifices and birthday banquets. Folk kilns mostly used blue and white porcelain with lower color saturation to avoid conflict with the official kilns' colors, reflecting the hierarchical social norms. The core logic of color application in the Ming dynasty was that color represented hierarchy, reinforcing the ritual order through the purity of monochromatic colors.

The colors of auspicious Chinese characters on Qing dynasty ceramics, however, broke through hierarchical restrictions, exhibiting a carnival-like characteristic of multicolor fusion and harmonious blending of shades. Imperial kiln wares introduced new techniques such as enamel and famille rose, resulting in a greatly enriched variety of colors. For example, the Qianlong enamel longevity cup uses multiple layers of blue, white, and gold enamel, creating distinct color layers. The gold outlines the lines, showcasing imperial luxury (Figure 5). Folk kiln wares, on the other hand, primarily used famille rose and wucai (five-color) enamels, with high color saturation and frequent use of contrasting colors such as red, yellow, and green. For instance, the Guangxu yellow-ground famille rose "Long Live the Emperor" plate features the inscription "Long Live the Emperor" in red enamel, creating a strong visual impact against the yellow glaze and green floral patterns, suitable for celebratory occasions such as birthday banquets (Figure 6). The core logic of color usage in the Qing Dynasty was that color represents emotion. Through the combination of multiple colors, secular emotional appeals were conveyed. For example, red symbolized celebration, blue symbolized auspiciousness, and gold symbolized nobility, fully activating the emotional expressive function of color.



Figure 5 Qing Qianlong enamel lotus patterned longevity cup, collected by the National Palace Museum in Taipei



Figure 6 Qing Guangxu Huangdi Pink "Endless Longevity" Plate, collected by Hubei Provincial Museum

4.2. The linkage between auspicious Chinese character patterns and craftsmanship technology

There is a deep coupling relationship between the form and craftsmanship of auspicious Chinese character patterns on Ming and Qing ceramics. The innovation and limitations of craftsmanship directly determine the presentation form of patterns, while the demand for

patterns in turn drives the development of craftsmanship.

4.2.1 The Constraints and Adaptations of Ming Dynasty Techniques to Patterns The core characteristics of Ming Dynasty

ceramic craftsmanship were limited materials and simple techniques, directly influencing the morphological expression of auspicious Chinese character patterns. In terms of blue-and-white porcelain craftsmanship, the cobalt material used in the Ming Dynasty had a high manganese content and a low iron content, making it prone to blurring during high-temperature firing. To ensure the legibility of the characters, craftsmen had to adopt a strategy of using thick strokes to resist blurring, resulting in bold and heavy lines in the Chinese characters with slightly rough edges, creating a robust and unpretentious style. For example, on a Wanli period blue-and-white lotus petal plate with the character "福" (Fu, good fortune), the lines of the character "福" are thick, with noticeable blurring at the corners, which unexpectedly gives the characters a "metallic" quality (Figure 7). The thick body technique limited the fineness of the strokes. Ming Dynasty ceramics generally had thick bodies, making carving and writing more difficult. The strokes of the Chinese characters were mostly wide and flat, with relatively simple details, uniform stroke width, and a lack of variation in pressure, reflecting a formal compromise under the limitations of the technique.

4.2.2 The Empowerment and Innovation of Decorative Patterns by Qing Dynasty Craftsmanship Qing Dynasty

Ceramic craftsmanship achieved comprehensive breakthroughs, with optimized materials and refined techniques providing solid support for the diversification of auspicious Chinese character decorative patterns. In terms of blue-and-white porcelain, the Qing Dynasty introduced high-quality cobalt blue pigments such as "Zhumingliao," resulting in stable and clear color development and significantly reduced blurring. Craftsmen could then create fine strokes, achieving precise expression of Chinese characters. The strokes could be delicate and fluid, with distinct variations in pressure and pause, showcasing the elegant charm of literati calligraphy. The emergence of new techniques such as famille rose and enamelware represented revolutionary breakthroughs. The "glass white" base technique of famille rose enabled a blurring effect, resulting in soft and natural edges for the Chinese characters, with delicate color gradations that seamlessly integrated with the decorative patterns. Enamelware used imported pigments, producing vibrant and luxurious colors, while the use of gold added a sense of solemnity to the Chinese characters.



Figure 7: Wanli Blue and White Lotus Petal Plate with the Character of Fortune, collected by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the United States	Figure 8. Qing Qianlong Pink Colored Hollow Bottle, Collection of Jingdezhen Chinese Ceramic Museum
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4.3. The Evolution of the Cultural Connotation and Social Function of Auspicious Chinese Character Patterns on Ming and Qing

The cultural connotations and social functions of auspicious Chinese character patterns on Ming and Qing dynasty ceramics evolved dynamically with their social context. In the Ming dynasty, these motifs primarily functioned as visual symbols of ritual order and imperial authority. Characters such as *fu* (fortune), *shou* (longevity), and *xi* (happiness) were governed by strict etiquette, color hierarchy, and motif combinations, forming a system of visual coding that reinforced Confucian ethics and imperial legitimacy. Their integration with Taoist and Buddhist imagery—such as clouds, cranes, Bagua symbols, and lotus motifs—did not merely express religious belief but served to legitimize hierarchical order through sacred symbolism, embedding the concepts of divine sanction and social stratification into everyday visual culture.

Qing dynasty auspicious Chinese character patterns increasingly became vehicles for expressing secular emotions, popular aspirations, and cultural integration. Driven by the expansion of the commodity economy and urban culture, these motifs conveyed wishes for wealth, success, health, and marital happiness through accessible symbolic combinations, bringing Confucian ethics into daily life in a secularized form. At the same time, within the context of a multi-ethnic empire and intensified global exchange, auspicious characters absorbed Manchu, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Western decorative elements, functioning as a visual medium for cultural inclusiveness and cross-cultural communication. In export porcelain, their meanings further shifted toward aesthetic exoticism, yet they continued to act as carriers of Chinese cultural identity. Together, these transformations reveal how auspicious Chinese character patterns moved from maintaining hierarchical order to satisfying secular needs and ultimately promoting cultural integration, offering insight into broader cultural changes in Ming and Qing society.

4.4. Socio-cultural Psychological Changes Behind Auspicious Chinese Character Patterns

The evolution of auspicious Chinese character patterns on Ming and Qing dynasty ceramics can be understood as a visual projection of broader socio-cultural psychological change. In the Ming dynasty, these motifs embodied a collective psychology rooted in strong identification with ritual hierarchy and religious authority. As core symbols of Han cultural orthodoxy, auspicious characters reinforced imperial legitimacy and social order through standardized forms, symmetrical compositions, and hierarchical color systems, even in folk kiln wares where simplified designs largely conformed to established norms. Their frequent combination with religious imagery, such as clouds, cranes, and lotus motifs, reflects a belief in the interaction between Heaven and humanity, through which people sought divine protection and blessings, revealing a society shaped by ritual conformity and reverence for transcendent authority.

Qing dynasty auspicious Chinese character patterns reflect the awakening of secular desires,

individual consciousness, and cultural inclusiveness. The expansion of the commodity economy and urban culture encouraged the widespread use of auspicious phrases expressing wealth, success, health, and happiness, projecting popular aspirations into everyday ceramic objects. At the same time, the multi-ethnic structure of the Qing empire and intensified contact with foreign cultures fostered an inclusive mentality, evident in the integration of minority symbols and Western decorative elements. This shift from hierarchical dependence to individual awakening marks a broader transformation from ritual- and authority-centered values toward a more human-centered worldview, illustrating the gradual transition of Chinese society from traditional order to early modern cultural plurality.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that auspicious Chinese character patterns on Ming and Qing dynasty ceramics are dynamic cultural symbols shaped by the interaction of form, craftsmanship, and social context. In the Ming dynasty, these motifs followed canonical character forms, symmetrical composition, and hierarchical color systems under ritual constraints, functioning as visual expressions of imperial order. In contrast, the Qing dynasty, supported by technological innovation and secular demand, witnessed greater formal diversity, expressive coloration, and expanded cultural functions, including folk expression and multi-ethnic integration. This evolution reflects a broader transformation of Chinese society from a ritual-centered hierarchy to a more pluralistic and inclusive cultural structure. By applying an interdisciplinary framework, this study not only enriches the understanding of Ming–Qing ceramic decoration but also offers reference value for the contemporary reinterpretation and transmission of traditional auspicious symbols.

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