

The Embodiment of Ritual in Vessels and the Conveyance of Dao through Design: The Influence of Book of Rites Philosophy on Contemporary Ceramic Design

Jing Liu*, Haoquan Xiong and Jingjing Fan

Jingdezhen Ceramic University, Jingdezhen, China

Keywords: Book of Rites; Ceramic Design; Equilibrium and Harmony; Vessel as Repository of Ritual; Unity of Heaven and Humanity; Design Philosophy

Abstract: In the contemporary era dominated by globalization and consumerism, ceramic design, while pursuing formal innovation and technological advancement, also faces the dilemma of a lack of cultural connotation and hollow spiritual expression. As a core classic of ancient Chinese ritual and musical civilization, the Book of Rites contains profound philosophical thoughts such as "Equilibrium and Harmony" (Zhong He Wei Yu), "Vessel as Repository of Ritual" (Qi Yi Cang Li), and "Unity of Heaven and Humanity" (Tian Ren He Yi). These concepts provide a timeless source of wisdom for contemporary ceramic design. This paper aims to systematically explore how the philosophy of the Book of Rites profoundly influences and reshapes the concepts and practices of contemporary ceramic design from three dimensions: design philosophy, functional ethics, and aesthetic realm. The paper argues that the philosophy of the Book of Rites not only guides design back to a balance between "function" and "beauty" but also promotes its sublimation into "contemporary ritual vessels" that carry cultural memory, manifest the spirit of the times, and construct a harmonious way of life.

1. Introduction

Ceramics, a treasure of Chinese civilization, have always been an art of "clay and fire" and a carrier of "Dao and vessel" since ancient times. From ritual objects for worshipping heaven and earth to the cups, plates, and bowls of daily life, the forms and decorations of ceramics have always been closely linked to the social ethics and cultural concepts of their specific eras. In the contemporary age, ceramic design has achieved unprecedented breakthroughs in materials, techniques, and forms. However, driven by commercial logic, some designs have fallen into the trap of technocracy and formalism, with their cultural identity and spiritual core becoming increasingly blurred. Against this backdrop, looking back at the pinnacle of traditional Chinese thought—the Book of Rites—is not merely a simple act of nostalgia, but an endeavor to trace the philosophical foundations that can nourish contemporary design innovation from its profound system. Although the Book of Rites discusses pre-Qin ritual systems, its core is a systematic reflection on social order,

human relationships, and the interaction between heaven and humanity. Its discourses on the relationship between "object" and "human," "vessel" and "Dao" hold profound enlightening significance for today's design, especially ceramic design, which is intimately connected to daily life.

2. "Equilibrium and Harmony" (Zhong He Wei Yu): The Philosophical Foundation and Art of Balance in Contemporary Ceramic Design

The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong) in the Book of Rites states: "Equilibrium (Zhong) is the great root of the world. Harmony (He) is the universal path [1]. When equilibrium and harmony are realized, Heaven and Earth take their proper places, and all things are nourished." The concept of "Equilibrium and Harmony" emphasizes a balanced state, avoiding excess and deficiency, and represents the fundamental principle for ensuring all things in the universe are in their proper place and flourishing. This thought provides a core philosophical foundation for contemporary ceramic design.

Firstly, regarding the relationship between function and form, the concept of "Equilibrium and Harmony" advocates an organic unity. Contemporary design often falls into two extremes: either excessively pursuing visual impact at the expense of practicality, or unilaterally emphasizing function while neglecting aesthetics. Confucius emphasized both the essential content and the external aesthetic form of "ritual". His idea of "being gentle and refined in both character and appearance" has had a profound influence on Chinese art, including the art of creation [2]. The concept of "Equilibrium and Harmony" from the Book of Rites enlightens us that excellent design should be a perfect integration of function and form. For instance, in a contemporary tea set, the smoothness of the water flow from the spout and the cleanness of the cut-off (function) are inseparable from the curvature of the pot's body and the control of its center of gravity (form). Pursuing "Equilibrium and Harmony" requires designers to seek the most appropriate balance point in every detail, making the vessel both beautiful and practical, achieving the state of "beauty in use." The Japanese Mingei movement, championed by Soetsu Yanagi, who was deeply influenced by Confucian thought, echoes this concept in the field of design with its advocacy of "utility equals beauty."

Secondly, in the dimension of tradition and innovation, "Equilibrium and Harmony" manifests as a wisdom of "reviewing the old and understanding the new." "How should contemporary ceramic design handle its relationship with tradition? Is it wholesale adoption or complete severance?" "Equilibrium and Harmony" provides the answer: "Wei" requires respecting tradition and understanding the cultural codes and wisdom contained in the shapes, glazes, and techniques of classical ceramics; "Yu" requires innovation through inheritance, allowing it to grow and develop in the context of the new era. For example, some contemporary designers integrate the minimalist aesthetics of Song dynasty ceramics with modern lifestyles, creating vases and tableware that contain the elegant charm of the Song era while conforming to modern ergonomics. This is not simple pastiche, but rather allowing the genes of tradition to "nurture" new life in the soil of the present, achieving a "creative transformation" of tradition.

Finally, in the interplay of emotion and rationality, "Equilibrium and Harmony" guides the temperature of design. Overly rationalized design can be cold and rigid, while overly emotional design can become ostentatious. The way of "Equilibrium and Harmony" requires designers to find a balance between rational calculation (e.g., material costs, production processes) and emotional infusion (e.g., cultural symbolism, user experience). An outstanding ceramic piece can withstand the scrutiny of industrial standards while also touching the softness within the user's heart, evoking emotional resonance.

3. "Vessel as Repository of Ritual" (Qi Yi Cang Li): The Cultural Narrative and Identity Construction in Contemporary Ceramic Design

The Book of Music (Yueji) in the Book of Rites states: "The fu and gui vessels, the zu and dou stands, the regulations and decorations, are the vessels of ritual." This clearly points out that "vessels" are the material carriers of "ritual," whose shapes, scales, and decorations all serve specific ritual norms and social order. This is the core connotation of "Vessel as Repository of Ritual." In contemporary society, although the feudal ritual system has changed, this concept remains vital. It enlightens contemporary ceramic design to become a medium for cultural narrative and identity construction.

First, the transition from "State Ritual Vessels" to "Ritual Vessels for Life." Ancient ding, gui, and jue were "state ritual vessels" symbolizing royal power and hierarchy. In the contemporary era, ceramic design is more integrated into daily life, and its function of "storing ritual" correspondingly shifts to carrying the "rituals of life." A well-designed set of tableware can subtly regulate family dining etiquette and promote communication and cohesion among family members. An elegant tea set or coffee set provides a "sense of ritual" for modern socialization—a chance to slow down and savor carefully—which in itself is a ritualistic discipline and solace for a fast-paced life. Through objects, designers advocate a more textured, more humane way of life.

Second, as symbols of cultural memory and identity. In the context of globalization, the expression of local cultural identity becomes particularly important. Ceramic design can be an effective carrier for telling Chinese stories and conveying Eastern aesthetics. For instance, integrating the "jade culture" in the Book of Rites (comparing the virtues of a gentleman to jade) into design, through jade-like smooth and moist glazes and harmonious, humble forms, conveys the introverted and generous temperament of Eastern culture. Another example is drawing inspiration from the shapes of ancient ritual vessels for modern interpretation, making them decorative pieces with cultural symbolic meaning in a space. These designs are no longer simple crafts; they become the materialized expression of the user's cultural identity and aesthetic taste, serving as a bridge connecting the individual to the national cultural tradition.

Third, demonstrating social concern and ethical values. The essence of "ritual" lies in "respect" and in establishing harmonious social relationships. Contemporary ceramic design can also reflect this ethical dimension. For example, ceramic products designed for the elderly and children consider their safety and ease of use more thoroughly, embodying the spirit of benevolence expressed in "respect the aged in one's own family as well as in others, care for the young in one's own family as well as in others." Ceramic installation art designed for public spaces, if it promotes community interaction and beautifies the public environment, is a contemporary practice of the concept of group harmony pursued by "ritual."

4. "Unity of Heaven and Humanity" (Tian Ren He Yi): The Aesthetic Realm and Ecological Ethics of Contemporary Ceramic Design**

The philosophy of the Book of Rites is deeply rooted in the ancient Chinese cosmic view of the "Unity of Heaven and Humanity." This concept emphasizes the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature, rather than opposition and conquest. This thought points the way to a lofty aesthetic realm and an essential ecological ethic for contemporary ceramic design, especially in a time when the concept of sustainable design is increasingly important.

In terms of materials and techniques, it is the beauty of "natural creation." The birth of ceramics itself is a natural process of "clay" transforming through "fire." Chen Wangheng In the book "Civilization Before Civilization: A Study of Prehistoric Aesthetic Consciousness in China", it is believed that the primitive ancestors' choice of colors was more based on instinct rather than true

artistic aesthetic needs. Their use of colors was strong, simple, and antique, closely related to the themes of prehistoric people's survival, reproduction, and beliefs [3]. They had primitive life consciousness and emotional colors, and through the colors of pottery, their emotions could be clearly felt. The concept of "Unity of Heaven and Humanity" encourages designers to respect and reveal the natural character of materials. Many contemporary ceramic artists champion the "Wabi-sabi" aesthetic, appreciating the unreproducible textures formed by the natural flow and transformation of glazes in the kiln fire, and even viewing traces traditionally considered "flaws," such as kiln transformation, crawling glaze, and kiln ash deposits, as unique marks bestowed by nature. This acceptance of "chance" and "imperfection" is precisely a reverence for and adherence to natural laws, embodying a collaborative dance between human ingenuity and the creation of Heaven.

In terms of form and imagery, it pursues the charm of "emulating nature." The shapes of traditional Chinese vessels often originate from nature, such as melon ridges, lotus leaves, cloud patterns, and landscapes. Although the Book of Rites does not directly discuss form, its philosophical background of "Unity of Heaven and Humanity" nourishes this aesthetic orientation. Contemporary ceramic design can continue to draw inspiration from nature, but no longer through simple imitation. Instead, it refines its spirit, expressing the artistic conception of landscapes and the rhythm of life through abstract lines and generalized forms, making a small vessel a microcosm containing the atmosphere of nature.

Throughout the entire process of design and production, implement the sustainable concept of "revering Heaven and cherishing things." The most urgent contemporary manifestation of "Unity of Heaven and Humanity" is ecological and environmental awareness. Ceramic design should uphold this ancient wisdom and commit to green design. This includes: selecting biodegradable, low-pollution natural mineral raw materials; optimizing firing processes to reduce energy consumption; designing durable, timeless products that resist "disposable" consumer culture; and even using recycled ceramic waste for re-creation. In these ways, ceramic design is no longer just about creating an object, but about participating in the construction of a modern lifestyle system that is friendly to the environment and resource-recycling—a modern system of "Unity of Heaven and Humanity."

5. Conclusion

As an ancient classic, the philosophical radiance of the Book of Rites has not dimmed with time but instead shines with new vitality in the field of contemporary ceramic design. From the balancing way of "Equilibrium and Harmony," it provides the fundamental philosophy for design to handle various contradictory relationships; the symbolic significance of "Vessel as Repository of Ritual" inspires design to undertake the important task of cultural narrative and constructing life rituals; and the lofty realm of "Unity of Heaven and Humanity" guides design towards a sustainable future of harmonious coexistence with nature.

The way forward for contemporary ceramic design does not lie solely in pursuing technical perfection but in exploring cultural depth and spiritual height. The philosophy of the Book of Rites is like a rich mine waiting to be excavated. Integrating the wisdom of the Book of Rites into contemporary design thinking is not about rigidly attaching traditional symbols, but about internalizing it as a design philosophy and ethical consciousness. Only in this way can ceramics transcend their limitations as "objects" and truly become a medium of "Ritual Embodied in Vessel, Vessel Conveying Dao." While meeting the functional needs of modern people, they can also settle their spirit, nourish their cultural identity, and ultimately lead us towards a more poetic, ethically meaningful, and harmonious way of life. This is the most profound and enduring value of the

philosophy of the Book of Rites for contemporary ceramic design.

Funding:

Jiangxi Provincial Art Planning Project: "Vessels for Rituals: A Study on the Creative Design and Cultural Motivations of Jiangxi Ceramic Ritual Objects during the Han and Tang Dynasties" (YG2022047)

Jiangxi Provincial Teaching Reform Project: "Research on the Integration of Ritual Culture into Design Theory Courses in Universities from the Perspective of Curriculum Ideology and Politics"(JXYG-23-11-8)

Jiangxi Provincial Education Science Planning Project: "From Western Discourse to Classical Return: Research on the Value Recognition and Practical Integration of the Spirit of Chinese Canonical Texts into Design Education" (23YB194)

Jiangxi Provincial Key Research Base Project of Philosophy and Social Sciences(23ZXSKJD50)

References

- [1] Hu Pingsheng, Zhang Meng *Rituals* [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2017.
- [2] Hang Jian. *A History of Chinese Craft Aesthetics* [M]. Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007.
- [3] Chen Wangheng. *Pre-Civilization Civilization: A Study of Prehistoric Aesthetic Consciousness in China* [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2018