

# Interpretation of the Forms and Connotations of Writings on Ancient Chinese Ceramics from the Perspective of Narratology

Xu Maolin<sup>1,\*</sup>, Yakup Bin Mohd Rafee<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Art, Sustainable and Creative Industry, Sultan Idris Education University, 35900  
Tanjong MalinPerak, Malaysia

\* Corresponding Author: maolinxuxu@163.com, yakup@fskik.upsi.edu.my

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the forms and connotations of writing on ancient Chinese ceramics through a narratological reading method. The decoration of ceramics is one of the important elements that help us read a ceramic object. The decoration of ceramics before the Tang Dynasty was relatively simple, and then with the painted ceramics of Changsha Kiln in the Tang Dynasty as a symbol, various pattern decorations on ceramics became popular and became richer and richer with the development of the times. Among them, Chinese characters are an important form of decorative expression. Studies have shown that when the characters on porcelain were applied by ceramic craftsmen by writing, engraving or molding, they were given multiple meanings. It not only contains the artistic significance of traditional Chinese calligraphy, but also produces pattern-like features and visual significance due to its design layout on porcelain, while the most fundamental narrative function, which is mainly to convey information, still exists. This paper takes the typical cases of ceramic writing in various historical periods as specimens, and tries to explore the narrative forms and connotations behind them from new perspectives such as creators, stories, and narrative styles, in order to fill the gap in the study of this ceramic history.

## Keywords

**Narratology; Ceramics; Text; Form; Connotation.**

## 1. Introduction

Writing carries the Chinese civilization, and the writing on ceramics is a special existence different from other ways of existence of writing. The reason why the text is universally common, because on the one hand, we can easily see the existence of the text at any time in our daily lives, we need the ubiquitous text as an explanation and guidance; on the other hand, most of the carrier of the text is ordinary and common, such as books, billboards, road signs, and so on, and ceramic text on the unique, first, because the number of words is not much, and secondly compared to the pattern decorations. Ceramics appear alone when the text is less, in addition, because of the complex production process of ceramics, decided to paint or engraved on the ceramic text must be an important event or information.

Since the 1990s, writing on ceramics has begun to receive attention. From the Tongzhi Nianmade Book Inscribed Tang Poem Porcelain Plate on the Changes of Text Decoration (Zhao Hong, 1997)[1]. Discusses the stylistic changes of text on ceramics from the perspective of decoration; Overview and Disconnection of Text Pillows of Song and Yuan Magnetic State Kilns (Ma Xiaoqing, 2006)[2]. Makes a brief discussion and disconnection of text on one kiln, the Magnetic State Kiln, and one single type of ceramic pillows from the perspective of archaeology; Analysis of Text Decorations on Longquan Kilns in Ancient Chinese Celadon Text Decoration" (Liu Faxing, 2015)[3]. Which summarizes and briefly introduces the types of text on Longquan kiln celadon; and "Classification and Examination of Certain Textual Literacies on Qingbai Porcelain from Jingdezhen in the Song Dynasty" (Xu Xiangyu, 2022)[4]. Which classifies and

analyzes the text on Qingbai porcelains in the Song Dynasty Jingdezhen in the light of its social significance and does not deal with the discussion of decorative art and aesthetics. The research field of analyzing the form and connotation of writing on ceramics from a narrative perspective is temporarily in a blank stage.

Narrative theory is a theory that focuses on how a narrative text connects events, settings, characters and perspectives [5]. Gennett, a famous narrative theorist, defines the three meanings of the word "narrative", namely: story (real or fictional events), narrative (the discourse or text that tells about the events), and narration (the act of narration that produces the discourse or text), and analyzes the relationship between the three [6]. Using narrative theory as a method, this paper analyzes the texts on ancient Chinese ceramics as narrative texts and tries to decipher the connotations of these texts at multiple levels, such as content, structure, authorship (including implied authorship), and audience.

The limitations of this paper are: it only talks about Chinese characters and does not include the characters of other nations or countries; it does not deal with the origin of the characters or the interpretation of the scripts, but only explores the form and content of the texts; it only talks about the characters on ceramics, and does not include the characters on other carriers; the texts under study have a pointing narrative content, and do not include the characters of the paragraphs which only represent the information of the age; and it excludes the pictorial narratives, and only focuses on the text narratives of the characters.

## **2. Historical origins of writing on ancient Chinese ceramics**

Ancient Chinese ceramic civilization from about 10,000 years ago, pottery, the Eastern Han Dynasty and the creation of porcelain, experienced the evolution from pottery to porcelain. Discussion of ancient Chinese ceramics on the text inevitably from the primitive society pottery civilization, and then in chronological order, the origin of the text on the ceramics sorted out a clear vein.








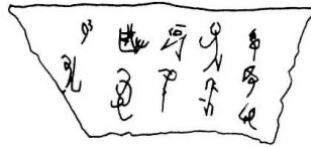
### **2.1. primitive society pottery writing**

The earliest origin of the writing on ceramics can be traced back to the primitive society. since the 1970s, archaeologists have been in Yangshao, Dawenkou, Longshan, Liangzhu, Majiayao and other cultural heritage sites have found a lot of pottery with incised symbols (Table 1), attracted the attention of the academic community, led to a series of studies on the pottery text, mainly focusing on the pottery is the origin of the script and the text, the pottery text of the interpretation and so on.

There are two views in the academic community on the nature of such symbols. Some scholars believe that they are primitive scripts and try to interpret them, such as Mr. Li Xueqin in the 1990s, who tried to interpret these symbols in the same way as he analyzed the scripts of the Shang and Zhou dynasties; some other scholars believe that these symbols are not yet systematic and mature scripts, but merely a kind of graphic markings, representing individuals, or tribal clans. "This simple writing on pottery, which archaeologists assume to be symbols, is, in my opinion, some of the simple writing produced at the stage of the origin of writing." [7] Even if it is a symbol, it is "undoubtedly a symbol with the nature of writing" and "there is no doubt that it is writing", "Those incised marks on the colored pottery can be said with certainty to be the origins of Chinese writing, or the remnants of the original Chinese writing" [8]

Whether they belong to the script or not, the symbols on these vessels are undoubtedly the direct source of the writing on the ceramics.

**Table 1:** Some carved symbols on Pottery in primitive society

			
			
Figure 1.1 Dawenkou culture(ca.4500-2500 B.C.), pottery, Carved symbols	Figure 1.2 Liangzhu culture (ca. 3300 BC-2000 BC), pottery, Carved symbols	Figure 1.3 Yangshao culture (ca.5000-3000 B.C.), pottery , Carved symbols	Figure 1.4 Longshan culture (ca.2500 to 2000 BC), pottery ,Carved symbols

## 2.2 Writing on Bricks and Tiles from the Qin and Han Dynasties

After the primitive society, Chinese society entered the Bronze Age, followed by the powerful Qin and Han Dynasties. In the history of Chinese ceramics development, the Qin and Han bricks and tiles of this period enjoy great reputation for their exquisite ornamentation, unique decorative forms and the historical value of texts. Among them, the most representative of the Han dynasty tiles.

Wadang culture began in the Zhou Dynasty and created extreme Qin and Han Dynasty, roughly through the half-tile to round tile, by the shadow carving to the relief, by the plain surface to the decoration, by the figurative to the abstract, by the pattern to the inscription of some of this progression.

The production process of Wadang is to choose clay, make molds, make specific shapes, and then fired at 800°C, which belongs to architectural components. Due to the special cultural background and national customs, a large number of texts were left on the tiles, which provide us with important historical research materials .









The decorative forms of wadang of Han Dynasty present more spiritual connotations of the Han nation and Han culture. They are the spirit of the Han Dynasty, ideals and temperament of the symbols and manifestations of the font form of exaggerated flexion and extension, letting, interspersed, increase or decrease has become an important method of the potters camp structure with decorative tatang text glyphs, the square and round organic combinations, straight and curved due to the shape of the unfolding of the formation of a new and very rich in personality of the "form of the meaningful"(Clive Bell,2015). Strokes increase or decrease more freely and freely, move to let the flexing and stretching more obvious staggering changes, some of the tile text also pay attention to the strokes pick to highlight the flavor of the writing.

In addition, the western han wadang text also pay attention to the Three-dimensional point and other patterns (such as birds) with, or a simpler text for the double hook treatment, so that when the face appears colorful. Han Dynasty potters in the non-circular non-square wadang transformed the square character shows the control, flying imagination, breathtaking. Special "writing" way (carve) and special calligraphy carrier (clay pottery) together influence the

wadang text or curved strength, or round simple, or simple line characteristics. In a letter to a friend in 1935, the literary scholar Lu Xun said, "Only the art of the Han Chinese is so majestic and broad".

The occasional occurrence of narrative writing on various types of pottery at this time (Table 2, Figures 2.1-2.4) can be considered an early form of narrative writing on ceramics.

**Table 2:** Han Dynasty Wadang with molded characters





			
			
Figure 2.1 Shan Yu Tien Sheng, Memorization, Han	Figure 2.2 Palace, palace tile, Han Dynasty	Figure 2.3 Changle Weiyang, Jiyu, Han Dynasty	Figure 2.4 Renyi Zicheng, Aphorism, Han Dynasty

## 2.3 Characters on Ceramics from the Six Dynasties to the Ming and Qing Dynasties

After the Han Dynasty, the Tang Dynasty was a period of high development of ceramic text decoration. The most prominent performance is the Changsha kiln, with the technique of green glaze and brown color, decorated on the abdomen of the pot, the pillow surface, the inner wall of the bowl and plate. To the Song, Jin, Yuan period, the northern Henan, Shanxi and other kilns, there are white and black flowers of the pillow, bottle and other objects, more books have the form of the words in running script, fugue, prose songs and small orders. Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, in the southern Longquan kiln celadon and Jingdezhen kiln celadon, pastel, glazed red, doucai, enameled animals, figures, birds and flowers on the decoration, but also the book is also painted together.

This information truly reflects the thoughts, interests, hobbies and living customs of the people at that time.(Table 3 Figures 3.1-3.4)

**Table 3:** Some porcelain decorated with writing

			
Figure 3.1 Class of mark, official, dish with petal mouth, Tang dynasty	Figure 3.2 Motto Class, Porcelain Pillow,Gold dynasty	Figure 3.3 Auspicious Words, porcelain Shou, Jiajing, plate, Qing dynasty	Figure 3.4 Scripture class, imitation scroll porcelain, Heart Sutra, Republic of China



### 3. Story and Discourse - An Analysis of the Form and Narrative Content of Writings on Ceramics

According to Gennett's theory of narrative, Every narrative contains at least two parts: a story (histoire), which refers to the content or strand of events (actions, happenings [hapenings], etc.), together with existents (characters, things in the scene, etc.); and a discourse, which is the method by which the content is conveyed. In short, in a narrative, the story is what is told and the discourse is how it is told. The "what" is the raw material of the events of the story, while the "how" is the presentation of the events in the form of narrative discourse.

Three Kingdoms Yue kiln celadon tiger (Figure 4.1), "Chiwu fourteen years Huiji Shangyu division Yuan Yi made", this is the earliest porcelain mark found to date. Yue kiln celadon fired in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, the Three Kingdoms period is the prosperity of the Yue kiln celadon development, this celadon tiger engraved with the production of a specific year, that is, Wu Chiwu fourteen years, the specific location, that is, Huiji Shangyu, and a specific producer, that is, Yuan Yi, for us to provide a very valuable narrative historical materials.

Zhi Zheng type Yuan blue and white elephant ear vase as an example (Figure 4.2), the neck of the vase sixty-two character inscription reads, "Xinzhou Road Yushan County Shuncheng Township, Dejiao Li Jingtang Xie FengSheng disciple ZhangWenJin, happy to give incense burner vase a payment, praying to protect the whole family QingJi children's peace. Zhi Zheng eleven years in April Liangchen respectfully, Xingyuan Zudian Hu Jingyi marshal playing offerings." The text contains basic information about the commissioner, i.e., the person who paid to customize this porcelain - details of his address and identity; the purpose of the porcelain - to beat the offering; the time when the porcelain was made - the tozheng Eleven years in April; porcelain manufactured after the initial landing point - Xingyuan ancestral temple. The whole passage is a straightforward narrative that leads directly to the events, with detailed information recorded to ensure the authenticity of the story, effectively restoring a specific thing done by a Chinese man out of piety a thousand years ago.

Similar ceramic feeding class text as early as the Song and Jin period has appeared, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties a large number of popular, especially the Ming Dynasty Wanli, Tianqi, Chongzhen, and the Qing Dynasty Shunzhi, Kangxi period is most common. These words and patterns are perfectly combined together, together to complete the picture of the decoration, not only in the form and picture play a colorful effect, while showing the diversity of ceramic decorative arts.

Another Tang dynasty Changsha kiln handle pot (Figure 4.3), with no decoration on the entire surface of the object other than the text that comes directly into view, is written in ventral form in a five-character poem, "Spring water and spring pools are full, spring grass grows in springtime, spring people drink spring wine, and spring birds chirp and sing spring sounds." The form of writing is the mature regular script of the Tang Dynasty, describing the image of a spring pond full of spring water, grass growing, birds singing and turning, and spring flowers making wine. Even after more than a thousand years have passed, that once vibrant moment is instantly real to one's eyes. The poem is a combination of narrative and lyricism.

The Qianlong enameled open-air poetry vase is a very valuable piece of porcelain (Figure 4.5). All the production of enamel in the Qing Dynasty must rely on the cooperation of two institutions thousands of miles apart to complete, first of all, the white tires need to be made in Jingdezhen, Jingdezhen has the country's best porcelain production process, can be purely handmade white porcelain to achieve the warm, delicate, white; after that, the white tires will be transported to the palace seat in Beijing, by the court of the Royal Academy of Painting for the porcelain for the painter to make further decorations. Enameled porcelain production is completed, only for internal use of the court, because of this, before the fall of the Qing dynasty,

no one knows what enameled porcelain looks like. The decoration of this porcelain is very complex, including the rolling road, letterpress and painting and other decorative techniques, calligraphy, painting, poetry art in one, the most important thing is that the court painter in the most important position in the porcelain deliberately left a blank, with the traditional decorative techniques in a way called "window", with the way of writing in clerical script A striking poem was left. The author of the poem is the Qianlong Emperor, the most enthusiastic of all the emperors who left poems on various works of art. The poem reads: "Inquiring about the wind, I know about farming and mulberrying, and viewing the ancient world, I am glad to have passed through the state of rites and music. Mao's interpretation of poetry is truly unique, and King Xian's achievement is unparalleled. The spring light in the store of Shaokai Estate is misty, and the wild water in the bridge of the stream is murmuring when the snow melts. Remembering my bookstore, I booked the scriptures, and I have a lot of admiration in the bright window." The general meaning of the poem is that it expresses the state of mind of remembering the past and lamenting the present.

**Table 4:** Some of the writing on the porcelain with a clear narrative significance






sample	Writing style	Era & Kiln	ornament al	Image source
<div><p>Figure4.1 Celadon Tiger</p></div>	carvings	Three Kingdoms, Yue Kiln, Zhejiang	glaze of porcelain	National Museum of China
<div><p>Figure 4.2 porcelain bottle</p></div>	colored painted-on designs	Yuan dynasty, Jingdezhen kiln, Jiangxi	blue and white (porcelain )	The British Museum
<div></div>	colored painted-on designs	Tang dynasty, Changsha kiln, Hunan province	glaze of porcelain	Changsha Kiln Museum

Figure 4.3 Green glazed pot				
 Figure 4.4 Brown-colored floral and poetic girdle-shaped pillow on a white ground	colored painted-on designs	Southern Song dynasty, Jizhou kiln, Jiangxi	brown glaze	Jizhou Kiln Museum
 Figure 4.5 Enamel porcelain vase	colored painted-on designs	Qing dynasty, Jingdezhen & Beijing	dentin	Palace Museum, in the Forbidden City, Beijing

4. Narrative expression of texts on ceramics

This part of the article is devoted to analyzing the different narrative expressions of texts on ceramics, using the author, content and style of the text as an objective basis.

4.1. Participants in Writing on Ceramics

Narrative analysis involves an examination of perspective: through whose eyes do we see the event? Whose voice tells us about the characters and their behavior? [9]

In the case of the Yuan Dynasty Zhizheng year blue and white vase mentioned above (Figure 4.2) , when today we are confronted with this thousand-year-old porcelain, when we read the passage word by word, there is no doubt that the first message we read is not related to the creator of the porcelain, i.e., the person who wrote the passage on the porcelain, but rather to the commissioner, and despite the fact that the text expresses the commissioner's will, the porcelain did not belong to that commissioner from the very beginning. client, but rather belonged to a monastery or a deity. It is also worth mentioning that the person who wrote this passage on the porcelain may not have been the craftsman who made the porcelain. Because the reason why the Chinese porcelain industry is so developed, the reason why porcelain is

purely handmade and still be able to achieve such a delicate, because of the complexity of the process, involved in the process of production of a large group of craftsmen, in general, the painting and writing of the text of the respective division of labor. If we add the implied authors, the number is infinite. As the porcelain moved from place to place over the millennium, and his owners continued to change, the number of people who saw it, as well as those who admired it, was obviously innumerable. Here, the text is completely just by means of porcelain as a carrier and independent of the existence, and silent completion of the conveyance of information and self-expression. This is also the significance of the narrative of the text on ceramics.

#### 4.2. Direct narrative, lyricism and empathy

Direct narrative refers to the text is straightforward and easy to understand, the opening that directly into the event of the narrative, the information to be expressed in specific detail smooth, unadulterated text of the author's subjective emotions as well as literary modification, the text of the style of the plain and simple; lyrical narrative is with the help of a certain form of literature, will want to express the events of the implicit euphemistic conveyance out of the obvious subjective emotional outflow, the capacity of the narrative is not as good as the previous one, but the context of the distant, artistic infectious power. Artistic infectious force is strong. Such as the former Figure 4.1 of the Three Kingdoms celadon tiger that is directly to the time, place, characters recorded, belongs to the direct narrative.

The lyrical narrative theme, represented by poetry on porcelain, is more important in expressing the latent emotions behind it, thus evoking the heart. As shown in Figures 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5 in Table 4, all of them use poetry as a narrative. Poetry, as a representative of traditional Chinese culture, contains the collective memory and cultural identity of generations of people. Through the carriers of ceramics and words, narrative techniques are involved to complete the deep dialog between the work and the audience.

### 5. Conclusion

In summary, the text specimens on ceramics, as one of the visual features of ceramics, contain a wealth of information, some of which are straightforward, obvious, and direct, and some are hidden, behind the scenes, and require association and analysis. The combination of the two completes the narrative authenticity and integrity of the text on ceramics.

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