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Song and Yuan Operas Integrated into Paintings Exploration from Ci Zhou Kiln White Black Decorative Patterns

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Abstract: The Song and Yuan periods marked an era of mutual integration of theatrical art and folk craftsmanship. As a representative of northern folk-kiln artistry, the white-ground black decoration of Ci Zhou Ware uniquely immortalized theatrical scenes on utilitarian ceramic vessels through its distinctive black-and-white visual language. Taking white-ground black decoration of Ci Zhou Ware as the object of research, this study employs methodologies of documentary investigation and visual analysis. It delves into the socio-cultural impetus behind this phenomenon, investigates the typology and visual narratives of theatrical imagery, and offers an interpretation of the aesthetic in the decorative portrayal of theatrical figures. Ultimately, the paper aims to illuminate the underlying cultural logic of the pictorialize of theatrical performance during this historical epoch.

Keywords: Ci Zhou Kiln; Decorative Arts; White-ground black decoration; Song-Yuan Opera.

1. Introduction

Based on surveys of sixteen Ci Zhou kiln sites, Ci Zhou decoration has been classified into fifty-eight distinct types according to variations in glaze color, pigments, and decorative techniques [1], among which white-ground black decoration occupies a central position. The white-ground black decoration technique of Ci Zhou Kiln emerged during the reign of Emperor Zhen Zong to the early Huizong period of the Song dynasty, developed rapidly in the early Jin dynasty, reached its peak in the middle Jin to middle Yuan period, and entered a decline by the late Yuan. During the Zhen Zong to early Huizong phase, the decorative style was characterized by formal rigor, predominantly featuring floral and geometric motifs. In the early Jin, the repertoire expanded to include genre scenes such as children at play and hunting, with the integration of texture strokes and ink wash shading within the black and white contrast. From the middle Jin to middle Yuan, while continuing the decorative techniques of the late Song and early Jin periods, artisans expanded the possibilities for incorporating artistic themes, such as narrative scenes and featuring figures into porcelain decoration. Particular during the mid-Yuan Dynasty, with the flourishing of opera art, the depiction of opera scenes on Ci Zhou ware, specifically black-ground with black decoration became increasingly common, establishing this form as a new decoration technique. However, With the maturation and development of blue and white porcelain during the late Yuan and early Ming, which dominated the market with its finer texture and exquisite ornamentation ,the white ground black decoration of Ci Zhou ware gradually declined and eventually faded from the historical stage [2]. As an outstanding representative of folk art, Ci Zhou ware featuring white ground black decoration immortalized ephemeral moments of Song Yuan opera upon ceramic surfaces through painted form. This gave rise to the distinctive phenomenon of the "entry of opera into painting," profoundly reflecting the social customs and aesthetic tastes of the time.

2. The Social and Cultural Motivation of Opera Painting in Song and Yuan Dynasties

2.1. Driven by Urban Cultural Demand

In " The Theory and Practice of History, " Kroci proposed that " all history is contemporary history. " Then the same is true for art. The influence of the times on art cannot be ignored [3]. The economic prosperity of the Song dynasty and the further expansion of commercial networks in the Yuan jointly engendered a massive new middle-class, who gradually supplanted the traditional aristocracy and literati as the primary consumers of culture. This group not only demanded accessible forms of entertainment but also sought artistic expressions that align with their own aesthetic preferences. Driven by this socio-economic factor, the art of opera underwent a popularization shift from the imperial court to the common people’s entertainment venues, creating a market demand for the visualization of opera performance. However, constrained by economic limitations and daily routines, ordinary citizens are unable to frequently visit these venues to watch the performances. Folk artisans seized this market opportunity by integrating elements of tradition opera into ceramic decoration, enabling those unable to visit the venues regularly to “collect” scenes from opera through pictorial form, thereby satisfying their recreational pursuits. The dynamic compositions and exaggerated representations in these images aligned with the urban dwellers’ preference for sensory stimulation, standing in stark contrast to the implicit elegance favored by literati painting. Essentially, this phenomenon represents a redistribution of cultural power driven by commodity economy. When the urban class acquired cultural discourse through consumption, dramatic imagery with its accessibility, narrativity, and interactivity emerged as a vital medium connecting the art of the stage with daily life, effecting the transmutation of drama from ephemeral performance into immortalized pictorial form.

2.2. Interaction between Literati and Artisan

The decoration technology of Ci Zhou kiln was born under the background of the prosperity of calligraphy and painting in Song and Yuan Dynasties and the rise of literati. The craftsmen of Ci Zhou Kiln are ordinary people. Although they mastered proficient painting skills, they lacked the cultural self-cultivation and extraordinary artistic attainments of literati. Therefore, they could not create drama legends, historical stories and other meaningful contents expressed by literati in calligraphy and painting, as well as poems and songs expressed by literati and officials. Folk artists admire the profound cultivation of literati, which inevitably makes frequent interaction between literati and craftsmen [4]. The literati directly participated in the design and creation of the Ci Zhou Kiln workshop, and transformed the literary images from the drama script into visual schemas for the craftsmen. The potter was creatively transformed on the basis of absorbing the aesthetic taste of the literati, combining the poem inscriptions with the iron-painted patterns, and the two sides gradually constructed a set of opera visual language system. This interaction was not a one-way process of refinement, but a two-way cultural negotiation. It was this creative cooperation between the elite and the public that made the theatrical imagery of Ci Zhou Klin not only retain the vibrant vitality of folk art, but also contain the pursuit of artistic conception of literati art.

2.3. Implicit Expression of Politics and Ethics

Under the special political environment of alien rule in the Yuan Dynasty, traditional poetry withdrew from the dominant position in the literary world, and the emerging Yuan Qu became the mainstream of the era's literature. The authors of Yuan Qu are mainly Han literati, who often use Yuan Qu to express the anguish of life [5]. Therefore, opera images have become a secret channel for Han intellectuals to express cultural resistance. Similarly, opera images also bore the function of Confucian ethical education. They carried out subtle moral dissemination through everyday objects, such as ' The Orphan of Zhao ' emphasizing the theme of loyalty and filial piety and ' Mencius's mother moves three times advocating enlightenment. These carefully selected opera segments penetrated into people 's daily life in the form of visual symbols, thus making up for the lack of mainstream ideology caused by the decline of the official education system in the Yuan Dynasty. More importantly, folk artists creatively combined political metaphors with common folk tastes, for instance, transforming the ethnic conflict in the story of "Zhao Jun Departs for the Frontier" into a poignant tale of romance. This kind of expression mode of using the past to allude to the present reflects the survival wisdom of the intellectual elites in the Song and Yuan Dynasties to continue the Confucian orthodoxy with culture, and also shows the adaptive strategy of folk art under political pressure. Finally, the ceramic decoration transcends the simple aesthetic function and becomes a unique medium for carrying national memory and moral concepts.

3. Thematic Categories and Visual Narratives of Dramatic Imagery

As an important carrier of the integration of traditional Chinese visual culture and opera art, opera images record opera performances and interpret the connotation of scripts in an intuitive image language, forming a unique theme type and visual narrative logic. The theme can be roughly divided into two categories: historical stories and secular Satire, reflecting Socio-cultural psychology of different historical periods. The visual narrative breaks through the limitation of time and space, interacts with the text by symbolic expression, and establishes the artistic connection across the media.

3.1. Theme Types of Opera Images

3.1.1. Historical Stories

Among the various themes depicted in the white-ground black-painted imagery of Ci Zhou ware, the historical story theme is the most abundant and diverse, covering different times and different types of classic narratives. And the themes are extensive , including the rise and fall of the dynasty and the legend of heroes, such as the story of the Sui and Tang Dynasties ' single whip snatch ', ' Tang Seng went to fetch the scriptures' ; classic scenes from the Three Kingdoms period, such as ' Three Visits to the Thatched Cottage ', ' Huo shao Bo wang po ' ; Classic plots from Yuan drama, such as 'Li Kui Fu Jing' stories of Buddhist and Taoist immortals, such as 'The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea'; and traditional dance and music allusions, such as 'The March of Lord Lan Ling'. There are also scenes of Yuan drama and stories promoting traditional ethics, such as twenty-four filial piety stories [6], thus forming an all-inclusive historical story. However, with unique thinking, the potters regard porcelain as a stage and glaze as ink, creating a unique folk narrative art on the objects. This kind of opera image is based on the strong visual contrast of white ground and black flowers. Through concise lines, dramatic composition and symbolic images, the ups and downs of historical stories are solidified on the surface of objects, and the perfect transformation from literary narrative to visual art is achieved. Its picture is intuitive and instructive, and it has become a medium for people to understand history and accept ethical education. The core values such as loyalty, filial piety and righteousness advocated by Confucianism are also subtly integrated into the daily life and ideas of the people with the help of these vivid opera stories. For example, the " white ground black flower snow night visit Zhao Putu rectangular pillow " white ground black flower Zhao Bian into the Sichuan story rectangular pillow " collected by China Ci Zhou Kiln Museum is a typical representative. The work uses white ground black flower as the artistic medium, transforms the classic historical narrative into a visual picture full of dramatic conflicts, and uses concise and smooth lines to accurately outline the sincerity of Zhao Kuangyin 's snow night knocking on the door, Zhao Bian 's light riding and other classic scenes. Through dynamic character posture and iconic prop display, the dramatic conflict of the story is strengthened, so that the historical scene is above the artifacts.

3.1.2. Secular Satire

The secular satire themes in the opera images of the Song and Yuan Dynasties, based on the social reality and the visual language of Ci Zhou Kiln characterized by white-ground black decoration, transform the critical spirit of the opera art into the image narrative that adorns the vessels. The emergence of this theme is mainly due to the prosperity of the urban economy in the Song and Yuan Dynasties, the growth of the citizen class and the prosperity of the market culture, which makes the opera art move from the palace to the public entertainment venues. The content itself also includes the observation and reflection of the social reality. The folk craftsmen transfer the critical consciousness from the stage to the ceramic decoration, so that the ceramics carry the social

comments and become the visual expression of the folk position and the spirit of the times. The secular satire images take the city life as the core object, take the life scene, the typical character, the conflict plot as the performance carrier, abandon the implicit and restrained of the literati art, and adopt the artistic techniques of exaggeration, humor and banter to form a direct and powerful satirical effect. Its critical dimension points to three levels : criticizing the hypocrisy and formalization of feudal ethics, and exposing the hypocritical nature of some monks and Taoist groups who abide by the etiquette on the surface, but actually contradict words and deeds ; it depicts the coldness of the world under the impact of the commodity economy, showing the shifting fortunes of the rich and the poor, the tendency of the ups and downs of the official career, and the phenomenon of intimacy and alienation, reflecting the survival anxiety of ordinary people ; it points out the darkness of officialdom ecology and the corruption of officialdom, depicts the chaos of power collusion between officials and tyrants, and completes the implicit accusation of power anomie from the perspective of folk. The white-ground black decoration ceramics of Ci Zhou Kiln feature a strong contrast between black and white, as well as a concise freehand brushwork, is able to transform complex social phenomena into easy-to-understand visual symbols, so that ordinary people can intuitively perceive the value position behind the picture. The craftsmen do not pursue fine realism, but strengthen the narrative tension with dramatic moments, so that the irony is highlighted on the porcelain surface, and the critical spirit is infiltrated into the daily utensils. For example, the work ' Zhang Tianshi broken case painting pillow ' collected by the Hunan Provincial Museum incorporates Taoist priest into a scene of legal adjudication. By employing a fragmented narrative style reminiscent of traditional opera and utilizing concise brushwork, the piece delivers a multi-dimensional satire of social norms and ideals.

3.2. Visual Narrative of Opera Images

3.2.1. Space-time Compression

The space-time compression of opera images breaks the limitations of physical space and the linear flow of time mainly through composition layout, symbol simplification and dynamic hinting, and achieves the complete narrative expression of opera stories in limited visual carriers. In their creative practice, the craftsmen of Ci Zhou Kiln abandoned the tedious scene stacking and meticulous replication in traditional realistic painting, and instead adopted the blank space technique of “emptiness within fullness” and highly condensed symbolic props. The instantaneous stop frame carries the narrative ductility, and implies the flow of time and the connection of the plot through the action conflict or expression tension in a single picture. They also abandoned the detailed description of the stage setting and environmental scene, instead creating a virtual opera stage space with a large area of blank, and quickly points out the identity of the opera role and the background of the story with the help of iconic props such as folding fans, weapons and costumes. Then, by capturing the highly dynamic posture and expression of the characters, the key moments in the opera plot are frozen in a single image. This single image implies the passage of the time and connection between plot points in the story. Through the specific details, viewers can image the full story, giving the static image a strong narrative expansiveness. Multi-scene juxtaposition is another important method to achieve space-time compression of Ci Zhou kiln opera images. With the help of the modeling characteristics of the objects themselves, the craftsmen use the open-light separation or continuous composition method to divide the core plot fragments of " cause-climax-end " in the same repertoire into different decorative areas of the objects, breaking the narrative order of linear time. This layout method can connect the complete story context on the limited curved or flat surfaces of the object without the help of text description, so that the viewer can fully interpret the theatrical story from beginning to end in the process of viewing, and achieving the ingenious integration of the space-time dimension. It can be seen that the space-time compression technique of Ci Zhou Kiln opera image is mainly rooted in its unique artistic creation gene. It combines the decorative concept of “simplicity surpassing complexity”, the strong black and white contrast line language, and the image modeling thinking of folk artists to jointly realize the application of this narrative technique. It abandons the creative logic of complicated carving and pursuit of image expression, so that craftsmen can break through the constraints of time and space. Finally, it achieved narrative effect of multiple meanings in a single image on practical ceramic objects, satisfying the practical functions of the objects while enabling the widespread dissemination of traditional opera culture through visual means.

3.2.2. Intertextuality with Drama Text

The creative logic of the opera image is always highly consistent with the artistic core of the opera text. The opera images mostly extract the most dramatic scenes in the text, fix the classic plots with concise lines of black and white contrast, outline them with simple strokes, and create artistic conception with image modeling. This form of freehand expression is similar to the way in which the opera uses lyrics, dialogues, and stage gestures to convey character emotions and drive the story forward. Both aimed to achieve the goal of expressing rich emotions with extremely simple form. Under the influence of literati painting, Ci Zhou kiln craftsmen integrated calligraphy and painting into porcelain painting, such as writing tunes or folk proverbs on porcelain pillows, and using flowing lines to depict the robe of the characters to express their inner states. The technique of expressing the spirit through form aligns with the text style found in the opera where silence speaks volumes, jointly creating an artistic realm of the interplay of the virtual and reality. The flat composition of images and the virtual space of the opera stage also form an aesthetic echo. Both of them break through the physical limitations through symbolic artistic expression. In the dimension of cultural dissemination, the two form a complementary symbiotic relationship. With the intuitive visual image, the opera image transforms the historical stories and folklores in the text into visual symbols accessible to the public, expanding the dissemination scope of opera culture. The opera text injects deep connotation into the image with rich plots and delicate emotions, so that the porcelain painting is no longer a simple decoration, but a narrative carrier carrying cultural memory. This intertextuality eventually led to the cross-media transformation of opera art from stage to porcelain surface.

The rectangular pillow with white-ground black decoration depicting ‘Liu Yi’s Biography’ is based on the literary and theatrical works specifically the Tang Dynasty tale ‘Liu Yi’s Biography’ and the Yuan Dynasty drama ‘Liu Yi Delivers the Letter’, which was adapted from that tale. The craftsman

accurately selected the core plot in the story, and by depicting the posture and expression of Liu Yi and the dragon girl, condensed the moving story of Liu Yi's righteous act of delivering the letter and mutual understanding between human and deity in the opera text on the porcelain surface, achieving the perfect integration of text narrative and visual narrative. It can be seen that the intertextuality between the opera image and the opera text of Ci Zhou Kiln is the complementarity of the art form and the inheritance and continuation of the cultural connotation, which makes the opera art to be passed down for a long time in a way closer to the folk life.



Figure 1. Yuan Dynasty the rectangular pillow with white-ground black decoration depicting 'Liu Yi's Biography'

4. Decorative Charm of Opera Characters in white-ground Black Decoration on Ci Zhou Ware

4.1. Visual Tension of Black and White Contrast

As stated in the 'Huainanzi-Yuan Dao Xun', "White is emptiness, white is nothingness." Thus, the decorative style featuring white-ground black painting can be regarded as a form of monochromatic black decorative art. In contrast of complex color palettes, black absorbs all the colors of the world, and can bring people a deep visual experience. It shows the vibrant diversity of existence within the simplicity of a single and unadorned tone. Triumphing through the "absence of color," it represents the highest realm of artistic color expression [7]. Depending on the different decorative techniques, it can be broadly classified into five types: white ground with underglaze black decoration; white ground with underglaze black drawing; white ground with underglaze black carving; white ground with overglaze black decoration; and black glaze with incised black decoration filled with white [8]. Ci Zhou ware featuring white-ground black designs has spawned a highly condensed narrative technique with distinct black-and-white contrast. The decoration is mainly based on symbolic elements. Only by using simple lines to outline the folds of garments, it can create highly dynamic characters in Chinese opera. The core of its



Figure 2. Yuan Dynasty white-ground black decoration' Fire Burning Bo Wang po image 'Rectangular Pillow

visual tension lies in the strong collision between the pure white glaze and the strong black color. The white glaze is as warm as silk, providing an expansive backdrop for the opera characters, while the black color of rust flowers becomes the visual core, and the two complement each other. This minimalist color language, with the help of a strong contrast between light and dark, makes the opera characters stand out from the plain white background, magnifying the fluidity and grace of their costumes, the exaggerated vividness of the expressions, and the dramatic sense of the gesture to the extreme. Taking the rectangular pillow of the white ground black decoration ' Fire Burning Bo Wang po image ' as an example, the object has a large area of pure white as the base, which is very clean. Then, with sharp black lines, the shape of figures of Zhang Fei and Zhuge Liang, as well as the details of their costumes and the background of the image, are precisely outlined. With black and white as the main color tone, supplemented by the natural gray level, the image of the opera characters is clearly shaped, and the scene atmosphere of the battlefield is skillfully created. The visual impact and artistic expression of black and white contrast are displayed incisively and vividly, and the decorative charm of the opera characters is perfectly demonstrated in the minimalist color.

4.2. The Spirit of Freehand Expression in Folk Brushwork

As a folk kiln, Ci Zhou kiln did not product ceramics for exclusive imperial use, instead, its wares were primarily intended to meet the daily needs of the common people. Therefore, painting could break free from the constraints of court art and instead pursue an aesthetic characterized by a free and unrestrained, concise and exaggerated style. Through flexible lines to show the graceful posture of the characters, or with the help of rough brush strokes to highlight the heroic spirit of the characters, with just a few strokes, the characters of the opera are vividly presented on the porcelain, or accurately grasp the core plot of the opera story, with less than more, with simple control complex, to create a far-reaching

artistic conception. This is also related to the limitations of the Ci Zhou kiln technique. The high iron content in the clay leads to rough texture, which is gray-white or gray-yellow. During production, it is necessary to apply white makeup clay to cover up the defects and form a rough base. Black color takes iron-manganese mineral 'spot stone ' as raw material. It is easy to be stained due to kiln temperature fluctuation during firing, and the clay body as strong water absorption capacity, which forces the creation to be completed quickly. The strokes tend to be concise and freehand, and it is difficult to describe them in detail. However, these limitations just gave birth to a highly condensed narrative technique. The decoration is mainly based on symbolic elements, such as using simple clothing lines to show the charm of characters, extracting the most recognizable features in life scenes and combines with extensive use of negative space. This approach compresses complex narrative into intuitive images, forming a folk aesthetic expression of ' freehand brushwork in form and vividness in simplicity '. For example, the "Black Patterned White Background Feng Yi Pavilion Story Pillow" features the bloated figure and ostentatious bearing of Dong Zhuo, the heroic demeanor of Lu Bu, and the graceful charm of Diao chan. These are all depicted through concise and free-flowing lines, without detailing such things as garment folds. The brushstrokes are bold and unrestrained, the black color is applied in varying shades naturally, and the background merely indicates the pavilion with simple strokes. It focuses on the interaction of the characters' expressions, using a simple and straightforward brushstroke to directly address the core of the story, fully demonstrating the simplicity and agility of the folk expression style.

4.3. The Stylized and Condensation of Traditional Chinese Opera

The opera program is the core of Chinese traditional opera, including a highly standardized symbol system such as role play, movement and postures costume and dressing, and it is also the unique expression language of opera art. These elements form a unique artistic language through exaggeration, symbolism and freehand brushwork in stage performances. Craftsmen realized the artistic essence of the opera program. With the help of the technological characteristics of white ground and black flowers, they broke the time limitation of the opera stage performance with the ultimate visual contrast of black and white, rough and powerful lines and symbolic modeling, and transformed the fleeting dynamic moments on the opera stage into static images. However, this freeze-frame conciseness is not a mechanical copy of the stage scene, but is deeply integrated into the folk aesthetic pursuit of spirit and charm. The white-ground black painted technique of Ci Zhou ware requires quick brushstrokes, simplifying complexity and eliminating unnecessary details. It is impossible to depict intricate details, forcing the creators to extract the most distinctive visual elements. For example, the exaggerated facial features of the clown are depicted in black patterns, while the expressions and features of the characters like the male and female roles are outlined with fine lines, achieving an artistic effect of "expressing the spirit through form". The fixed pattern of the characters in Ci Zhou Kiln opera is essentially to transform the dynamic time art into the static space art, which solidifies the essence of the opera on the porcelain surface. Taking the long square pillow as an example, the craftsman abandons the story bedding and the subsequent plot development, precisely capturing the climax moment when Monk holds a staff and separates the two tigers. Through concise lines and distinct contrast of images, they depict Monk's composure and kindness as well as the fierce and powerful nature of the tigers with great precision, creating a sharp contrast. Through typical artistic expression, the essence of the opera pattern is permanently presented on the object.

The Ci Zhou kiln opera image with black flowers on the white ground is a typical representative of the Song and Yuan opera “incorporating into painting”. It is the visual product of the prosperity of citizen culture, and also the artistic crystallization of the cross-media dialogue between literary narrative and ceramic decoration. It takes historical stories and secular allegories as two tracks. Through the composition wisdom of time and space compression and the intertextuality tension with opera texts, it has fixed the cultural pulsation of the Song and Yuan societies on the black and white interwoven porcelain surface. This kind of creative logic that refines the opera pattern as a visual symbol and interprets the literati 's spirit with folk brushwork not only shapes the decorative style of Ci Zhou Kiln ' taking vulgarity as beauty ', but also establishes the unique paradigm of ' mutual interpretation of pictures and texts ' in ancient China. However, this unique decorative technique does not arise spontaneously. It is driven by the needs of civic culture, the interaction between literati and craftsmen, and the implicit expression of politics and ethics. This not only reflects the social reality aesthetics of the Song and Yuan Dynasties, but also truly reflects the folk customs and secular culture. Therefore, This study “Song and Yuan Operas Integrated into Paintings Exploration from Ci Zhou Kiln White Black Decorative Patterns” offers us deep insight into the evolution of this decorative art form, and provide us with important physical evidence for studying the social culture and aesthetic characteristics of the Song and Yuan dynasties. More importantly, as a new generation of young people, we should realize that Ci Zhou kiln is a precious legacy left to us by our predecessors, we should inherit its tradition, carry forward its spirit, to create new brilliance.

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