

Heritage and Reinvention: A Cultural Narrative Study of Han and Tang Ceremonial Ceramics from the Perspective of Cultural Memory

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Abstract: Cultural memory is the interactive expression of past historical memory, identity recognition, and cultural continuity. The cultural inheritance of Han and Tang ceremonial ceramics is not only a simple reminiscence and "replication" of the past culture, but also a cultural reinvention rooted in the present and future, aiming to remedy the erosion and dissolution suffered in daily life. Constructing cultural inheritance through cultural memory requires reshaping memory in the context of "living inheritance" combining the cultural connotation of Han and Tang ceremonial ceramics with the conditions of the times, and endowing them with new contemporary significance. Through the living inheritance and modern reinvention of Han dynasty ceremonial ceramics, cultural memory forms a cultural transmission chain, identifying the cultural genes of Han and Tang ceremonial ceramics applicable in contemporary China, and facilitating their creative transformation and innovative development.

Keywords: Cultural Memory; Han and Tang; Ceremonial Ceramics; Heritage.

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, there has been a flourishing research on "cultural memory." Jan Assmann argues that cultural memory functions as a technical support for memory and identity through symbolic systems such as rituals, texts, and monuments. With the aid of cultural memory, members of a collective can establish and cultivate a shared identity and sense of belonging. Simultaneously, "through the recollection of their own history and the presentization of memory images that play a consolidating role, the group confirms its identity". Cultural memory verifies cultural continuity by preserving collective knowledge passed down through generations. It provides a temporal dimension for the cultural identity of future generations and forms a source of inspiration and cohesion, enabling individuals to develop a sense of belonging and identification. Cultural memory is a reconstruction of the past, considering memory as a concept closely linked to history and culture. By showcasing enduring historical memories, it solidifies the identification of the collective subject with the group at its core. The interaction between consciousness, values, culture, and society embedded in memory has developed over thousands of years of historical sedimentation. This enables cultural memory to maintain group cohesion and continuity over time.

Cultural memory typically focuses on key elements or symbolic objects from the past, such as documents, architecture, or artifacts, which help maintain cultural continuity and provide an objective and historical dimension to the cultural identity of future generations. Ceremonial ceramics from the Han and Tang periods are symbolic forms that possess both material and spiritual attributes. They serve as material carriers of ceramic objects, embody the culture of ritual, and showcase external forms through their artistic designs. These culturally significant symbols are important forms of "cultural memory". However, due to the considerable time elapsed since the Han and Tang periods, many ceremonial ceramics have withdrawn from the

historical stage and can only be found in museums or documented in ancient texts, thus existing in a state of "forgetfulness". Therefore, the study of ceremonial ceramics from the Han and Tang periods requires a fresh interpretation from the perspective of cultural memory.

2. Origin: The Transformation of History into cultural Memory

The origin of ceramics is still filled with literary or mythological imagination to this day. Examples such as "Nüwa molding humans from clay", "Shennong cultivating and making pottery" and "using clay to create vessels... all the work of sages" contain a selective cultural memory with emotional and mythical undertones. Ceremonial ceramics have evolved from ceramics, but the exact origin of ceremonial ceramics remains unclear in the academic field. There is no definite answer regarding the specific time and place of their origin. Through long-term practical experience and intergenerational transmission, the origin of ceremonial ceramics has transformed into a historical cultural memory.

From a phenomenological perspective, the initial form of ceremonial ceramics emerged as a means of spatial differentiation in the use of objects, aiming to bring order to social life through rituals or activities. The origin and use of ceremonial ceramics serve as mediatory symbols for the worship of ancestral and celestial gods by prehistoric human ancestors, creating a distinction between the "sacred" and the "everyday" in people's lives. The Shuowen Jiezi defines "li" (Rite) as "to practice and bring blessings from the gods". Xu Hao, a Qing dynasty scholar, annotates in Annotations on Shuowen Jiezi that "the term 'li' originally referred to the practice of walking in accordance with rituals. Its name originated from the offering of sacrifices to the gods and was later extended to refer to all forms of ceremonial etiquette". This indicates that the original meaning of "li" refers to rituals associated with seeking blessings from the gods. Due to the primitive material conditions of prehistoric times, the rituals for worshipping deities were relatively simple. In these ritual

activities, the inherent function of ceramics aligned with the requirements of primitive ritual utensils. Everyday objects such as utensils for food and drink transformed into sacred ceremonial utensils, gradually becoming important symbolic objects within the ritual system. Ceremonial ceramics became the earliest form of ritual utensils. Through the use of objects in rituals, the ancestors and deities who were absent from daily life could communicate with the people. Memories that were marginalized or hidden in everyday life were awakened in rituals and constructed through the material carrier of ceremonial ceramics. Ceremonial ceramics in collective rituals of prehistoric ancestors solidified their activities in memory and frequently appeared in various activities, continuously consolidating the collective memory of groups with similar cultural forms. From the perspective of origin theory, the cultural memory of ceremonial ceramics is shaped by the specific historical and production life of society. It is the cultural accumulation of the prehistoric ancestors' lives and beliefs in specific social and natural environments. Through the form of objects, it records and preserves people's lives in specific times and spaces, becoming an important witness to the cultural and life history of prehistoric ancestors.

The origin of ceremonial ceramics carries a sense of ritual rooted in belief, and its cultural metaphors in rituals constantly consolidate and enrich with the development of time. Within the framework of cultural memory, people continuously fill and interpret the foundational elements of ceremonial ceramics according to the needs of society, forming a relatively stable state during a certain period. Ceremonial ceramics with stable forms represent a standardized cultural memory and possess aesthetic attributes. They typically adhere to strict ritual norms and design systems, following established protocols for production. These protocols are not simply a requirement for the shape of the objects themselves, but a means of consolidating the cultural memory of ceremonial ceramics through relatively stable paradigms. The symbolic elements of ceremonial ceramics, such as form, patterns, craftsmanship, and colors, are embodied in the objects but have an impact beyond them, endowing ceremonial ceramics with aesthetic attributes that distinguish them from everyday objects. For example, objects like the ceramic tripod, ceramic beans, and ceramic pots used in ceremonial activities present a "design aesthetics" through their beauty of form, patterns, or craftsmanship. They create a visual impact and emotional resonance for the participants, evoking feelings of solemnity, reverence, pleasure, or sadness, thus enhancing the conveyance of emotions and needs in relation to the ceremonial activities associated with these ceremonial utensils.

3. Process: Selection and Construction of Cultural Memory

The development of cultural memory in ceremonial ceramics is not a stagnant imitation or mechanical progression of objects, but a historical and constructive process centered around ritual culture. The cultural memory of ceremonial ceramics has existed in history and people's lives since prehistoric times and has evolved with the progress of time. It is not the memory of an individual but originates from and acts upon the collective, representing the collective choices of a group. What is remembered and what is forgotten is constantly selected based on the development of the times and the needs of ritual culture. To express nostalgia for history and

reverence for ancestors, people repeatedly use and express typical elements in their designs, seeking their own rationality and legitimacy to strengthen their pursuit of values and the infectious power of culture. For example, during the Shang Dynasty, there was frequent communication and dissemination between different cultures and religious beliefs, and the powerful Shang dynasty and its culture had a significant impact on other cultures. This led to a certain degree of convergence in culture, religious beliefs, and rituals. "Different clans and political systems shared the same patterns and sacrificial ceremonies represented by graphic writing, which is an important characteristic of early Chinese society, culture, and religion". The most common patterns in the Shang Dynasty, such as the taotie pattern and the kui pattern, were representative decorative symbols of this period and an important manifestation of the aesthetic ideal of "harmony between gods and humans". They were not only iconic patterns in bronze ritual vessels but also appeared on ceremonial ceramics. In the later period of the Shang Dynasty, some white pottery imitated the shapes of bronze ritual vessels, incorporating patterns commonly used in bronze carving, such as the taotie and dragon patterns. These patterns were meticulously designed and standardized. They served as important decorative means, artistic treatments of ceremonial ceramics, and also revealed the religious beliefs and aesthetic pursuits of the people in the Shang Dynasty. The same patterns were shared by different carriers such as bronze vessels and pottery, sharing artistic experiences and promoting the recognition of the subject culture through communication and integration.

The charm of Han and Tang ceremonial ceramics lies in the diversity and constructive nature of cultural memory presented in different historical contexts. This includes selective memory of the form and function of past objects as well as constructive design and expectations for the future. Ceremonial ceramics are produced under the influence of ritual culture, always incorporating new elements that align with current expectations while continuing traditional practices, resulting in new forms of objects. The cultural memory of ceremonial ceramics is not a mere replication or imitation of the past, but rather a continuation, activation, and continuous development of past object forms and craftsmanship in a new era.

4. Obfuscation: Narrative Barriers in Contemporary Cultural Memory

With the arrival of industrial civilization, the roaring of modern machinery has drowned out the simple and natural pastoral scenes of rural life. The industrialization of modern society has ushered in automation, standardization, and speed as key characteristics of the machine age. China is undergoing a transformation into a post-industrial society, and the outbreak of global ecological and cultural crises has prompted people to reflect on the negative consequences brought about by modern mechanical civilization. While enjoying the abundance of material culture brought about by technological advancements, human comprehensive development has been fragmented and constrained. Marx's concept of the "complete human being" implies that everyone has the freedom to dominate and express themselves, showcasing the richness and diversity of human nature through practice. However, reality is as Marcuse stated, "Mass production and mass distribution have come to dominate the individual's entire

body and mind, and in an almost mechanical reaction, the individual and the entire society have reached a high degree of conformity. In this process, the inner dimension of the individual is weakened." Thus, a one-dimensional mode of thought and behavior has emerged within the highly industrialized civilization.

Walter Benjamin, in his book "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", emphasizes the "aura" of art, which originates from various ritual activities in ancient times. He believes that art initially acquired its value through its use in ceremonial activities, and even the most perfect reproduction lacks the "here and now" uniqueness of the artwork — its unique birth that embodies historical significance. However, in the age of mechanical reproduction, the unique aura of art is being replaced by the display value of modern society. With the rapid development of the digital age, countless miracles and infinite possibilities have been created, but at the same time, when ancient ceremonial ceramics are presented to the public in various digital forms, the dissolution of their aura may occur. If we only stay at the level of "being seen", it is difficult to perceive the intrinsic cultural significance and value beneath the surface of the objects.

If we only focus on the surface narrative of the objects and simply liberate the Han and Tang ceremonial ceramics from their hidden state to become "objects of observation" as public resources displayed in showcases, display cabinets, exhibition stands, etc., through replicas, digital images, and other forms, it will create a distance between the objects and history, and there will be a barrier that is difficult to overcome between people and objects. When technology maliciously expands and pushes instrumental rationality to its extreme, technology not only conquers nature but also has a serious negative impact on human creative spirit. The excessive intervention of technology can create significant obstacles to the presentation of the cultural connotations of ceremonial ceramics, making it difficult to convey the cultural significance, information, and experiences that carry historical context, which may result in the obscuring of the inherent "meaning" of ceremonial ceramics. Therefore, when it comes to the cultural memory of Han and Tang ceremonial ceramics, we should not only focus on the objects themselves but also not overlook the various aspects such as craftsmanship, culture, and concepts that they embody. We should have a special and profound understanding of history and culture.

5. Reshaping: The Cultural Heritage and Construction of Han and Tang Ceremonial Ceramics

Ceremonial ceramics from the Han and Tang dynasties "exist" in various ritual spaces such as tombs and sacrificial ceremonies, together with surrounding objects, forming specific contexts of use. They possess a sense of sacredness and concealment. Their forms are not static and preserved exactly as they were in the past, but rather, they are used, recognized, and interpreted by different groups of people under the influence of social and cultural factors. The cultural memory of ceremonial ceramics is influenced by various factors. It includes the personal religious beliefs and cultural identities of the users, as well as the influence of official ideologies and mainstream social culture, involving ritual norms, political ecology, and historical changes. Additionally,

it is closely related to the craft system, visual traditions, and craftsmanship level of the time, embodying both the spirit of the era and the historical context. As one of the material carriers in the realm of memory, ceremonial ceramics are no longer mere artifacts. They contain events, figures, beliefs, and other contents related to the objects, symbolizing "symbols" that record history within specific time and space. They carry multiple meanings related to people's emotions, relationships, and daily lives.

Compared to the Han and Tang periods, the current temporal and spatial contexts have undergone significant changes. In the book "Cultural Memory: Writing, Memory, and Political Identity in Early High Cultures" by Jan Assmann, he argues that "memory is constantly undergoing reconstruction. The past cannot be preserved in its original form in memory, and the ongoing present continuously produces a changing frame of reference in which the past is constantly reorganized. Even new things can only appear in the form of a reconstructed past... Memory not only reconstructs the past but also organizes present and future experiences". The interpretation and reconstruction of the cultural memory framework of ceremonial ceramics from the Han and Tang periods cannot be separated from tradition; it must be combined with contemporary ideological perspectives to achieve a new construction. Only then can its meaning become more enriched, and it can possess the power of typification and sustainable norms. Only by building upon heritage, integrating with the new socio-cultural background and the needs of different groups, and using "the present" as a reference point, can ceremonial ceramics and the ethnic cultural genes they carry be integrated into contemporary social life.

Culture supports society and regulates and constrains the thoughts and behaviors of its members. At the same time, it requires the collective maintenance of society members in order to be better inherited and developed. The producers and eyewitnesses of Han and Tang ceremonial ceramics have long passed away, and we need to "replicate the past" and "construct the present" through cultural memory, public memory, and various cultural symbolic rituals in order to highlight the real value of these cultures. In the new era, with the help of various media, it is beneficial to reproduce the memory of Han and Tang ceremonial ceramics preserved in museums and archives and give them new contemporary connotations and historical significance. This can be achieved through novel means such as text, images, and artifacts to disseminate to the general public, thus attaching cultural memory to external objective objects, while cultural significance is encapsulated in a fixed form. To stimulate the rich intellectual wisdom contained in the cultural genes of the Han and Tang dynasties, it is necessary to make the Han and Tang cultures "come alive" and "speak" by adapting the Han and Tang cultural genes to contemporary culture. Through the "dynamic inheritance" of cultural memory, memory reconstruction can be achieved, which means combining with the conditions of the times to inherit and develop, giving it new meanings, and achieving innovative development in the process of inheritance.

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