

THE CULTURAL AND VISUAL ART DIMENSIONS OF KHITAN CERAMICS

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ABSTRACT

Khitan ceramics were handmade by craftsmen in the Liao Dynasty during the existence of the Liao Dynasty. They were daily-use ceramics and decorative ceramics with typical Khitan national style and characteristics of grassland nomadic life for local people's daily life. In order to apply the unique Khitan ceramic art style to the local cultural and creative industry, this study aims to explore the characteristics of Khitan ceramics and the local natural environment, living customs, national beliefs and visual arts. In the field of descriptive analysis, this study adopted a qualitative approach. Taking the Khitan ceramics from Chifeng City, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region as the research object, combined with the local natural environment and the culture and beliefs of the Khitan people, the shape, modeling lines, colors and pattern layout of Khitan ceramics are analyzed, and the visual art of Khitan ceramics is understood and displayed. The research results show that Khitan ceramics have diverse shapes, smooth lines, natural colors, and simple and elegant patterns. The decorative patterns of Khitan ceramics reflect the cultural beliefs and daily life of the Khitan people. Applying the unique Khitan ceramic art to the local cultural and creative industries will not only help protect and inherit the Khitan cultural heritage, but also provide inspiration and reference for the development of modern cultural industries. This study has important academic value and practical significance for understanding the artistic value and cultural significance of Khitan ceramics.

Keywords: Khitan Ceramics, Visual Art, Natural Environment, National Culture and Beliefs

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INTRODUCTION

The Khitan nation were a nomadic people in ancient northern China who established the Liao Dynasty, which was in parallel with the early Song Dynasty. The Liao Dynasty was a northern nomadic regime that existed side by side with the early Song Dynasty. It once divided the north and south from the Song Dynasty with Hebei as the border, and became the most powerful political, military, and economic regime at that time. Khitan ceramics, also called Liao porcelain, are daily-use ceramics and decorative ceramics handmade by craftsmen in the Liao Kingdom during the existence of the Liao Dynasty for local people to use. They have a typical Khitan national style and characteristics of grassland nomadic life. The establishment of the Liao Dynasty also brought changes to the nomadic lifestyle of the Khitan people, and produced the first systematic ceramic production system in ancient northern China. It produced ceramics with northern national styles and regional characteristics, breaking the China's porcelain firing areas are limited to the Central Plains and southern regions. The Khitan people also conveyed their unique world outlook, values and outlook on life through the decorations and patterns on their customs, clothing, jewelry, and production and living utensils. These concrete objects convey the unique spiritual beliefs and worldview of the Khitan people. Most of the ceramic products, as functional daily necessities, are used more frequently and replaced more frequently in daily life, and the characteristics of Khitan culture and art they express are more abundant. The visual artistic characteristics of these Khitan ceramics can be easily integrated with daily necessities in modern life through creative design, becoming part of the local cultural soft power, attracting more cultural tourists and thus boosting local cultural and economic development. Therefore , this study will focus on the relationship between the unique visual art characteristics of Khitan ceramics and the unique national culture , beliefs , and living customs of the Khitan people , in order to explore elements of Khitan visual art that are more suitable for modern aesthetics. This research aims to analyze the cultural and artistic characteristics of Khitan ceramics from the Liao Dynasty in the cultural and visual arts dimensions, including connotation, beliefs, aesthetic and lifestyle.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Characteristics of the natural living environment reflected in Khitan ceramics

After the establishment of the Liao Dynasty, due to the expansion of the territory, the Khitan people began to migrate southward, but generally they still lived in the northern areas, mainly Northeast China and Inner Mongolia, staying between 40° and 55° north latitude. Most of the Khitan people live in the mid-temperate zone, and some live in the cold-temperate zone. Summers are short, mild, and rainy; winters are long, cold, and dry; and the average annual temperature is low. During their nomadic lifestyle, the Khitan people developed a customary system of four seasons based on the fluctuating laws of animal and plant growth in the grassland. The Khitan people primarily use Nabo for spring hunting, which involves hooking fish to catch wild geese; in the autumn, they hunt tigers and deer; in the summer, they use Nabo to escape the heat; and in the winter, they use Nabo to withstand the cold. This is the unique Nabo culture of the Khitan people in four seasons (Ma, 2015). In the process of migrating according to the changes in the natural environment in the four seasons, the Khitan people also abstracted, simplified, and decorated the animals and plants of different seasons and environments on ceramic products.

The collection and analysis of Khitan ceramics revealed the typical, unique plant patterns of peonies, crabapples, and chrysanthemums. These flower patterns are typical of plants that thrive in the unique climatic conditions of the Chifeng area, reflecting the Khitan culture and nomadic life. When in full bloom, they stand out with bright colors, a large number of petals, and vigorous vitality. They typically grow over a large area and stand out. Every spring around April-May, many wild peonies bloom on the mountains in the Chifeng area. While grazing, the

Khitan people will see peonies blooming throughout the mountains and plains. Therefore, peonies have become an important decorative pattern in Khitan ceramics. One flower and two leaves make up the majority of peony patterns in Khitan ceramics. The image is relatively simple, and the style is very realistic. Among them, the three-color printed peony pattern stands out for its brightness. It adopts Khitan ceramics' unique color combination of white, yellow, and green and has a strong ethnic flavor. Features (Yang, 2018). *Malus miromalus* is a fruit tree native to northern China. Its flowers are pink and white; the petals are nearly round or oblong and are about 1.5 cm long. The annual flowering period is from April to May, which coincides with the spring hunting time of the Khitan people. The Khitan people used the shape of the *malus miromalus* flower as a prototype to create plates with irregular outlines in the shape of a crabapple that are unique to Khitan ceramics. Chrysanthemum is also a flower that blooms widely in the mountains in autumn. For decoration, many Khitan plates use chrysanthemum as the central pattern and combine it with other curly grass patterns.



Figure 1 Wild peonies in Chifeng area

The animal patterns in Khitan ceramics are mostly animals that the Khitan people often hunted in their nomadic life, such as wild geese, mandarin ducks, fish, deer, etc. Every spring, the emperor of the Liao Dynasty would lead his ministers to areas with rivers and lakes to catch swans, geese and other birds with trained hawks. Deer have characteristics such as cold resistance and gregariousness, and the Khitan people live in an ecological environment of rivers, lakes, grasslands, and forests. This particular environment provides favorable conditions for deer survival. Cheng (2018) believes that in this ecological environment, deer have become an important target for Khitan people to hunt in autumn. To obtain more food resources, the Khitan people will also sacrifice to the "Deer God" and regard white deer as sacred. As an auspicious omen, artistic images with national and regional characteristics are produced (Qiu, 2017). In the first month of the lunar calendar, the territory of the Liao Dynasty was covered with ice and snow, making it impossible to graze and the animals that could be hunted were limited. Therefore, the Khitan people would dig holes in the frozen rivers and lakes to fish and lower nets to catch fish. A banquet is held to celebrate the harvest of fishing and hunting, and this custom is still retained by ethnic minorities in Northeast China (Huang, 2018).

Table 1 Natural environmental elements in Khitan ceramics

Classification	Element	Khitan ceramic products
	Peony	
Plant	Malus Miromalus	
	Chrysanthemum	
	Mandarin duck	
Animal	Wild geese	
	Deer	
	Fish	

National culture and beliefs expressed in Khitan ceramics

The Khitan people adhere to animistic shamanism, attributing changes in natural events to the influence of corresponding deities. To ensure the seamlessness of their nomadic lifestyle, the Khitan people would engage in prayers to their ancestors and deities, resulting in the development of distinctive sacrificial customs. These customs involved making offerings to the mountains, shooting willows, and venerating the sun. The mountain sacrificial ceremony takes place biannually, in the spring and autumn, or prior to embarking on an expedition. According to ancient legends, the Khitan emperor instructs his ministers to return to Mount Konoha, the sacred site where the Khitan forefathers are believed to have emerged. They will offer a ceremonial sacrifice of a blue ox and a white horse to invoke blessings and good luck from the ancestors. To secure sufficient rainfall for the grasslands and ensure the sustenance of

their livestock, emperors and nobles will also partake in a willow shooting ceremony. This ceremony involves shooting willow branches with bows and arrows as a means of beseeching the gods for rain. The Khitan people practice a distinctive rain-prayer ritual. The Khitan people revered the sun and conducted rituals to pay homage to it in the eastern direction, particularly when the emperor assumed power and on significant occasions of national importance. In Khitan culture, the practice of venerating ancestors and nature deities serves as a comprehensive manifestation of the people's national beliefs and worldview. The Khitan people's animistic beliefs have consistently revolved around their desire to maintain the stability of their nomadic lifestyle. They believe that performing rituals like sacrificing mountains, shooting willows, and worshipping the sun will ensure the smooth progress of livestock activities, maintain adequate rainfall on the grassland, and prevent dryness and water scarcity. The Khitan people's desire for an improved existence and reverence for the natural world are evident in their religious beliefs and sacrificial practices, as well as the ornamentation of their pottery.

Table 2 National culture and belief elements in Khitan ceramics

Faith elements pattern	Khitan Ceramics	Faith elements pattern	Khitan Ceramics
Sun		Phoenix	
Fire Beads			
Capricorn		Monkey	

The nomadic production and lifestyle are entirely dependent on the climate and surroundings, and they are highly precarious. Consequently, the Khitan people enhanced their production and livelihood by engaging in commerce with other nations in Central and Western Asia, as well as with the Han people of the Song Dynasty, using the Prairie Silk Road and border villages. As trade has expanded, cultural exchanges have also become more profound. The Khitan people have developed a high level of tolerance towards various cultures due to their nomadic lifestyle. Through a mindset of prioritising self-interest, along the course of diverse cultural interactions, they assimilated and incorporated elements of Central and Western Asian as well

as Chinese cultures that shared similarities with their own national culture, resulting in the formation of novel cultural practices.

In Central and Western Asia, the inhabitants engaged in the worship of the sun and fire, creating intricate designs like the sun and beads representing fire. As a result, the Khitan people decorated ceramics with these two intricate designs, and they also revered the sun and fire. Capricorn originates from Indian folklore and tales. The ubiquity of Indian Buddhism led to the incorporation of Capricorn's representation into numerous Khitan artworks. During that period, individuals had the belief that it possessed a safeguarding influence (Xu, 2006). As the Capricorn statue assimilated into Chinese society, it progressively transformed into a symbol. In ancient Han nation folklore, there were tales that depicted the transformation of a carp into a dragon, ultimately ascending to the status of a deity, achieved by leaping over the dragon gate. Thus, Chinese folklore merges the Capricorn fish, known for its heavenly abilities in Indian mythology and Buddhism, with Dragon King. The Dragon King is known for leaping over the dragon gate and bestowing plentiful rain upon a location. This fusion produces an entity with a dragon's head and a fish's body. Through commercial and religious interactions with the Khitan people, the image of Capricorn became widely known. The Khitan people have a strong affinity for this activity due to its association with their animistic beliefs and traditional spring fishing and hunting practices. In Chinese culture, the Phoenix is revered as the deity responsible for avian beings, symbolising its role in bringing about global harmony through its ability to manipulate fire. In Khitan ceramic, the phoenix-head vase is a combination of the mythological beast with favourable meaning in Han culture and the metal bird-head vase from Central and Western Asia. The monkey was formerly a primate species inhabiting the region located south of the grassland where Khitan people resided. In Han culture, it is believed that keeping a monkey in a stable can act as a preventive measure against horses contracting the plague (Zhang, 2014). Horse-dependent nomads typically prioritize the welfare of their equine companions. The Khitan people embraced this instruction and adorned little monkey sculptures with ceramic vessels suspended from the horses' saddles that they used for transportation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researcher adopted qualitative research methods, including observation, interview, and descriptive analysis, to study the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of the Khitan ceramics. In order to summarise the cultural background, historical value, and artistic characteristics of Khitan ceramics, enrich local Khitan cultural resources, provide certain suggestions for Khitan ceramic cultural and creative design, and promote the development of the local Khitan cultural and creative industry. The researcher summarises the steps in the research process as follows:

Step 1 Literature review:

The researchers collected and analyzed academic research related to Khitan ceramic art and its cultural context, through a systematic review of existing literature. This step helped clarify the theoretical basis and background knowledge of the study.

Step 2 Data collection:

The qualitative research method was adopted to collect data through various channels, including field survey, observation, expert interviews, historical document analysis, and ceramic works in museums and private collections.

Step 3 Data sorting and classification:

To sort and classify the collected data for the better description and analysis, including detailed records and classification of the shape, color, pattern, material, production process and other aspects of the ceramic works.

Step 4 Data analysis:

The descriptive analysis method is used to describe and explain the collated data in detail. Through descriptive analysis, the researcher deeply explores the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of Khitan ceramic and reveals its cultural connotation and design value.

Step 5 A summary of the research findings:

Based on the descriptive analysis, the researchers summarized and concluded the cultural and aesthetic characteristics of Khitan ceramic art, put forward research conclusions, and discussed its significance for understanding Khitan culture and art history.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Characteristics of visual art demonstrated by Khitan ceramics

In this study, the visual art characteristics of Khitan ceramics include the shape of the vessels, the lines used in modelling, the colours employed, and the arrangement of patterns. The following sections will be examined in detail:

1) Shape

Ceramics with distinctive Khitan attributes can be categorised into three forms: pots, plates, and bottles, based on the shape of the vessel. The collection of distinctive pots includes tricolour mandarin duck pots with bionic curves, tricolour Capricorn fish pots, melon-edge pots, and cockscomb pots that prioritise functionality and are conveniently mountable on horseback. One distinguishing style among them is the Khitan cockscomb pot, which can be classified into two types: perforated and beam-lifting. Cockscomb teapots with holes are categorised into single-hole and double-hole variations. The cockscomb kettle raising beam is categorised into two types: ring-shaped and raised tail-shaped. The most distinctive varieties of plates are the irregularly shaped square plates and crabapple plates. The two most notable sorts of bottles are the crested bottle and the portable belt bottle.

Table 3 The unique shape of Khitan ceramics

Categories	Types	Pictures	Characteristics
Pot	Tricolor mandarin duck pot		The body of the pot is in the shape of a mandarin duck, with a mandarin duck mouth as spout and a five-petal flower on the back as the spout. It is molded and glued together. The mandarin duck feathers have clear lines.
	Tricolor Capricorn Fish Pot		The Capricorn pot is in the shape of a Capricorn with the head of a dragon and the body of a fish, with an eight-petal lotus base underneath.
	Melon-shaped pot		The ampulla is melon-shaped with feather-like patterns engraved on it
	Single hole cockscomb pot		Most of them have a single glaze color, the cockscomb ears are pierced with a single hole, and the mouth is straight.

Categories	Types	Pictures	Characteristics
Plate	Double hole cockscomb pot		It has a double-hole bridge nose, a monkey squatting on each side, leaf-shaped appliqués on the shoulders, curly grass patterns on the abdomen, and a tower-shaped lid.
	Ring-shaped lifting beam cockscomb pot		The handle is decorated with finger-pinch patterns, and the base of neck is decorated with ring-shaped protrusions.
	Cockscomb pot with raised tail of the lifting beams		The protruding vertical lines of the imitation leather strips are laminated with plastic, and a green glaze milk nail pattern is added.
	Square plate		The shape is square, plate with petal-shaped edges, flat bottom, and three colors of yellow, green and white.
	Malus miromalus plate		It has a wide flat rim, a shallow belly, and a flat bottom. The rim is printed with curly grass patterns, and the center of the inner bottom is decorated with three flower patterns and is lined with water ripples.
	Phoenix head Vase		It has a petal-shaped disc-shaped mouth, a phoenix head, a slender neck, and delicately carved mouth, eyes, eyebrows, and ears.
Vase	Thread bottle		The vase has a plate-shaped mouth, a tubular neck, and two bridge-shaped holes symmetrically attached to both sides.

2) Modeling lines

The majority of decorative designs found on Khitan ceramics are created by skills such as carving, stamping, and lamination. These skills are used to establish the fundamental structure of the pattern, resulting in a distinct three-dimensional look. Khitan ceramic patterns predominantly use organic motifs such as flowers, grass, fish, mandarin ducks, and other flora and fauna designs, resulting in uneven curves in their depiction.

3) Color

The coloration of Khitan ceramics mostly originates from the glaze, which encompasses seven distinct colors: white, green, yellow, tea foam, sauce, black, and cyan. Furthermore, these glaze colors have developed specific patterns of coordination in addition to the single-color ceramics. Simultaneously, there are two distinct glaze color combinations available: white and black, and white and green. Alternatively, there are three different glaze colors, with the set combination of yellow, white, and green. The three-color ware is a highly representative example of Khitan-style ceramic.



Figure 2 Common color combinations of Khitan ceramics

4) Pattern layout method

The decorative patterns on Khitan ceramics often align with the shape and structure of object. Ceramics must conform to precise shape specifications and exhibit uniform pattern designs.

① Centrosymmetric

Centrosymmetric refers to an object or system that possesses a centre of symmetry, meaning that it can be divided into two equal halves that are mirror images of whether found individually or in combination with other elements, the majority of Khitan ceramics adhere to a centrally symmetrical composition principle.

Table 4 Centrosymmetric layout of decorative patterns on Khitan ceramics

The Malus miromalus plate pattern center symmetrical layout	The Square plate pattern center symmetrical layout	Circular disk center symmetrical layout

② Axial symmetry

The composition pattern with three branches of flowers is usually composed in a symmetrical way on the central axis.

Table 5 Axial symmetry

Floral axial symmetry pattern layout	Pattern layout divided into three equal parts	Pattern layout divided into six equal parts

④ Continuous pattern

Usually, the decorative patterns of round objects such as ceramic bottles or pots are decorated continuously around their outer walls with a pattern or a combination of patterns.



Figure 3 Peony continuous pattern layout

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Khitan ceramics are the nomadic people's material cultural heritage in northern China. The appearance of Khitan ceramics conveys the national cultural connotation, beliefs, and customs, which differ significantly from the ceramics found in traditional Han national culture areas. These are valuable cultural and artistic resources of local culture, which can become a major boost to the cultural soft power of local cultural tourism, allowing tourists to be attracted by the visual art characteristics of Khitan ceramics and then learn about the unique national culture and religion of the Khitan nation, including connotation, beliefs, customs, and aesthetics, for the purpose of cultural depth and widespread dissemination. However, most of these valuable cultural and artistic resources are currently only in the academic research stage, and ordinary people in other provinces and cities, as well as the local public, do not have a complete understanding of them. Therefore, the re-innovation and application of Khitan ceramic visual art so that it can be revitalised in modern life, thereby further restoring the vitality of Khitan culture and boosting local cultural and economic development, requires the cooperation and joint efforts of local governments, cultural and creative institutions, scholars, and designers.

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