

# *Translation of Ceramic Inscriptions under the Background of Chinese Culture “Going Global”*

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**Keywords:** Ceramic Inscription; Translation; Spread of Chinese Culture

**Abstract:** Against the background of Chinese culture “Going Global”, the English translation of ceramics has aroused wide attention and hot discussion, mainly involving ceramic classics, decoration, names of utensils, kiln names, ceramic inscription, folk words and so on. Ceramic inscription is an important part of ceramic decoration, which is influenced by the ceramic style, aesthetic standards and political culture in its production era. However, ceramic inscription contains profound Chinese cultural connotation, and it is difficult to be translated into English perfectly, which requires translators to have solid ceramic background knowledge and profound bilingual ability. To do a good job in the dissemination of ceramic culture and enhance the confidence of national culture, the primary task of a ceramic translator is to do a good job in translation to spread Chinese culture, to publicize China’s excellent ceramic culture through high-quality translation and cross-cultural exchanges, and to promote the diversified development of the traditional Chinese ceramic culture in the global scope.

## 1. Introduction

The inscription on the ceramic refers to the engraving, delimit, printing or writing at the bottom of the object or other parts of the text, used to indicate the age, name, origin, hall name, auspicious language and other contents. Some may be engraved in the bottom of the object or on the object. The content, font, form, brushwork and other aspects of the inscription have more obvious characteristics of The Times, so the inscription plays an important role in the identification of the ceramic age, the kiln and the identification of authenticity, is an important link in the identification. The categories can be roughly divided into historical year style, hall name style, auspicious speech style, human name style, pattern style and other special styles.

Before the Ming Dynasty, Jingdezhen porcelain was basically without inscription. It was not until the Yongle period of the Ming Dynasty, that the porcelain of the chronological style began to appear on the porcelain of the official kiln. Before Ming Yongle, although there were signatures on porcelain, it was not common and did not form a system. For example, some of the kilns built in the Song Dynasty have inscriptions such as “Jin Zhan” and “Gongyu” (for the imperial palace) at the bottom, which are inscriptions used as tribute. The bottom of the Song Dynasty Ru kiln ware in the Taipei Palace Museum is also engraved with the words “Fenghua” and “Cai”, among which

“Fenghua” is the name of the palace and the bedroom of Liu, the favorite concubine of Zhao Gou, Emperor Gaozong of the Song Dynasty. The Ding kiln porcelain from the Five Dynasties to the early Song Dynasty was carved with “Guan (official)” and “Xin Guan (new official)”, which are considered to be specially paid tribute to the court. In addition to the white glaze porcelain on the “Shu fu” (called the *shufu* white porcelain), other signatures were rarely found.

## 2. The Categories of Ceramic Inscriptions

### 2.1 Chronological Style

Inscriptions are a mark used to indicate the time when the porcelain was made. It can be divided into two types: one is to use the year number of the emperor at that time as a sign, called the year number, such as “Qing Dynasty Kangxi”, “Qing Dynasty Qianlong” and so on. The other is to use the combination of heaven and earth branch as a sign, called stem and branch annual record, such as “In the Bingwu year of the Qianlong reign”. Most of this type appear in official porcelain, but some also have examples of folk kilns. The font of the folk kiln is usually relatively sloppy, far less than the neat standard of the official kiln. The use of Stem and Branch Chronology on porcelain was mainly concentrated during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

### 2.2 Hall Name Style

Hall names refer to the names used for custom firing porcelain, engraved or written on the porcelain. Its content includes the hall name, fast name, veranda name, mansion name, room name, temple name, building name, pavilion name and so on. Hall names have appeared in the Jiajing period of the Ming Dynasty (Examples as seen in table 1). And other hall names, which became popular in the late Ming Dynasty. After entering the Qing Dynasty, there were applications in various dynasties, especially in the reign of Kangxi, (Examples as seen in Table 1).

Table 1: Inscriptions’ Definition of the Hall Name Style

Chinese name	English name	Dynasty
Zishu Hall	Nourish Trees Hall	Ming Dynasty
Dongshu Hall	The Eastern Bookstore	Ming Dynasty
Zhonghe Hall	Neutralization Hall	Qing Dynasty
Zhuo Cun Zhail	Humble Existence Hall	Qing Dynasty
Fuxiang Xuan	Fragrance Veranda	Qing Dynasty

### 2.3 Person’s Name Style

Table 2: Inscriptions’ Definition of the Person’s Name Style

Chinese name	English name	Dynasty
Shi Yuanyi made	Made by a person who named Shi Yuanyi	Three Kingdoms period
Zheng Xiaokou is the first in the world	The ceramics made by the Zheng family are the best in the world	Tang Dynasty
Zhang made	Made by a famliy surnamed Zhang	Song Dynasty
Chen Shougui made	Made by a person who named Chen Shougui	Ming and Qing dynasties
Mi Shiyin made in the first year of Tianqi	Made by a person who named Mi Shiyin in the first year of Tianqi	Ming and Qing dynasties
Chunyu master treasure	Made and cherished by a person who named Chunyu	Ming and Qing dynasties

The name or alias on ceramics refers to the words carved, printed and written by the craftsman or someone private. In the Yue kiln of the Three Kingdoms period and the Changsha kiln of the Tang Dynasty, there were ceramics signed with people's names, and the same was true in the Song Dynasty. This phenomenon was more common in the Ming and Qing dynasties, (Examples as seen in Table 2).

## 2.4 Auspicious Words Style

The content of Auspicious Words Style refers to the words with auspicious meanings, which is engraved, printed or written on ceramics, expressing people's wishes or longing for a happy life. And it was common in the late Ming Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty. At that time, there were many popular inscriptions of the auspicious words style, and there was also a single carved a word, such as "Fu", "Shou" and so on (Examples as seen in Table 3).

Table 3: Inscriptions' Definition of the Auspicious Words Style

Chinese name	English name	Dynasty
Wan Shi Ru Yi	All the Best	late Ming Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty
Fu Gui Ying Men	Spring Blossoms Everywhere	
Xing Fu Chang Shou	Happy Longevity	
Fu Gui Jia Qi	Fine vessel for the rich and honourable	
Fu	Blessing	
Shou	Longevity	

## 3. English Translation of Ceramic Inscriptions

### 3.1 The Meaning of Chinese Ceramic Culture "Going Global"

In the history of porcelain development in China, various kilns in the Song Dynasty competed to display various beautiful works, but in the Yuan Dynasty, this phenomenon gradually changed into the dominant position of Jingdezhen porcelain. As we all know, Jingdezhen porcelain occupies the majority of the national market share, so the real representative of the Ming Dynasty porcelain characteristics is Jingdezhen porcelain. Jingdezhen porcelain is mainly blue and white, and there are also underglaze color, glaze color, clashing color, monochrome glaze and other colors. Jingdezhen ceramics are developing rapidly day by day. As a carrier of Chinese culture, Jingdezhen ceramics are constantly moving towards the world.

In the 1920s, European collectors highly valued Song porcelain and regarded it as a precious work of art. This trend has also promoted the study of Chinese ceramics by Western ceramics and Sinologists, which has given rise to a group of Western ceramicists centered across Robert Lockhart Hobson, Stephen Wootton Bushell and other scholars. Hobson compiled *A Catalogue of Chinese Pottery and Porcelain in The Collection of Sir Percival David* in 1934[1]. This book was the first Western collector of Chinese court art to showcase his collection of Chinese porcelain from the Song to Qing dynasties to the world.

At present, cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries are becoming increasingly frequent, and the "going global" of Chinese culture has become a bounden task for people from all walks of life. In the field of Chinese ceramic industry, which is full of Chinese characteristics and profound cultural deposits, we need to carefully tell the "Story of Chinese Ceramics" to spread Chinese ceramic culture. As a part of ceramics, the importance of the inscription can not be ignored; therefore, accurate, correct and readable translation of the content is the first step to the international stage. So to promote the dissemination of ceramic culture and enhance the confidence of national culture, the primary task is to do a good job in translation. Through high-quality

translation and cross-cultural communication, we can publicize China's excellent ceramic culture and promote the diversified development of traditional Chinese culture, including ceramic culture, on an international scale[2].

### 3.2 Translation Methods for Ceramic Inscription

#### 3.2.1 The Combination of Literal Translation and Free Translation

Ceramic inscription generally has a relatively small number of words and limited information, however, the content of Chinese ceramic inscriptions contains a lot of internal information that needs to be translated, so the frequency of literal translation is not very high, and more free translation methods are needed. Common literal translations exist in the Chronological Style, Personal Name Style, and Hall Name Style. Some of them need to be translated freely, such as words with specific cultural connotations. (Examples as seen in Table 4)

Table 4: Translation of Inscriptions with Specific Cultural Connotations

<b>Name Style</b>	<b>Chinese Name</b>	<b>English Name</b>
Chronological style	Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty	Kangxi Region of Qing Dynasty
	The Republic of China	The Republic of China(1912-1949)
Person's name style	Zhang Zao	Made by a famliy surnamed Zhang
Hall name style	Shen De Tang Zhi	Shen De Tang Zhi" (The mark includes the name of the palace of the Emperor Daoguang in the Yuanmingyuan)

#### 3.2.2 The Combination of Annotation and Creative Translation

Annotations usually appear more frequently in the Auspicious Words Style or the Hall Name Style, because their unique Chinese cultural connotations are relatively rich. The cultural loaded words translated into English are explained through annotations at the end of the text. For Example, Auspicious Words Style: "Wan Shou Wu Jiang" translated as Wan Shou Wu Jiang (Ten thousand years without ends)[3]; "Blessing for generations to come" translated as Good Fortune of Thousand Years[4]. "Yang Xin Dian, Ming Chuang Yong" translated as "horizontally, Yang hsin tien (a Palace pavilion) and verticalll, ming ch'uang yung (for use in the Bright Window [room])". Then give a annotation: "The south-western apartment of the Yang hsin tien was called the Bright Window (ming ch'uang)[5]. The situation of creative translation exists in the translation of some unclear textual content, such as single characters or only patterns. This situation is relatively rare, and translators need to have a better understanding of its cultural background and the era and characteristics of ceramics.

## 4. The Problems of Ceramic Inscription in English Translation

### 4.1 Little Research on Ceramic Translation

Making ceramics is a very complicated process, and each step requires a lot of details. To understand ceramics deeply, the translators need extensive experience and related information. Faced with these difficulties, many people who have a slight interest in ceramics may choose to give up. Therefore, Jingdezhen and other places with profound ceramic culture have paid more attention to the study of ceramic translation. At the same time, the interdisciplinary exchanges are also more frequent. However, relatively speaking, foreign language colleges lack good ways and

environment to contact and understand ceramics. Therefore, ceramic translation is relatively less studied. This is also one of the reasons why few scholars are engaged in ceramic translation. Through the analysis of the time distribution of the literature, we can see the reality and future development trend in the field of ceramic translation research[6]. According to statistics, a total of 241 articles have been published in *China Ceramics*, *China Science and Technology Translation*, *The Palace Museum Journal*, *Ceramic Research*, *China Ceramic Industry*, *Ceramic Journal* and other journals. It can be seen that domestic scholars have less research on ceramic translation research.

## **4.2 Lack of Background Knowledge in Ceramic Culture**

At present, the field of ceramic translation is still quite unique. In some areas without a ceramic cultural background, people's understanding of the ceramics is very limited, and it is difficult to accurately understand the translation method of each part of the ceramics. For example, the translation of various colors and glaze colors, as well as the stories and meanings behind the ceramics, as well as the names of the ceramics in different ages. As a translator, we should not only understand the source language culture, but also have a profound and skilled knowledge of the target language culture. English culture also has a certain ceramic background culture. Although it is not as profound and rich as Chinese ceramic culture, the translator still needs to understand the foreign ceramic culture. Especially after many Chinese ceramics are shipped abroad, the translation of ceramics should be more accurate and easy to understand.

## **4.3 Lack of Information on Ceramic Inscription Corpus**

In the era of increasingly advanced machine translation technology, translators can translate with the help of machines. However, in some special areas, the translation of terms requires extreme caution. Ceramic translation is one of the challenging areas, which is filled with a large number of professional terms, which have not yet formed a complete corpus, which brings great trouble to the translators. The phenomenon of multiple translation of terms also increases the difficulty of translation and the difficulty of foreign readers. For example, the term "tricolo" can be translated in different ways as "Sancai", "Tricolor", "tri-color", "Three color", "ri-colored glazed" and others. The inconsistency of term translation also increases the difficulty of translation and the difficulty of foreign readers[7].

# **5. Strategies to Solve the Problems**

## **5.1 Provide Professional Training**

At the national level, the state can provide funds to the relevant departments to promote the development of the ceramic field. From the social level, the society can do more cultural activities about ceramics to stimulate the public's interest and create a greater social environment with more ceramic atmosphere. From the educational level, courses on ceramics can be offered to lead more students to do study and research. From the personal level, everyone who is interested in ceramics can acquire the knowledge of ceramics independently, make use of the advantages of the advanced technology, and learn the corresponding content through the Internet.

## **5.2 Establish a Complete Ceramic Corpus**

At present, there is an urgent shortage of corpus resources in ceramics, which requires relevant

scholars to actively organize, conduct in-depth research, and invest time and energy in the establishment of the corpus. Authorities concerned also need to provide financial support to provide the environment.

## 6. Conclusion

At home or abroad, ceramic translation has not become a popular trend, but the cultural characteristics of ceramics are unique to China, and every individual, especially the translator, should regard the dissemination of Chinese culture as their own glorious mission. As one of the cultural characteristics of ceramic translation, the English translation of ceramic inscriptions is also very important. This paper introduces the categories of ceramic inscriptions, introduces the significance of ceramic communication and the difficulties of the English translation of ceramic inscriptions. As a unique part of Chinese culture, a good translation of ceramic culture is in line with the trend of the times. Ceramic culture is an extremely brilliant pearl in traditional Chinese culture, and doing a good job in translating and introducing ceramic culture to the world is also a crucial step in telling the story of China well nowadays.

## Acknowledgement

This paper is supported by JCU Graduate Innovation Fund Project (JYC202454) and JCU Ideological and Political Education Demonstration Course (SZXJZD-20231113-06), by Jiangxi Provincial Social Science Fund Projects (24WT36), and by Annual Project of Jiangxi Provincial Higher Education Society (ZX4-C-021).

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