

On the Characteristics of Multicultural Integration in Ceramic Decoration of Northern Wei Dynasty - Take the Tile of Northern Wei as an Example

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Abstract:

The Northern Wei period was a significant historical era of multicultural integration. In this social context, the ceramic design of the Northern Wei Dynasty exhibited distinct characteristics of cultural fusion, which are prominently reflected in its decorative designs. Among the existing archaeological materials from the Northern Wei period, roof tiles are abundant and diverse in decoration. Particularly, the decorative patterns vividly reflect the cultural exchanges and integration among the northern grassland peoples, the Han people of Central China, and various ethnic groups from the Western Regions. These patterns serve as tangible manifestations of regional, ethnic, and historical factors. A deep analysis of the multicultural elements embedded in the decorative motifs of Northern Wei roof tiles not only enhances our understanding of the ceramic decorative art of the Northern Wei but also deepens our appreciation of the artistic value of Northern Wei roof tiles. This reveals their unique aesthetic qualities and cultural symbols, providing new reference material for the development of modern ceramic design and the creative industry.

Keywords:

Northern Wei, Cultural Integration, Tile, Ceramic Decoration

1. The History of Northern Wei and the Background of Multicultural Integration

The Northern Wei (386-534 AD) was a regime established by the Tuoba Xianbei, a northern grassland people. The first ruler was Emperor Daowu Tuoba Gui, who ruled for 12 emperors over a period of 148 years. The Tuoba Xianbei originated from the Gaxi Cave area in the Greater Khingan Range and later migrated southward to the "Great Marsh," eventually settling in the former territories of the Xiongnu, reaching near Shengle [1]. In 386, Tuoba Gui formally established the Northern Wei regime, proclaiming himself King of Wei and setting his capital at Shengle.

In 398, Tuoba Gui moved the capital to Pingcheng, which is now in the northern part of Datong City, Shanxi Province. To strengthen the state, Tuoba Gui implemented proactive policies on population, agriculture, and household registration, and learned from the advanced political systems of the Han people. These measures facilitated the interaction and integration between the Xianbei and Han peoples, promoting the settlement and agriculturalization of the Xianbei people. They also contributed to the gradual stabilization of the political and economic systems of Northern Wei, leading to the rise of handicrafts, particularly the thriving ceramic industry.

In 493, to meet the needs of national development, Emperor Xiaowen Tuoba Hong moved the capital to Luoyang and forcefully implemented a series of Sinicization reforms. The deep penetration into the heartland of Central China and the enforcement of various Sinicization policies strengthened the ties between Northern Wei and the Han people in Central China, freeing it from the constraints of the conservative Xianbei aristocracy. This not only led to an unprecedentedly prosperous state of political and economic development in Northern Wei but also brought cultural integration to its peak, providing fertile ground for the ceramic industry and infusing it with fresh vitality. During this period, the ceramic industry reached an unprecedentedly prosperous state.

The Northern Wei Dynasty was located at the strategic point connecting the northern grasslands, Central Plains, and the Western Regions, serving as a pivotal link between these three areas. After Tuoba Tao unified the north, the Northern Wei maintained close ties with various countries in the Western Regions through the Silk Road. Foreign cultures were transmitted to the Northern Wei via this route, profoundly influencing all aspects of social life in the Northern Wei.

Throughout the historical development of Northern Wei, the cultural integration between nomadic culture from the northern grasslands, Central Plain culture, and Western Regions culture was the main theme of this era. This multicultural fusion not only manifested in political and economic fields but also, in its depth and breadth, was reflected in ceramic design, which served as a crucial medium for living materials and productivity at the time.

2. Multicultural Factors in the Decoration of Tile in Northern Wei Dynasty

Decorative patterns are one of the most important and direct elements in ceramic decorative design. They not only beautify ceramic objects but also reflect the designer's philosophy and aesthetic taste. The decorative design of Northern Wei ceramics is characterized by the integration of diverse cultural elements, particularly evident in the decorative patterns on roof tiles. The decorative patterns on Northern Wei roof tiles are diverse, mainly including text patterns, human figures, animals and plants, and geometric shapes. These patterns carry rich cultural connotations from the northern grasslands, Central Plains, and Western Regions.

2.1. Inscribed eave tile

Chinese characters are the foundation of Central Plain culture and even Han culture. The reason why Chinese civilization has been passed down for five thousand years is largely due to the standardization and widespread use of Chinese characters. In the ceramic decorative arts of the Northern Wei Dynasty, Chinese characters were often

used as decorative elements, applied to tiles through mold printing techniques. The content covered auspicious phrases, eulogies, and records of specific places or events. Sometimes they were also used as marks on objects, with the main fonts being clerical script, regular script, and seal script. This phenomenon fully demonstrates the Xianbei people's absorption and learning of Chinese character culture.

For example, the “Da Dai Wan Sui” tile from the collection of the Northern Dynasties Art Museum is divided into nine sections by a grid of “well” characters, with one character placed on each of the four sides—giving the auspicious phrase “Da Dai Wan Sui” The characters are in clerical script and are engraved in relief (i.e., Figure 1). Another example is the “Ping cheng” tile, which features the two-character inscription “Ping cheng” in raised clerical script at its center (i.e., Figure 2). Both tiles use Chinese characters, but their content relates to the Northern Wei Dynasty, a minority regime. “Da Dai” refers to the Dai Kingdom, the predecessor of the Northern Wei, while “Ping cheng” denotes the second capital of the Northern Wei, Pingcheng. The appearance of these two tiles not only reflects the Xianbei people's acceptance of Han culture but also highlights the unique charm of cultural integration between two different cultures. This makes these pottery pieces valuable not only for their practical use but also for their absorption of Central Plain culture, showcasing the characteristics of cultural integration and transformation during the Northern Wei period.



Figure 1. “Da Dai Wan Sui” tile.



Figure 2. “Ping cheng” tile.

2.2. Wrestling tile

The Northern Wei was a regime established by the Tuoba Xianbei, a northern grassland people. Naturally, it inherited the tradition of valuing bravery and martial prowess that has been passed down through generations of these nomadic peoples. Activities such as horseback riding, archery, and wrestling exemplify this tradition. The term “wrestling” originates from “wrestling with horns,” which is a form of two-person combat similar to modern wrestling or sumo. At today's “Naadam” festival in Inner Mongolia, Mongolian compatriots still refer to wrestling, archery, and horse racing as the “Three Manly Arts,” attracting many athletes to participate in competitions. Among these, the wrestling activity appears in the form of decorative patterns on the child's wrestling tiles unearthed from the ancient city of Tuchengzi in Linhe.(i.e., Figure 3).

The narrow edge of the tile is divided into inner and outer zones by a pearl pattern. The outer zone features a circle of creeping plants, while the inner zone has a grid pattern as its base. In the center, two chubby children are depicted wrestling. The child on the right is pressing down on the head of the child on the left, who is bending over to grab one of the other's legs. Both are in a stalemate, their poses lively and interesting [2]. The pearl pattern originates from the Sasanian Empire in Central Asia,

initially a classic decoration on metal objects, later appearing in the decorative patterns of Northern Wei ceramics. Its decorative characteristics consist of a series of similarly sized round beads, sometimes connected into lines or arranged in certain patterns, coexisting with other motifs. The creeping grass pattern, which originated from the honeysuckle pattern, is a symbol of the Western Region culture.

This tile depicts the corner wrestling activity, recreating the traditional grassland scene. It also incorporates the typical Western Regions pearl pattern and Buddhist creeping plant pattern, reflecting the integration of Northern grassland culture with Western Regions culture.



Figure 3. Wrestling tile.

2.3. Lotus pattern roof tile

Buddhism originated in the Western Regions and was introduced to Northern Wei through the Silk Road. To consolidate their rule, the rulers of Northern Wei established Buddhism as the state religion, thus profoundly influencing the ceramic decorative arts of Northern Wei. A large number of lotus-patterned roof tiles were produced during the Northern Wei period, with the lotus motifs originating from Buddhist art in the Western Regions. In Buddhism, the lotus symbolizes purity and is not only a symbol but also a typical element of the faith [3]. The characteristic of lotus-patterned roof tiles is that the center of the tile features a carved lotus pattern, often adorned with a lotus pod at the center. The lotus blooms in an open posture, with petals that can be single or double, and the number of petals is usually even. Early lotus petals were relatively large and round, but after the Northern Wei capital was moved to Luoyang, the petals gradually became narrower, and the patterns evolved from intricate and complex to simple and abstract. Some lotus-patterned roof tiles also feature interlocking pearl motifs, which are clearly and orderly arranged. Among these, the lotus pattern is a symbolic element of Western Region Buddhism, while the interlocking pearl motif is a typical decorative pattern of the Western Regions. The application of these two cultural elements highlights the integration of Western Region decorative patterns in Northern Wei ceramics and also reflects the profound influence of Buddhist culture on the themes of Northern Wei roof tile decorations (i.e., Figure 4).



Figure 4. Lotus pattern roof tile.

2.4. The lotus is transformed into a tile

The characteristic of the lotus-born roof tile is that the center of the tile features an image of Shakyamuni Buddha, Maitreya Buddha, or a child figure. The figures are at the center, while the lotus image, like Buddha's light, adorns behind the Buddha. [4] The outer edge of the tile is also decorated with bead patterns. "Born" refers to the deceased being reborn in the Western Paradise from the lotus in the Seven Treasures Pool or the Eight Merit Water. "Born" and "flower" are synonymous; "born" means "flowering," corresponding to the lotus behind the figures on the tile. It is worth noting that the Buddha's features on the Northern Wei lotus-born roof tiles were not shaped based on the Sinicized Buddhist images of China but rather retained a strong Indian flavor, primarily in the Gandhara style. The appearance of lotus-born roof tiles not only represents an important aspect of Western Regions culture in the decoration of Northern Wei roof tiles but also serves as a medium for spreading Buddhist teachings and culture(i.e., Figure 5).



Figure 5. The lotus is transformed into a tile.

3. Conclusions

The Northern Wei Dynasty was situated in an era of multicultural integration, which had a profound impact on the development of Northern Wei ceramics. Roof tiles were a significant category of Northern Wei ceramics, featuring rich decorative patterns primarily consisting of text, human figures, animals and plants, and geometric designs. These patterns encapsulate the essence of Northern grassland culture, Central Plains culture, and Western Regions culture, vividly reflecting the characteristics of multicultural integration. Textual roof tiles exemplify the fusion of Northern grassland culture with Central Plains culture, while comb-shaped roof tiles represent the integration of Northern grassland culture with Western Regions culture. Lotus-patterned roof tiles and lotus-transformed roof tiles symbolize Western Regions culture. These decorative elements from different cultures, conveyed through the medium of roof tiles, collectively showcase the inclusiveness and innovative spirit of ceramic decoration design during the Northern Wei period, highlighting the unique artistic charm of Northern Wei ceramic decoration.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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