

From Divinity to Secularity: A Study on the Evolution of Symbolic Meanings in Chinese Ceramic Animal Sculptures

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Abstract:

Connotations, creative techniques, and contemporary development of Chinese ceramic animal sculptures, by tracing their historical evolution in China, the paper analyzes the cultural values—such as folk customs, religious beliefs, and aesthetic concepts—embedded in their artistic language of form, decoration, and color. In conjunction with modern innovative practices, the study also examines the directions for inheritance and development of ceramic animal sculptures under the new-era context.

Keywords:

Ceramic Animal Sculpture, Artistic Features, Cultural Connotation, Creative Craftsmanship

1. Introduction

Sculpture is an art form that conveys emotion, thought, and ideas. Auguste Rodin once said, “Art is emotion.” [1] In expressing feelings, many sculptors turn to animal figures. Animal sculpture occupies an important place in sculptural work: it can serve as the main subject or appear as prop and backdrop. Through an animal’s form, posture, fur, and gaze, sculptors are able to communicate a wide range of emotions—love, fear, anger, serenity, and more.

Ceramic art, a vital thread in the fabric of human civilization, carries an extensive history and profound cultural resonance. Within this tradition, ceramic animal sculpture stands out for its distinctive expressive power, vividly dramatizing the intimate bond between humans and animals. Shifting aesthetics, lifestyles, and spiritual aspirations of each era are all mirrored in these clay creatures: from prehistoric pottery figurines to today’s boldly inventive ceramic fauna, the genre has continually evolved, preserving its artistic essence while absorbing the imprint of successive ages. Chinese ceramic animal sculpture, in particular, embodies a wealth of historical and spiritual meaning; across different periods its cultural context, social function, and symbolic language have followed a unique trajectory of transformation.

2. The Descent of Divinity: Primitive Beliefs and Symbols of Power

2.1. Totems and Shamans: Animal Spirits in Primitive Clay Sculpture

As early as the Neolithic period, Chinese ancestors began to model simple animal figures on their pottery. Vessels unearthed at the Banpo site, for example, carry designs of fish and deer that, though abstract and summary, reveal close observation of animals and a way of life lived in harmony with nature. Small clay statuettes of pigs, dogs, sheep and the like—naïve yet endearing—display the unaffected beauty of primordial art. These earliest ceramic creatures served practical ends: they were ritual utensils or votive objects that prayed for abundant harvests and prolific reproduction. When a sacrificial vessel was fashioned in the likeness of an animal, it acquired an aura of mystery and the force of a totem. The pig-shaped pottery “xizun” (ritual wine vessel) recovered at the Dawenkou site in Tai’an, Shandong, and at Sanlihe in Jiaoxian (see Figure 1) is just such a sacred object used exclusively by the clan for offerings, attesting to a religious cult devoted to the pig. [2]



Figure 1. Pig-shaped.

Image source: baike.baidu

In the Yellow River valley's Yangshao culture, the animal motifs painted on its polychrome pottery became a prime expression of primordial art. Fish, frog and bird designs are the most emblematic of all Yangshao painted wares. Across Neolithic China the evolution of animal sculpture may be sketched in three stages. In the early phase (pre-Yangshao) forms are coarse and almost always stand-ins for domestic animals; used in sympathetic magic, they were discarded after the rite. The middle phase (Yangshao) sees an explosion of subject matter—birds, geckos and other wild creatures appear, usually as appliqués on vessels. Function shifts from sorcery to totemic cult, reflecting a richer spiritual life. The late phase (Longshan) adds dogs, tigers and, for the first time, jade carvings; roles diverge—magic, totem and apotropaism coexist—mirroring social stratification and a maturing belief system. In prehistoric animal cults the animal-god itself was the object of worship: sacred, awe-inspiring, executed with technical care and housed in set places of veneration. By contrast, sculptures made for witchcraft were produced casually, often crudely, had no fixed cult site, and were commonly broken or thrown away once the spell was spent. [3]

2.2. Majesty and Immortality: Ceramic Replicas Influenced by Shang and Zhou Bronze Vessels

During the Shang and Zhou dynasties, the style of ceramic animal sculpture became distinctly regional. In the north, clay chickens and ducks were modeled with a lifelike vigor that expressed the plain, robust culture of the Central Plains. In the south, clay

dragons and tigers were outlined in fluid, supple curves, betraying a more lyrical, ethereal temperament.

As the core of Shang dynasty civilization, the pottery of the Yin Ruins culture was no longer the simple animal-worship artifacts of the Neolithic era, nor did it resemble the realistic or romantic styles of surrounding regions. Instead, it extended the bronze ritual order of the Shang court into clay. Mingling utility, ceremony and artistry, the vessels adopt a grave, abstract and mysteriously symbolic idiom that proclaims the majesty of Shang kingship and its divine mandate (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Pottery tripod with pig-head lid.

Image source: Yinxu Museum

2.3. Guardians of the Underworld: Qin and Han Terracotta Figurines

During the Qin and Han periods, ceramic animal sculptures reached their first peak of development. During this time, the country was strong, and the practice of lavish burials was prevalent, with a large number of ceramic animal figurines used as burial accompaniments. The Terracotta Army of the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor is an outstanding representative of this period, with lifelike ceramic horses displaying grandeur. In addition to the terracotta warriors, the Han Dynasty also popularized ceramic animal figurines depicting daily life. For example, terracotta chickens and ducks unearthed in Sichuan are lively and vivid, reflecting the atmosphere of Han family courtyards. The terracotta camel figurines unearthed in Gansu and other regions reflect the trade and cultural exchanges between the Central Plains and the Western Regions following the opening of the Silk Road. During the Han Dynasty, the belief of “serving the dead as in life” was very popular in funerary customs. These ceramic animal figurines were not only products of burial culture but also true representations of the social economy, culture, and life of the time. In terms of craftsmanship, the Han Dynasty invented low-temperature lead-glaze technology, giving rise to a batch of brightly colored glazed ceramic animals, such as the famous green-glazed ceramic dogs shown in Figure 3 or the yellow-glazed chicken coops, whose glossy glazes added brilliance to the underground world. Furthermore, animal images also conveyed the spiritual beliefs of the Han people: turtles and tortoises symbolized longevity; rhinos and elephants from distant lands were considered auspicious; fierce beasts on rooftop decorations were used to ward off evil. All of this reflects the profound immortal beliefs and notions of auspiciousness of that period.



Figure 3. *Green Glazed Ceramic Dog.*

Image source: baike.baidu

3. The Awakening of Humanity: The Fusion of Religion and the Joys of Life

3.1. The Buddha's Mount: Ceramic Animal Imagery Influenced by Buddhism

During the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, ceramic works were closely related to the political economy and aesthetic tastes of the time. This period represented the second major social transformation after the pre-Qin era. The social changes manifested in ideology and cultural psychology as the collapse of the dominant Han dynasty Confucian studies. [4] Under societal turmoil, the introduction of Indian Buddhism greatly influenced the styles of craftsmanship of the time. In Indian Buddhism, the lion symbolizes Buddha's authority, imbued with awe-inspiring divinity. However, when it was introduced to China along with Buddhism, its image began to be reinterpreted by local artisans. For instance, in the Qing dynasty celadon lion-shaped candlesticks from the Western Jin period, the lions' fierce and majestic temperament was softened, their forms becoming more stout and simple, resembling a gentle auspicious beast. (Figure 4)



Figure 4. *Celadon Lion-Shaped Candle Holder.*

Image source: Hubei Province Museum

The design of the candlestick on the back brought it from the sacred altar into daily life, allowing its divinity to merge with human daily needs. This fusion was even more profound in funerary spirit jars. Lions, along with Buddha figures, winged beings, musicians of Central Asian origin, and other images, were sculpted together on the body of the jar, collectively forming a divine world that guards the soul of the deceased. Here, the lion retained its religious role as a Buddhist guardian beast while also taking on the secular functions of traditional Chinese auspicious beasts, such as

warding off evil and praying for blessings. This coexistence of Buddhist and Daoist elements with Chinese folk beliefs no longer emphasized doctrinal differences but focused instead on the shared goal of praying for the well-being of the tomb owner.

3.2. Silk Road Camel Bells and Noble Companions: The Realism and Luxury of Sui and Tang Dynasty Ceramic Animals

Animal sculptures of the Tang Dynasty display an unprecedented vitality. During the Tang Dynasty, especially in the Early and High Tang periods, the country was powerful, confident, and open. This spirit is reflected in its animal sculptures, which show a robust, full-bodied, and dynamic aesthetic. The animal figures are muscular, with proud postures, exuding an unbeatable heroic spirit. At the same time, the aristocracy pursued luxury and pleasure; activities such as hunting, polo, and traveling with falcons and dogs became fashionable. Therefore, as funerary objects for nobles, there were not only tri-colored horses and camels but also hunting dogs, falcons of various forms, and even charming Persian pet dog figurines. These works no longer carry mystical connotations but serve as a genuine reflection of luxurious, joyful, and worldly life. Moreover, this era bears the profound imprint of unparalleled cultural exchange between China and foreign lands. The Tang Dynasty was the golden age of the Silk Road, with exotic cultures flooding in like a tide. This is vividly expressed in animal sculptures. The most typical example is the camel, which was no longer the auspicious and mythical creature of the Han Dynasty but appeared in large numbers as a realistic depiction of the ‘ship of the desert,’ carrying silk and foreign merchants’ musical ensembles, directly symbolizing the prosperity of international trade. At the same time, high-quality horse breeds from Central Asia, such as the Ferghana horse, were greatly admired by the Tang people, which transformed the style of ceramic horses in Tang tombs from the simplicity of earlier dynasties to figures with small heads, long necks, slender limbs, and spirited expressions, clearly reflecting the elegant characteristics of foreign horse breeds. In addition, images of rare birds and exotic animals such as lions and elephants entered China along with tribute goods and legends, and were depicted by craftsmen in a more realistic manner. Finally, innovations in ceramic techniques provided the material foundation for this. During the Tang Dynasty, especially with the maturation and popularization of the sancai (three-color) lead-glaze technique, the flowing and brilliant glazes greatly enhanced the expressiveness of animal fur, texture, and spirit. For example, in Figure 5, a sancai camel uses a blend of brown, green, and white glazes to simulate the camel’s shiny coat and robust physique.



Figure 5. Sancai Camel.

Image source: the palace museum

This craft not only served the nobility but also allowed vivid and exquisite animal images to be mass-produced, further promoting their secularization and popularization. Tang animal sculpture broke free from the heavy constraints of early religious and funerary contexts, being shaped jointly by the empire's strength, cultural integration, and technological advancement, ultimately becoming an art form that passionately celebrates real life, full of confidence and vitality.

3.3. Appreciated by All: The Poetic and Folk Aspects of Song and Yuan Dynasty Ceramic Animals

Animal sculptures of the Song Dynasty were imbued with the aesthetic spirit of the era, exhibiting a temperament markedly different from the bold and full-bodied style of the Tang Dynasty. Their style was deeply influenced by contemporary philosophical thought, the tastes of literati, and the peak development of ceramic craftsmanship, leading to a realm of restraint, elegance, and poetic expression. The Neo-Confucian pursuit of understanding through the investigation of things manifested in animal sculpture as an ultimate quest to capture the natural charm of life. Artisans were no longer satisfied with merely depicting the outward strength of animals; instead, they devoted themselves to capturing their most characteristic expressions and fleeting moments, full of the genuine vitality of life. At the same time, the flourishing urban culture and the refined tastes of the literati together shaped the subjects and meanings of animal sculpture. On one hand, porcelain toys from folk kilns such as Cizhou, like the endearing figurines of children holding dogs, were filled with the simple and lively atmosphere of everyday life. On the other hand, the literati's admiration for "pure appreciation" and "elegant play" gave rise to numerous scholar's studio wares that combined practicality with aesthetics. These were often crafted into small, exquisite animal shapes such as turtles and toads, with glazes in pure Yingqing (shadow blue), pale green, or the mysterious effects of rabbit fur or oil drop glazes. Their charm lay not in dazzling colors but in their subtle, warm texture and intriguing forms, perfectly blending the natural image of animals with the practical functions of the objects, reflecting an elegant sense of aesthetic taste. In addition, the Song Dynasty was a period of great prosperity for China's ceramics industry, with a wide variety of glazes, including not only green and white glazes, but also yellow glazes and sancai (three-color) glazes. The production areas and distribution regions also shifted from the south to the north, with kilns such as the Ding Kiln in Hebei, the Guantai Kiln, the Changzhi Kiln in Shanxi, and the Duandian Kiln in Lushan, Henan, while in the south only the Jingdezhen Kiln continued production. [5] This environment encouraged each kiln to continuously innovate in both techniques and forms, resulting in a flourishing diversity. Together, they formed the rich and profound artistic world of animal sculptures in the Song Dynasty.

During the Tang and Song Dynasties, there was a certain depth in the understanding of lines in sculpture. The ceramic animal sculptures created were not merely static animal forms within a space; through variations in the strength of lines and the flow and rhythm of their presentation, they conveyed a continuously evolving space where the real and the imaginary coexist, illustrating the philosophical idea of 'expressing thoughts through form.' As viewers observe the forms, they also contemplate the 'artistic conception' conveyed by the sculpture, allowing them to 'grasp the essence while forgetting the words,' achieving an experience where one 'appreciates the meaning while forgetting the form.' Yet, 'words have limits, but the meaning is boundless; this is inspiration.' [6]

During the Yuan Dynasty, the nomadic lifestyle of the rulers influenced the artistic style of ceramics, gradually shaping them into a form characterized by boldness, grandeur, and strength. [7] The style of animal sculptures in the Yuan Dynasty is particularly evident in ceramics. It was neither a continuation of the full, vigorous style of the Tang Dynasty nor the restrained and delicate taste of the Song Dynasty, but rather developed a unique aesthetic of grandeur, ruggedness, and untamed vitality against the backdrop of the vast territory of the Mongol Empire and the fusion of diverse cultures. As rulers of the Yuan Dynasty coming from the nomadic peoples of the steppes, their lifestyle and aesthetic preferences profoundly influenced artistic creation. They admired grand, direct, and vigorous modes of expression. This preference led Yuan Dynasty ceramic animal sculptures to move away from the refined delicacy of the Song Dynasty, instead pursuing a robust sense of overall form and mass. Animal figures were often large, vigorous in posture, and full of untamed wildness. For example, mythical creatures commonly seen on utensils, such as chi dragons and Capricorn fish, have bulging muscles, sharp claws and teeth, and dynamic poses, conveying a primal and unrestrained power—an embodiment of the hardy spirit of the steppe peoples.

In terms of craftsmanship, the skills of the Jingdezhen kiln workers during the Yuan Dynasty had become increasingly sophisticated, especially in the firing techniques for large-scale pieces, which far surpassed those of previous generations. This enabled them to create massive, intricately shaped animal sculptures, such as the fierce dragon heads on beast-ear censers and the majestic lion knobs on vessel lids. These components were no longer merely decorative attachments to the vessels but were sculptural works with independent aesthetic value. Their robust forms, substantial bodies, and vividly colored blue-and-white designs complemented each other, collectively forming the overall robust and vigorous style of Yuan Dynasty animal sculptures.

4. Secular Prosperity: Auspicious Symbols and Commercialization

4.1. “Every design has meaning, and every meaning brings good fortune”: The systematization of auspicious patterns

Ming dynasty craftsmen used the exquisite skills of official kilns’ blue-and-white porcelain to shape them into classic auspicious patterns. Compared to previous dynasties, they inherited the techniques of Yuan dynasty blue-and-white porcelain, but abandoned the exotic and wild qualities of Yuan dynasty animal motifs, instead pursuing auspicious meanings consistent with Han cultural classics and the dignified order of court decorations. This transformation profoundly reflects that after the establishment of the Ming dynasty, the rulers were committed to restoring traditional Han culture and integrating art into the service of consolidating political power, promoting Confucian ethics, and espousing notions of good fortune. At this time, animal images were no longer representations of natural creatures, but symbols of morality and auspicious concepts. The Ming Dynasty’s ‘Ducks-shaped Sancai Incense Burner,’ as shown in Figure 6, features a clever design that perfectly combines practical functionality with animal forms. While the tradition of making vessels in the shape of animals is long-standing, the intricacy of its design and the delicacy of its craftsmanship far surpass previous dynasties. This reflects the Ming society, particularly the affluent urban class, and their growing demand for artistic daily objects, as well as the remarkable creativity of the ceramic industry in meeting this

demand. Throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties, animal ceramics inherited the glaze techniques of earlier eras and the blue-and-white and painted decoration skills from the Yuan and Ming periods, but in terms of their spiritual essence, the Ming Dynasty oriented them toward ethical and symbolic auspicious meanings.



Figure 6. *Sancai-Style Duck-Shaped Incense Burner.*

Image source: baike.baidu

Figure 7 depicts a Qing Qianlong period famille rose porcelain sculpture of an elephant carrying a treasure vase, exemplifying court art during the prosperous era of the Qing dynasty. The elephant carries a magnificent treasure vase, with a design imbued with the auspicious meaning of ‘peace and prosperity,’ intended to celebrate the flourishing era. The glaze is bright, the craftsmanship meticulous, and every detail showcases the majesty and opulence of the royal court. Its core purpose is to demonstrate the strength and order of the empire to both heaven and the people.



Figure 7. *Qing Dynasty Qianlong Famille Rose Porcelain Figurine of an Elephant Carrying a Treasured Vase.*

Image source: baike

Another work, like the one in Figure 8, is the Qing Dynasty late-period Shiwanyao ceramic masterpiece, the Shiwanyao porcelain figure of the Golden-thread Cat. It shows us the vibrant vitality of art among the common people. Unlike imperial kilns, the craftsmen of Shiwanyao devoted all their effort to capturing fleeting expressions from nature, portraying the cat's alertness and spirit with striking precision. Qing Dynasty animal ceramic sculptures were not monolithic in style but rather a symphony composed by both the court and the common folk. Imperial kiln works, at the pinnacle of craftsmanship, narrate the grandeur of the empire, while folk kiln works, with expressive strokes, record the charm and humor of everyday life.

Together, they create a magnificent panorama of flourishing Qing Dynasty ceramic art.



Figure 8. Huang Bing Qingshiwan Kiln Ceramic Sculpture of a Golden Thread Cat.

Image source: baike

5. Modern Pluralistic Expressions

5.1. From Antique to Innovative: The Modern Transformation of Traditional Symbols

Modern ceramic artists such as Zhou Qingding and Zhou Guozhen have achieved a creative transformation of traditional aesthetic paradigms with their animal sculpture art. Rooted in the spirit of Eastern freehand expression, they deeply reinterpret the aesthetic concepts in Chinese traditional culture of ‘learning from nature’ and ‘vitality and spirit’ through the language of modern ceramics. Zhou Qingding’s animal sculptures demonstrate a subtle grasp of the essence of life, as exemplified by the work ‘Fox’ in Figure 9. He is greatly influenced by the Chinese painting tradition of ‘capturing the spirit with form’ and excels at capturing the most dynamic and lively moments of animals. His works, infused with calligraphic freehand strokes, are concise in form yet convey the animals’ vitality and movement vividly. This pursuit of ‘spiritual resonance’ embodies the translation of traditional aesthetic conception into the practical language of modern sculpture.

Zhou Guozhen perfectly integrates the rustic spirit of Chinese folk art with modern aesthetic sensibilities. Through bold exaggeration of forms and highly expressive texture treatment, the animal figures he creates retain the primal tension of clay while also conveying a sense of formal beauty appreciated by contemporary viewers. Most importantly, his innovative use of glaze colors allows the accidental effects of kiln firing to become an essential means of shaping the animals’ character. This exploration of the language of materials represents a contemporary expansion of traditional ceramic aesthetics. Zhou Guozhen, through his ‘Animal World,’ demonstrates a keen insight into and care for the richness of human nature in modern Chinese people, paying attention to, capturing, and portraying the subtle emotions of daily life. His pursuit and flawless presentation of the Eastern aesthetic of ‘great skill appearing as clumsiness’ and ‘skill within clumsiness’ almost reach the realm of Eastern ‘Zen.’ [8] The creative practices of these artists are essentially a modern interpretation of the spirit of Chinese art. They no longer simply imitate nature or replicate traditional patterns; instead, through a deep understanding of the qualities of clay, they transform the expressive spirit and folk charm of Chinese traditional culture into a sculptural language with a modern sensibility. In their works, animal figures retain the aesthetic charm of the East while being imbued with a strong sense of

modern consciousness, achieving a creative continuation of traditional aesthetic spirit in contemporary times.



Figure 9. Zhou Qing ding “The Fox” 1860s.

Image source: bing

5.2. New Directions in the Development of Chinese Ceramic Animal Sculptures in a Global Context

In the global context, the development of Chinese ceramic animal sculpture is quietly shifting. It is no longer merely a display of traditional craftsmanship, but a profound dialogue that crosses cultures and technologies. Artists are shifting their focus from meticulously replicating forms to deeply exploring contemporary social ideas and spiritual concerns. The endpoint of creation is no longer limited to animal imagery; it also serves as a medium that carries philosophical reflection, ecological awareness, and social critique. Creators can use the imagery of animals to explore the ethics of technology, suggest environmental crises, and provide a profound response to global issues within the context of the human world. At the same time, the boundaries of materials are continuously being challenged and broken. Ceramics actively step out of their comfort zone, colliding and merging with metal, glass, and even discarded industrial parts. Within the conflict of materials, there is a metaphor for the complex tension between tradition and modernity, nature and civilization. In this process, a deep ecological concern and a post-human perspective increasingly emerge. Artists generally transcend anthropocentric narratives, turning their attention instead to the fate of the entire ecosystem. The works often feature injured or mutated animals, or life forms coexisting with human industrial relics, filled with concern for species extinction and environmental changes, reflecting a strong ‘planetary consciousness.’ Responses to their own cultural traditions also display new forms of wisdom. Classic symbols such as dragons and phoenixes are no longer used directly; instead, they undergo clever deconstruction and abstract refinement. Through minimalist forms or playful techniques, artists internalize ‘Chineseness’ into an aesthetic mood or philosophical reflection, allowing tradition to radiate a new critical vitality in a contemporary context. Moreover, the intervention of new technologies is particularly thought-provoking. Technologies such as 3D printing and digital modeling not only give rise to complex forms that traditional craftsmanship cannot achieve but also blur the boundaries between the biological and the mechanical, the virtual and the real, prompting people to rethink the definition of life. In summary, the future of Chinese ceramic animal sculpture is growing within this collision of diversity—it is both local and global; handmade and technological; aesthetic as well as philosophical. With a resilient stance, it seeks and establishes its irreplaceable cultural position within the global art landscape.

6. Conclusions

Zhou Qingding on Animal Sculpture, there is a passage that describes: “Mr. Zhou’s theory of animal sculpture starts from an old saying—serve the people. He believes that whether studying animal sculpture, making small animal sculptures, or creating large garden animal sculptures, the sole purpose is to meet the aesthetic needs of working people.” [9] He emphasized that animal sculptures should serve the people, meaning that art should not be lofty and detached from the public, but closely connected to people’s lives. Whether small or large, animal sculptures should become a part of the spiritual and cultural life of the people, bringing them aesthetic enjoyment and emotional resonance. This viewpoint reflects respect for the aesthetic rights of working people, recognizing their need to appreciate and enjoy art, and that art should actively fulfill these needs. At the same time, it also reflects an emphasis on the social function of art, aiming to enrich people’s lives and elevate their spiritual realm through animal sculptures, allowing art to play its proper role in serving the people, which has strong practical significance and humanistic care. Using ceramics to create animal sculptures takes advantage of the unparalleled plasticity of clay, precisely capturing the tension of animal muscles and the subtle textures of their fur. The glaze flows, crystallizes, and changes color freely in the fire, producing unexpectedly brilliant effects. This unique element of chance injects a vitality into the work that is difficult for mechanical reproduction to achieve.

Ceramics itself is an epic deeply rooted in the memory of civilization. When an artist shapes an animal out of clay, he is invoking not just a craft, but an entire long-standing cultural lexicon. When the audience appreciates it, they can perceive not only the beauty of the form, but also faintly recall the splendor of Tang Sancai or the gentle elegance of celadon—an aesthetic resonance that transcends time and space. Ultimately, the clay, transformed by intense fire, changes from fragile and breakable to hard and eternal. This transformation itself is the most profound metaphor for life—it endows the sculpture not only with the form of an animal but also with the unique warmth and soul akin to life, achieving an artistic allure that other materials can hardly replace.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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