

# Beyond the Trinket: Narrative and Authenticity in Contemporary Ceramic Cultural Product Design

Lisha Mi<sup>1,\*</sup>, Yan Zhang<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Fine Art, Nanjing Normal University Taizhou College, Taizhou 225300, China

<sup>2</sup> School of Fine Art, Nanjing Normal University Taizhou College, Taizhou 225300, China

\* Corresponding author email: alisha20061072@gmail.com

---

**Abstract:** Driven by both the upgrading of cultural consumption and the revival of traditional craftsmanship, contemporary ceramic products are undergoing a transformation from mere “trinkets” to cultural carriers, requiring designs that balance cultural expression with market recognition. Narrativity and authenticity, as core elements, are mutually dependent and reinforcing: narrativity builds the bridge for cultural transmission, while its effectiveness relies on the support of authenticity; authenticity provides the value foundation for narrativity, while its dissemination depends on innovative narrative transformation. This paper analyzes the manifestations of narrativity in form, decoration, and functional design, and explains the importance of authenticity in preserving cultural integrity, enhancing consumer trust, and promoting the inheritance of traditional craftsmanship. On this basis, it proposes pathways for implementation, including deeper excavation of cultural connotations, innovation in design methods, and adherence to traditional crafts and materials. The aim is to provide theoretical reference for the high-quality development of ceramic cultural products and to support the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional ceramic craftsmanship.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Ceramics, Cultural Product Design, Narrativity, Authenticity, Traditional Craftsmanship.

---

## 1. Introduction

Currently, ceramic product design faces multiple challenges. Some products remain confined to the superficial category of “trinkets,” overly emphasizing decorative appeal while neglecting the exploration and expression of cultural content. Others claim to embody “cultural empowerment,” yet lack a foundation of authenticity, resulting in hollow narratives and superficial accumulation of symbols, which fail to earn lasting consumer recognition[1]. Such conditions not only constrain the contemporary value release of traditional ceramic craftsmanship but also fall short of meeting public demand for high-quality cultural products amid cultural consumption upgrades. Therefore, exploring the intrinsic relationship and practical pathways of narrativity and authenticity in contemporary ceramic cultural product design is of significant importance for promoting industrial innovation and transmitting and enhancing the cultural heritage of Chinese ceramics.

## 2. The Relationship between Narrativity and Authenticity in Contemporary Ceramic Cultural Product Design

### 2.1. Mutual Dependence

The realization of the cultural value of ceramic cultural products requires design processes that facilitate the transformation from cultural symbols to consumer cognition. In this process, narrativity undertakes the role of information encoding, translating abstract cultural connotations into perceptible design language. The accuracy and appeal of such encoding rely directly on the authenticity of the cultural facts it is based upon. If narrative content is detached from specific historical contexts, craft traditions, or regional cultural traits,

even the most innovative forms cannot establish genuine cultural connections with consumers, nor achieve long-term value recognition[2-3]. Authenticity, as the original state of cultural existence, does not manifest in design as simple replication; rather, it requires narrativity for selection, reconstruction, and reinterpretation to adapt to contemporary aesthetic demands and usage contexts. Without narrative mediation, authenticity risks becoming a static cultural specimen, gradually losing vitality in contemporary life. Thus, narrativity requires authenticity as its premise, and authenticity finds its modern pathway through narrativity. Together, they ensure the complete expression and effective transmission of cultural value within products.

### 2.2. Mutual Reinforcement

The competitiveness of contemporary ceramic cultural products lies not only in the uniqueness of their cultural core but also in the innovativeness of their expressive forms. Authenticity, with its cultural attributes-including distinctive craftsmanship techniques, symbolic meanings, and historically accumulated emotional value-provides narrativity with abundant creative resources. These authentic cultural elements lend narrative content unique distinctiveness, forming memorable markers within the product landscape and enhancing the cultural impact of communication. Narrativity, through the recombination of authentic cultural elements, can transcend the temporal and spatial constraints of traditional expression, transforming ancient craft wisdom into contemporary design language and integrating regional cultural features into universal aesthetic preferences. In doing so, authentic cultural connotations gain broader channels of dissemination and wider audiences of acceptance. This process of reciprocal empowerment drives narrativity and authenticity to achieve a dynamic balance in design practice (see Table 1). Authentic cultural elements deepen narrative content, while innovative narrative approaches enliven

authenticity, jointly enhancing the cultural added value and market competitiveness of ceramic cultural products.

**Table 1.** Specific Manifestations of Mutual Reinforcement

Direction of effect	Specific manifestation	The effects brought about
Authenticity to narrative	Provide differentiated creative resources such as craftsmanship techniques, cultural symbols, and emotional values	Endow narrative content with unique recognizability, create memorable points, and enhance the penetration of cultural dissemination.
Narrative to authenticity	Reorganize the authentic cultural elements, transform them into contemporary design language, and integrate them into universal aesthetic demands	Break the spatiotemporal limitations of traditional expression, enabling the true cultural connotations to gain broader dissemination channels and acceptance groups.

### 3. Forms of Narrativity in Ceramic Cultural Product Design

#### 3.1. Form Design

Form design occupies a foundational role in the narrative dimension of ceramic cultural products. By creating three-dimensional spatial structures, it transforms abstract cultural concepts into tangible, perceptible entities. Traditional ceramic forms embody the lifestyles and aesthetic orientations of particular historical periods: for instance, the rounded fullness of Ming and Qing blue-and-white porcelain conveys the prosperity of its era, while the robust simplicity of Qin and Han terracotta figures reflects the spirit of those times[4]. Contemporary designers make use of these formal elements not by merely replicating them but by employing adjustments in proportion, structural refinement, and functional alignment to reinterpret cultural information. Every detail of a form—from the curvature of the rim to the treatment of the base—can serve as a narrative node, linking technical norms of traditional craftsmanship with the practical habits and emotional expectations of modern users. This continuity and transformation of formal language enables ceramic cultural products to simultaneously evoke historical resonance and contemporary relevance, generating narrative power that transcends time and space.

#### 3.2. Decorative Design

Decorative design forms the expressive visual symbol system of narrativity in ceramic cultural products, using pattern combinations, symbolic metaphors, and color schemes to open channels for cross-temporal cultural dialogue. The formation and evolution of traditional ceramic motifs are closely tied to local ecologies, modes of production, and religious beliefs, with each motif encoding specific cultural meanings. Coarse patterns from northern kilns reflect bold regional character, while the refined motifs of southern kilns reflect gentle aesthetic sensibilities; religious motifs express spiritual dependence, while motifs from daily life record folk customs. In contemporary design, traditional motifs undergo processes of symbol extraction, semantic reconstruction, and formal innovation. Designers strip away

superficial forms while preserving the motifs' core cultural meanings, then apply simplification, deformation, and rearrangement to align them with contemporary aesthetic contexts. Through such visual interactions, users experience resonance between historical traditions and contemporary values.

#### 3.3. Functional Design

Functional design integrates lived realities into ceramic product narratives, as the layout of usage scenarios and definition of functional boundaries directly align with modern rhythms of life and value orientations. Traditionally, ceramic functions were often tailored to specific rituals or social classes, carrying strong normative and symbolic meanings. In contrast, contemporary ceramic cultural products emphasize integration with daily life: from tableware to office décor, from incense burners to vases, the extension of function illustrates the permeation of culture from ritual settings into everyday spaces[5]. Details such as the comfort of grip, ease of use, and compatibility with other items highlight the negotiation between traditional craftsmanship and contemporary lifestyles. Function as a narrative vehicle ensures that ceramic culture is no longer an abstract symbol detached from life but becomes, through practical use, a vital pathway for contemporary people to experience tradition and appreciate culture.

### 4. The Importance of Authenticity in Ceramic Cultural Product Design

#### 4.1. Preserving Cultural Integrity

Ceramic culture is a luminous jewel of Chinese civilization, and preserving its integrity is central to safeguarding cultural roots. Take Jun ware as an example: as one of the Five Famous Wares of ancient China, its restoration and transmission exemplify dedication to cultural authenticity. Artisans searched across regions to visit master craftsmen, collected scattered recipes, and conducted extensive research on glaze materials, repeatedly experimenting to refine firing techniques. In this process, every stage—from material selection to kiln temperature control—adhered strictly to traditional methods, ensuring that the hallmark transformation of Jun ware—"one color into the kiln, myriad colors out"—was sustained. Such fidelity is not mechanical replication but a conscious grasp of cultural essence, enabling ancient techniques to merge with modern aesthetic needs so that ceramic products convey information that is both authentic and reliable.

#### 4.2. Enhancing Consumer Trust

In the context of cultural consumption becoming mainstream, consumers place increasing emphasis on cultural depth and craft heritage when purchasing ceramic products. Comprehensive and truthful cultural expression strongly influences their decisions. The Jingdezhen ceramic industry once suffered from counterfeit products flooding the market, undermining consumer trust. At that time, repurchase rates for high-end products hovered around 20%, online positive reviews were below 65%, annual average sales growth was only 3%, and conversion of potential buyers remained at 7%. By introducing "one item, one code" traceability systems, consumers could track the full production process[6]. As a result, counterfeit circulation dropped by 72%, consumer trust rose by 55%, annual sales growth for high-end ceramics

increased to 18%, repurchase rates reached 48%, online positive reviews climbed to 92%, and conversion of potential buyers rose to 35% (see Table 2). Transparent and authentic cultural expression therefore boosts both consumer willingness to purchase and brand loyalty.

**Table 2.** Indicators Before and After the Introduction of the Traceability System

Indicators	Before implementation	After implementation
Average annual growth rate of high-end product sales	3%	18%
Consumer trust level	-	Increase by 55%
Volume of counterfeit products circulation	-	Sharp decrease by 72%
Re-purchase rate of high-end products	20%	48%
Online positive review rate	Less than 65%	92%
Conversion rate of hidden consumer groups	7%	35%

### 4.3. Promoting the Transmission of Traditional Craftsmanship

The transmission of traditional craftsmanship faces dual challenges from modern industrial production and generational discontinuities, with many ancient ceramic techniques fading from public view. Upholding authenticity in contemporary ceramic design provides an opportunity to reintegrate these crafts into daily life. Authenticity requires that design activities remain closely tied to core techniques and production logic, prompting designers to visit kilns, consult veteran artisans, and study traditional methods such as wheel-throwing, glazing, and firing. In practice, these crafts are no longer static museum exhibits but living processes applied and refined in product design[7]. Collaboration between designers and artisans itself becomes

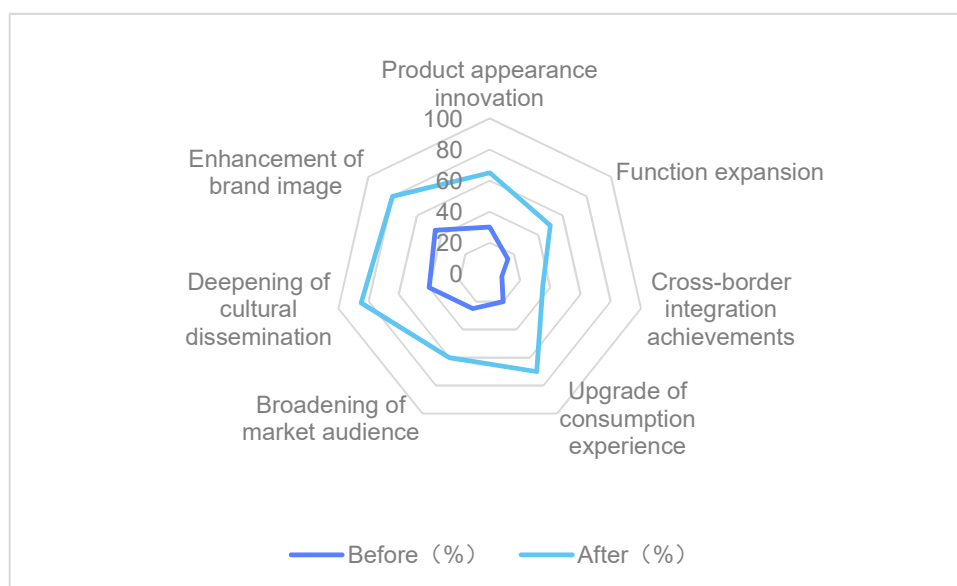
a stage of transmission, preserving craft essence while making pragmatic adjustments for modern use. Through this dynamic practice, traditional crafts regain vitality, avoiding extinction through disconnection from real-world application.

## 5. Pathways to Achieving Narrativity and Authenticity in Contemporary Ceramic Cultural Product Design

### 5.1. Deep Exploration of Ceramic Cultural Connotations

At present, some contemporary ceramic cultural product designs exhibit superficial cultural expression, where the use of traditional elements remains at the level of simple replication, without engaging the deeper cultural essence. The root cause of this lies in the lack of systematic and in-depth exploration of ceramic culture, resulting in products that cannot generate enduring cultural appeal. Designers should establish a multidimensional research framework: tracing the development trajectory of ceramic craftsmanship across historical periods, examining the evolution of forms, motifs, and glazes across dynasties, while also identifying the unique characteristics of different regional ceramics—for example, the cobalt-blue delicacy of Jingdezhen, the earthy charm of Yixing purple clay, and the pure whiteness of Dehua porcelain, each differing in raw material properties, techniques, and aesthetic tendencies. Such research should not be confined to textual archives but should extend to fieldwork in production sites, engaging directly with veteran artisans, documenting endangered craft details, and experiencing local cultural environments. Through this comprehensive approach, designers can grasp the core dimensions of ceramic culture—its historical origins, craft systems, and symbolic meanings—and distill representative yet contemporary cultural elements[8]. This enables ceramic cultural products to narrate with both historical gravitas and emotional warmth.

### 5.2. Innovative Design Methods and Approaches



**Figure 1.** Changes in Innovative Design Methods and Approaches

To foster dialogue between tradition and modernity while maintaining cultural authenticity, designers can employ cross-

disciplinary strategies through diverse design thinking. This may include combining ceramics with other traditional crafts

such as textiles or lacquerware, or integrating minimalist aesthetics from modern interior design, thereby breaking boundaries of material and style to make function and aesthetics better suited to contemporary life. For instance, blending the smooth texture of ceramics with the softness of fabric creates home décor items that are both culturally rich and sensorially comforting. Digital technologies also expand narrative dimensions: parametric design tools allow algorithmic reinterpretation of traditional motifs, while interactive projections can transform ceramic vessels into dynamic cultural displays during use, enhancing immersive cultural experiences. Incorporating experiential design is particularly valuable—for example, creating ceramic ornaments with interchangeable decorative modules, enabling consumers to assemble their own cultural narratives. Such participation fosters deeper emotional connections between consumers and products (see Figure 1).

### 5.3. Commitment to Traditional Craftsmanship and Materials

In today's industrialized market, where new materials constantly challenge traditional practices, the long-term survival of traditional craftsmanship and materials faces the risk of marginalization. Yet they represent the distinctive identity of ceramic culture, accumulated over millennia. Traditional craftsmanship embodies unique techniques refined by generations of artisans: the subtle control of clay during hand-throwing, the nuanced adjustments of flame and atmosphere in wood-fired kilns, and the secret formulas in glaze preparation. These processes produce textures and tactile qualities that mechanized mass production cannot replicate, forming the most intimate and narrative-rich aspects of ceramics. Likewise, natural clays and mineral glazes embody regional geological memory and cultural depth. Designers should resist the convenience of substituting chemical raw materials for traditional ones, and instead uphold the use of natural resources that ensure continuity with traditional heritage. While key processes should be preserved, reasonable optimization can be introduced to meet modern usage needs<sup>[9]</sup>. This allows consumers, through touch and sight, to genuinely experience the raw essence of ceramic culture and the weight of history.

## 6. Conclusion

In summary, narrativity and authenticity form the twin pillars enabling contemporary ceramic cultural product design to move beyond the limitations of being mere “ornamental trinkets.” The two are mutually dependent and mutually reinforcing: narrativity conveys cultural meaning through form, motifs, and function, while authenticity provides a trustworthy foundation, safeguarding cultural integrity, building consumer trust, and supporting craft transmission. Achieving their integration requires deep

exploration of cultural connotations, innovative design approaches, and steadfast adherence to traditional craftsmanship. Only then can ceramic cultural products truly serve as bridges between tradition and modernity, showcasing unique appeal amidst the wave of cultural consumption, and advancing Chinese ceramic culture through creative transformation and innovative development.

## Acknowledgments

Research Fund Project: New Realm of Ceramics--Innovative Practice of Contemporary Ceramics in Cultural and Creative Product Designs.

Item No.:2024SJYB1715.

## References

- [1] Xinran Huang. Research on the Application of Dunhuang Dyeing and Weaving Patterns in Ceramics Creation: An Example from the Period of Wei, Jin, and North and South Dynasties [J]. *Ceramics*, 2023(8):106-108.
- [2] Yiqing Rao. Research on the Development and Design of Ceramic Creative Products of Museums--Taking "Millennium Kiln Fire Creative Blind Box" of China Ceramic Museum in Jingdezhen as an Example [J]. *China Ceramics Industry*, 2024, 31(2):117-120.
- [3] Ru Yang, Qiang Ge, Shimin Zhu. Research on Development Problems and Countermeasures of Ceramic Cultural and Creative Industry in Jingdezhen--Under the Perspective of Digital Economy [J]. *Northern Economy and Trade*, 2023(4):49-51.
- [4] Jing Wan, Ou Jun. Non-heritage Cultural Inheritance and Red Cultural and Creative Product Design Innovation in the Perspective of Hunan Culture [J]. *Furniture and Interior Decoration*, 2023, 30(4):84-89.
- [5] Fengqi Zhang. Exploration of the concept of "regional culture" and its research path [J]. *Zhejiang Social Science*, 2008, No.140(04):63-66+50+127. *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Art, Design and Social Sciences*.
- [6] [7] Zhi Yang. Shanxi Yaozhou porcelain ceramic cultural and creative design innovation art research and thinking [J]. *Ceramics*, 2022(7):35-38.
- [7] Majiayao Culture Coloured Pottery Cup: Traditional Culture and Modern Trends Drinking Together in this Cup. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1786312985937836241&wfr=spider&for=pc>
- [8] Zhuo Zhang, Xiaojing Wang. Exploration on the application of non-heritage pottery in the design of cultural and creative products under the perspective of national culture [J]. *Journal of Taiyuan City Vocational and Technical College*, 2023(12):194-1963.
- [9] Guodong Liang, Lu Hao. Design Strategy of Ceramic Creative IP Products Empowered by Regional Culture--Taking Zixi Regional Culture as an Example [J]. *Ceramics Research*, 2024, 39(2):65-67.