

Article

Taking Lacquer as a Mirror, Expressing Morality via Implements: A Study of Confucian Ritual Spirituality and the Concept of Consumption in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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Abstract: The periods of the Ming and Qing dynasties featured prosperous socioeconomic development; the development of industrial, commercial, and manufacturing production; and active urban consumer behavior with great advocacy for the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius in the imperial court, and extensive promotion of refined elegance of benevolence, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom among the public. Under the influence of such an objective environment, lacquerware, as China's most ancient traditional form of artwork, also functioned as significant historical evidence for the development of the urban handicraft industry. Assuming a social role between ritual items and daily items, the development of lacquer arts was closely bound up with Confucian ritual spirituality. Based on relevant cultural relic data and documents in the literature, this study takes lacquer as a mirror with regard to the progress of the trend of lacquer culture and lacquer art during the Ming and Qing dynasties as the clue, and analyzes the embodied features of lacquer art design function, modeling, and themes to discuss the influence of Confucian ritual spirituality on social consumption.

Keywords: Confucian thought; ritual spirituality; the concept of consumption; lacquer art of Ming and Qing dynasties

1. Introduction

Chinese lacquer culture features a long history of 7000 years with the earliest found lacquered vessel “vermillion lacquer wooden bowl” originating from the Hemudu Neolithic Period (Zhang 2006). As a precious handicraft, lacquerware has had its development traced back to ancient times. Based on its ever-present existence in Chinese history, lacquerware reflects the difference between the spirit of the time and cultural connotations as a result of the influence of the dominant ideology and aesthetic tastes in different eras. Therefore, the role of lacquer art is spontaneously transformed from god-worshipping artifact to sacrificial vessel, which profoundly embodies Confucian ritual spirituality and becomes a symbol of status, a keepsake of human communication, and an attestation of the concept of consumption.

Ritual, one of the core concepts of Confucian thought, originally applied to specifically religious ceremonies, and later extended to refer to the ceremonial expression of respect or grandness and used in a general sense of social ethical standards of hierarchical feudal society (Editorial Board of Ci Hai 1998). Ritual systemic spirituality had actually become a top-down feature from generation to generation during the Ming and Qing dynasties, carrying worship of Confucian thought.

In light of the regulations of historical development of China's feudal society, religious faith is bound to cater to the taste and interest of scholars who hold the knowledge, and also strives for a

place in the recognized knowledge genealogy to keep a foothold in the mainstream culture (Ge 2018). On the strength of the flourishing urban economy in the Ming and Qing dynasties, upper-class people, represented by the nobility, scholars, and businessmen, led their Confucian-influenced lives with a sense of ceremony, spared no expense on articles and utensils, and then satisfied the needs of ritual systemic spirituality with the achievement of utilitarian functions.

Confucian beliefs constrain people's lives via various ethical rules, customs, and ritual, thus affecting consumer behavior via a sense of values. Ritual spirituality is the core content of Confucian thought and experienced repeated amendments within different social contexts during the inheritance. Since the middle of the Ming dynasty, urban economic development accelerated the progress of the commodity handicraft industry and social consumption behaviors maintained an active period for a long time. Ritual spirituality and the concept of consumption in the Ming and Qing dynasties were the intangible outcome of the thought structure and economic behavior, respectively, with mutual effect and promotion.

As recorded in *The Old Book of Tang*, a biography by Wei Zheng, "Take a brass tray as a mirror, clothes can be straightened; take history as a mirror, ups and downs can be presented; take person as a mirror, gains and losses can be evident" (Li 2010). By the same token as "expressing morals via implements," this study takes lacquer as the mirror, and adopts the development features of lacquer art design during the Ming and Qing dynasties as the focus of research to analyze the relationship between Confucian ritual spirituality and the concept of consumption of modern society.

Prior to the discussion of this research, the concept of lacquer art design in Ming and Qing dynasties needs to be clarified. This is the collective name for lacquerware locally made in China during the Ming and Qing dynasties, including both official and private manufacturing. This study mainly focuses on the research of common small and medium-sized lacquerware such as tableware, containers, and stationery items.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Ritual System and Lacquer Art

As said in *The Ten Faults* by Han Fei Zi, "Yao, while ruling All-under-Heaven, ate from earthen plates and drank from earthen bowls ... When Yao abdicated and handed over the crown to Yu Shun, the latter took those as new table wares. He hewed trees from the mountains and cut them into small pieces, which he first whittled, sawed, and smoothed away the traces of the axe, then lacquered them with varnish and ink, and finally transported them to the palace. Therefore, he was regarded by the feudal lords as far more extravagant than his predecessor. And the states that refused to obey him were thirteen. When Shun abdicated and handed over the crown to Yu, Yu took those as sacrificial utensils, which he varnished black outside and painted red inside. He had cushions made of pieces of thin, plain silk; mats made of water-oats and hemmed for decoration; cups and decanters embellished with pretty colors; and casks and basins made with ornaments. The extravagance having thus turned from bad to worse, the feudal states that disobeyed were thirty-three" (Wang 2003). This passage provides two pieces of information: Lacquerware had the function and value as sacrificial utensils early in ancient China, and lacquerware items had been taken as articles of luxury since antiquity and featured extremely exquisite workmanship in their design and ornamentation.

People in the pre-Qin period endowed lacquerware with significant ritual connotations based upon the shape and structure, quantity, size, and assortment. Exquisite lacquerware features its function as ritual vessels, complicated manufacturing processes, and little correlation with daily production and demand. As it were, lacquerware did not meet the material needs for basic life but was a kind of pursuit derived from religious spirit and concepts. Due to the high production cost, lacquerware was normally possessed by high-class minor nobles and thus built up its historical role as a symbol of governors' identity, status, and power.

With the continuous development of China's ritual culture, lacquerware items became implements for manifesting rituals and beliefs with gradually reinforced social attributes, similar to bronze sacrificial utensils, which symbolized the morality of traditional rites (Liu 2019). As a carrier of "implements endowed with ritual," lacquerware is empowered with particular ritual significance and brings social and political attributes to articles made by the art.

The handicraft industry achieved a peak in the Han dynasty, featuring superior skill that was unprecedented, with craftsmanship handed down from generation to generation, which fully served the supremacy with ritual items and items used by the emperor regardless of time and labor cost (Li 2001).

As a highly sophisticated product of the handicraft industry, lacquerware became a symbol of noble social status endowed with "religious authority" during the process of acting as a ritual item, which was a creation of the age and generated along with ritual spirituality. The presence of ritual culture may be influenced by the progress of science and technology, the development of material culture, the richness of spiritual culture, and the accompanying transformation of the relationship between humans and nature, humans and religion, humans and humans, and humans and society (Zhang 2014).

Differing from pure forms of art or general material manufacturing, lacquerware has obvious material cultural characteristics closely associated with the society and economy and is a specific art under social and economic production via human creation that develops levels such as social spirit, culture, and religion (Meng 2013).

2.2. Confucian Ritual Spirituality

The origin of ritual can be traced back to sorcery rites in prehistoric societies, when people accumulated primitive social consciousness from songs and dances, totems, and sacrificial activities, then formed a group sensory awareness along with the emergence of the state, change of class formation, and fanatical but methodical totems, images, and vessels, and eventually developed into solemn ritual governance (Xie 2015). In terms of social function, ritual is embodied as normalizing individuals and maintaining class domination, which acts as the most intuitive expression of inner cooperation among everything in the world and the externalization of rules.

With the development of human society, ritual in the Zhou dynasty was gradually enlightened by humanistic connotations from the initial simple religious features, and the ritual system was expanded to cover the rules of behavior for ethical relationship management under the patriarchal system. The patriarchal ethical norm is the core content of the differentiation of the precedence, status, and affinity between man and man, and the establishment of an ethical relationship order conducive to social stabilization (Sun 2015). The ritual system, functioning as the approach to interpersonal ethical relationship management, mainly performed the role within families or patriarchal clans at the beginning, then gradually extended to the political, economic, and life domains of the whole state.

From the perspective of Confucian thought, the ritual system consists of regulations stipulating human–nature relationships, interpersonal ethical relationships, and the ruling order, and also the normal restrained mode of life, moral principles, living behavior, and moral sentiment. With the features of coerciveness, universalization, and secularization, the ritual system penetrated into every area of Chinese social life (Zhao 2008). Moreover, Confucian thought is adept at establishing traditional rituals upon routines and general psychological foundations and principles such as proper human relationships and kindness, provides practical and rational psychological analysis of ritual systems which did not initially attract many profound senses, consequently adjusts the original external peremptory norms to active internal desire.

During the more than 2000 years of China's feudal society, governors mostly adopted the basic management of "ruling the state by Confucian thought, integrating Confucian thought and legalism" and promoted Confucian thought as the orthodox ideology to maintain class domination. Ritual spirituality was initiated in the Shun period and refined in the era of Confucius, with Confucianists

acting as the inheritors and promoters of ritual culture. From the perspective of Confucian thought, to formulate ritual is to stabilize the social order, with the significance of ritual as a kind of order that it symbolizes (Shao 2016). Ritual spirituality originated from the emotions and eventually spread among the public for communication and moralization in the form of poems, music, and implements upon effective promotion by the governors.

Confucian ritual spirituality features the essence of valuing feelings, advocating nature, and appreciating fundamentals (Cao 2015), taking the way of spreading ritual to enlighten people on both status and responsibilities thereof, and consequently fulfilling their own duties and obligations. The ultimate goal that Confucian ritual intends to achieve, in simple terms, is that each individual can fulfill his or her own duties, stay with reverence, respect natural rules and ethical human relations, and refrain from doing whatever they want (Lou 2013).

2.3. Development of the Concept of Consumption

Consumption refers to the economic activity of people consuming material subsistence or material value to satisfy the basic needs for a material life. The key motive for consumption behavior is human desire as consumers, and the final goal is the satisfaction of such desire, i.e., effectiveness (Yi 2013).

Solomon's demand theory divides consumer demand into five levels: Physiological, security, social, esteem, and self-actualization demands (Solomon 2014). Baudrillard, in his analysis of consumption principles, held the view that people never consume things themselves (value in use); people always regard things as symbols highlighting personal status, or use things to join groups that are considered to be ideal (Baudrillard 2017). In the opinion of Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, the most obvious impact of consumption on individuals is a certain degree of satisfaction of the demands based on which the process is originally stimulated (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh 2014). On the whole, consumption can be divided into three levels in a broad sense: One, absolute consumption of things with the purpose of maintaining basic living needs; two, the consumption of value exchange focusing on the true value of goods with the purpose of demonstrating one's stronger purchasing ability to publicize one's wealth; and three, consumption aimed at symbol value, focusing on the cultural connotation of goods to manifest one's personal taste and unique aesthetic vision (Chen 2012).

The consumption ethics concept had been closely linked with the idea of imperial governance throughout Chinese history. Confucian thought features a broad range of influences on China's political administration. Since the pre-Qin period, Confucianists advocated proper government guidance in social morals, balanced moderate physical-mental consumption, human-nature harmonized ecological consumption, and fair human-human co-localized consumption (Yang and Wu 2012).

During early feudal society with a rigid hierarchy, strict consumption levels established by the governing class absorbed all consumption activities of the whole society into their own norms, thus maintaining the moral standard of class domination. Every kind of article, from food utensils, clothes and hats, and household supplies to means of transportation and housing construction, was consumed according to the status of the family and the individual (Yi 2013).

During the middle and late Ming dynasty to the end of the Qing dynasty, the social showed great performance of the factors, such as a gradually prosperous urban economy, vigorously developed business marketing, turbulent political situations, and increasing class mobility and infiltration among all levels of society.

Broadly speaking, the upper class itself, functioning as a leader in consumption, did not need to demonstrate its own dignity or social prestige via deliberate consumption. The lower class did not have sufficient capital for capacity demonstration, while middle-level common people had certain economic strength and spare time to present their own taste and individuality in order to obtain higher social prestige and status. Thus, they kept pursuing the "symbolic value" (Chen 2012) generated by consumption behavior to express their own value.

Nevertheless, the upper class would independently change their consumption habits to show their uniqueness after they were imitated by the public (Huang 2013). Such endless cycles formed the

major driving force promoting urban consumption. The transformation of the concept of consumption, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, was mainly manifested as a change from the original “esteeming thriftiness and refraining from extravagance” to the diversified situation of “valuing extravagance” and “living thriftiness”.

3. Research and Analysis

3.1. Confucian Ritual Spirituality and the Concept of Consumption

3.1.1. Analysis of Confucian Ritual Spirituality in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

The history of Chinese Confucian thought is dominated by the ruling class, who held political rights and participated in shaping history by Confucian scholar elites with humanistic morality or cultural literacy. If we take the political power held by the ruling class as a kind of tangible institutional “hard power,” then the cultural literacy and humanistic morality possessed or advocated by Confucian scholar elites could be a kind of intangible spiritual “soft power” (Lin and Hou 2011).

Since ancient times, China has been particular about the idea of “harmony between morality and status,” indicating that a person’s political power should be subject to his/her political status, while the performance of political status should enable the person with relevant ability and morality (Cao 2016). In addition to the achievement of a whole set of symbolic behaviors and program structures to normalize the relationship, between individuals and others, individuals and regions, and individuals and groups, China’s ritual spirituality also managed to theoretically sort out status boundaries among persons, and thus stabilize the moral order within various communities. The fundamental principles of Confucian ritual are status–responsibility cognizance (Sun 2015), responsibility–power correspondence, and determination of moral obligation and responsibility based on different status hierarchies.

In terms of further analysis, Confucian ritual is the order of social life as well as cultural development and creation. Ritual indicates human activities expressing human spirituality and presenting aesthetic feelings (Xu 2019). Not just a kind of action or gesture or system, ritual is also a symbolized order, whose stabilization is the subject of people’s awe and respect, and the latter relies on conscientiousness of morality and ethics. It is impossible to repose and express individual morality or recognize or observe social order without ritual spirituality (Li 2014).

Early in the era of Confucius, the Confucianists advocated that individuals should restrain their own material desires and correct their personal behaviors to conform to the moral stipulations of ritual. When consumption violated the fundamental monarch–subject ritual, Confucius persisted with the principle that the consumption level should be well-matched with social status and identity. Such thoughts were fairly ethical during the pre-Qin period (Ma 2013). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the restraint stressed by Confucian thought and the frugality that was advocated should be “frugal but not breaching ritual”; that is, seeking the balance between frugality and extravagance to achieve harmony without breaching morality. Ritual consumption was a significant part of the ancient consumption system. In the view of Confucian thought, as long as the behavior met the ritual standard, all kinds of consumption were acceptable regardless of the cost, even if there was any waste (Gao 2017).

Confucian ritual spirituality was formed and shaped in the pre-Qin period and went through continuous adjustments due to changes in the social structure. In the early Han dynasty, feudal princes arrogated power to maintain their own interest and called for a new order, while obtaining immediate tolerance from the governor. As they stood for the emerging social forces, there was no threat to the monarch–subject ethical relationship. In terms of further consideration, this was expedient to a large extent for emperors in the Han dynasty to achieve grand unification. After the collapse of the hereditary gentry in the Song dynasty, the emerging commoner landlord class was in a state of change and it was hard to control the grassroots society as a whole. Under such a dilemma, the superstructure adopted the manner of establishing ritual cultural spirituality to directly control the grassroots society while the scholar elites also performed self-regulation via Confucian rituals (Sun 2013).

The social urban economy had been progressing prosperously from the middle and later Ming dynasty until the Qing dynasty. The adjustment of state policies facilitated another transformation in the social structure. Despite the supreme imperial power, after taking Beijing as the capital, being far away from central and southern China, the state's ritual regulations were more sensitive to public thoughts and words. Therefore, there was no relatively strict constraint on people's material life despite the unceasing "luxury ban" issued by the imperial court.

On the other hand, the public enhanced the pursuit of spending on food and clothing along with the rapid development of urban businesses and material abundance. Reviewed from the ancient ritual tributes as mentioned in *The Book of Rites*, "Turtle as front rank, for the foresight; gold second, for the emotion; followed by cinnabar, lacquer material, silk, cotton fiber and bamboo arrow, acquirable both by king and public," implying that turtle ranks first among the tributes for its prediction of good or bad luck, and symbolizes longevity in Chinese culture; gold ranks second for its expression of emotion; then come cinnabar, lacquer material, silk, cotton fiber, and bamboo arrow, indicating common acquirability for both the king and the public (Gao 2016). Articles, such as these symbolic objects of traditional Confucian ritual culture and materials that were exclusively used by imperial nobles for the manifestation of status, had already become available for ordinary people under the objective conditions of volume production by handicraft workshops and functioned as common utensils for civilians in the Ming and Qing dynasties (Ning 2017).

Confucian thought held the distinct view that all men were born with demands. Social disruption would likely be caused by fighting that arose from unsatisfied demands. Admittedly, governors were the last ones to be willing to face such a situation, so they preferred to satisfy people's desires and pursuits within the limited scope of resources. As recorded in the work of Xunzi, "Saint King top status, official posts granting upon morality and ability, placing the right man at the right place" (Xun 2015). Obviously, "everything in its proper place" is also a significant part of Confucian ritual.

In the period of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the population hierarchy relationship features more mobility, and the impressive progress of urban handicraft production (He 2019). With the society becoming Confucian scholars mastering the interests, craftsmen performing independent production, and merchants contributing sales promotion under a considerably high degree of integration and little gap between common status. The public was in a great state of performing its own functions and realizing the great satisfaction of the demands of life. That was the premise of contentment in the life and work of people, the foundation of stable social ethical relationships, and the self-correction by Confucian ritual spirituality for adapting to a new objective environment (Lin and Hou 2011).

3.1.2. Influence of Confucian Thought on Social Consumption

Confucian thought was formed in the material-lacking pre-Qin period and conspicuously upheld "safeguarding the state with supreme good of morals, advocating thriftiness rather than extravagance". The main players in extravagant life were imperial members, royal relatives with merit, and high-ranking officials (Ren 2013). The Song dynasty started to have gentry-civilian coupling, and for all this, the dominant economic form in China was always the self-sufficient natural economy before the emergence of modern society (Liu 2015). Due to the lack of sufficient surplus materials, the imperial court still upheld the Confucian thought of "thriftiness as natural law, extravagance as human desire" and advocated "keeping the natural law and abolishing the human desire" (Han 2012).

The middle and late Ming dynasty was a significant transformative period for the grand progress of China's commodity economy and led the trend of valuing extravagance along with the rapid development of an urban commodity economy. It was not only the ruling class who highly valued the implements symbolizing their supremacy status, but also ordinary people attached unprecedented significance to their own spending on food and clothing thanks to the remarkable improvement of living conditions. As recorded in the records of Yuncheng County customs in the seventh year of the reign of Emperor Chongzheng, "Yuncheng ... known as effortless for governance, recently esteeming extravagance with high-living appearance in clothing on both ordinary people and scholars, palaces of

both scholars and senior officials, food utensils as well as implements for wedding, funeral, tour and banquet." The ethical consumption values of esteeming extravagance and flaunting wealth were coming out in succession in major prosperous cities at that time. Such a flashy social phenomenon was still prominent until the Qing dynasty (Huang 2013).

Traditional Confucian thought originally stood for the concept of consumption of satisfaction with thriftiness under a lack of materials. Undeniably, there was a significant difference in consumption demand in different social moral conditions. Consumption is restricted not only by certain material production modes and levels, but also by the influence of social morality. As Karl Marx said, "Our demands and enjoyment are produced by society, which should be taken as the criterion for our living rather than the implements satisfying demands and enjoyment, because both demands and enjoyment are of a social nature" (Ren 2013). Guan Zi, though he upheld the view of "objecting extravagance and praising austerity," still fully affirmed the function of social consumption and believed that human consumption could contribute to industrial prosperity, mutual benefits, and diverse means of a good-quality life (Han 2012).

In terms of further analysis, social consumption in the Ming and Qing dynasties was not only economic behavior, but more often a kind of cultural expression full of the significance of Confucian ritual spirituality (Xu 2018). In the consumption society, workshop productivity improved with implements from the batch process capable of meeting people's basic needs, then freed more members to engage in activities beyond the scope of productive work (Ning 2017). The leisure class, who did not have to work on production, had to find effective means of living to maintain their own economic depletion and give a strong performance in daily consumption (Veblen 2014).

Ye Mengde, in his *Shilin Family Instruction on Living*, advocated an organic integration of living skills and Confucian political ethics, and upheld living as "not meaninglessly busy for competition and blind dependency" and "realization of sages and men of virtue" and "best wise man for living" via "poems, books, ritual and music" and "righteousness, morality, attainment and ritual" (Yi 2013). Ritual ethical norms were never left in the basket during the process of selecting and implementing living skills, because the Confucian ideas of self-cultivating, family-regulating, state-ordering, and land-governing were deeply rooted in the people for ages. Scholars preferred to adopt the integration of "ology for enriching people" and "ology for living skill."

Thereupon, the social trend of "merchant-scholar integration" and thought literature and works that emerged in the Ming and Qing dynasties continuously enhanced the new trend of "both Confucian and merchants" and a "two-way switch between Confucian and merchants." Many scholars spent ancestral property to purchase large amounts of land and houses and accumulated wealth via leasing and trading wisely. Many merchants took tremendous economic strength as the backing to make friends with scholars to acquire sincere knowledge and morality, instead of pretending to be truly educated (Huang 2013). They esteemed literature and art, devoted themselves to the Confucian circle with effort and financial resources in their spare time, and achieved personal development with noble temperament and elegant interest (Ji 2011). The formation of the gentry class in the Ming and Qing dynasties was the great driving force for the influence of Confucian ideas on social consumption.

As Zhao Ruyu said, in his memorial submitted to the throne by important officials in the Song dynasty, "precious, fantastic and trendy implements for houses, gardens and table wares; unstoppable desire, unlimited grading; advocating gorgeousness, despising simpleness; being fickle in affection in different ages" (Yi 2013). The pursuit of luxury materials by refined scholars with high taste is vividly expressed in these words.

Consumption is the behavior that the consuming subject performs to satisfy his or her own demands. Luxury consumption refers to the consumption of goods and services relatively insufficient in society and beyond necessity in that time and place as a kind of flaunting. Judging from the consumption habits of ordinary people and gentry and high-ranking officials, the main feature in the Ming and Qing period is the desire for novelty with a delicate impression (Huang 2013). Consumers in the Ming and Qing period pursued an elegant life and reflected the popular and enjoyed lifestyle

in society at that time (Clunas 2016). Confucian ritual spirituality, inherited through the ages, is the foundation that supported such flashy consumption.

Confucian spirituality placed an emphasis on the “rationality” of consumption. Human consumption could not proceed upon desocialization. The major approach to express individual identity, social status, and wealth is to socially acclimate the consumption mode (Dong 2012). Consumption in pursuing fashion is the outcome of class polarization and could be extended to the phenomenon of ordinary lower-class people’s imitation of the fashion of the gentry class, such as clothing, aesthetics, and ornamentation, which would be regarded as a special spiritual honor and elegant temperament (Ning 2017).

3.2. *Ritual Expression in Lacquer Art Design in the Ming and Qing Dynasties*

Ritual vessels, also called sacred vessels, originally indicated the vessels used by ancient nobles in ritual ceremonies for formal activities such as sacrifices, funerals, royal meetings, punitive expeditions, banquets, weddings, and capping ceremonies (Editorial Board of Ci Hai 1998; Zhang 2014). The right part of the unsimplified Chinese character for “ritual” (礼) is “豊” which is displayed as a bean-shaped lacquer vessel filled with a string of jade, signifying a state of enshrining and worshiping gods with the most precious things (Xu 2019). The manufacture and decoration of ritual vessels originated from daily utensils, some of which could be used as both ritual vessels and household supplies without obvious distinctions between them. The emergence of ritual vessels, with extravagance as the symbol, began with the ancient sacrificial culture and originated from reverence toward nature.

Bronze and lacquer are common materials for China’s traditional man-made ritual vessels. Bronze ritual vessels were in fashion for a period, while only lacquerware remained imperishable. The Tang and Song dynasties were known for ceramics, when lacquerware was less popular. The Yuan period focused on workmanship and carried forward lacquer art mainly from the standpoint of material production. In the Ming and Qing period, the imperial court ruled the state by Confucian thought and lacquerware integrating ritual and daily articles eventually achieved a peak.

The development of a feudal society in the Ming and Qing dynasties focused on differences and distinctions between classes. The imperial court imposed restrictions on people’s spending on food and clothing. Just as there were regulations on clothing and embroidery patterns for people in every class in the Ming dynasty, the colors and patterns of porcelain used by imperial harems at all levels were explicitly stipulated in the Qing dynasty. Nevertheless, as lacquerware was no longer exclusive to the nobility in the Ming and Qing dynasties and no specific constraints were imposed by the governors on the model or style of lacquer art design, lacquer art received broader development space, stimulating market consumption, and made remarkable progress based on there being no breach of ritual regulation in ethical relationships.

Common small and medium-sized lacquerware products in the Ming and Qing dynasties were mainly tableware, containers, and stationery items. The next section focuses on expounding the ritual embodiment of lacquer art design, with respect to the style and ornamentation of these three categories, during their consumption and use in the Ming and Qing dynasties under the influence of Confucian thought.

3.2.1. *Food as the First Necessity: Style and Ornamentation of Lacquer Art Tableware in the Ming and Qing Dynasties*

Early in feudal society, with the rigid hierarchy in the Shang–Zhou period, under the influence of Confucian ritual spirituality, the public’s daily use of utensils strictly followed class and status, together with severely bound provisions in aspects such as material, color, and ornamentation. As the symbol of noble social status, lacquerware could only be used by the emperor, feudal princes, and high ministers and nobles, not by the common people (Zhao 2008). After the Jia Jing resurgence in the mid-Ming period, the change of the state’s social structure facilitated the rapid development of the handicraft industry. Common people’s passion to consume fashionable implements could not be stopped by the unceasing “luxury ban” issued by the imperial court and severely bound controls (Wu 2012).

People at all levels in the Ming and Qing dynasties, from imperial members to ordinary people, commonly used lacquer art products to wrap food or hold tea and pastries. In part of the “Along the River During the Qingming Festival”, created by the famous painter Qiu Ying (1497–1552) in the Ming dynasty, a red-lacquer hamper filled with food for sale in the booth is clearly visible in the middle of the rainbow-shaped bridge (Figure 1). It can be speculated that lacquerware for food was very popular and in great social demand.



Figure 1. (Ming dynasty) Qiu Ying “Along the River During the Qingming Festival”, Hongqiao section, from “Along the River During the Qingming Festival” (Cao 2013).

Urban people in those times were part of affluent life and mostly were bound up in family trips, when children could play games, adults could enjoy physical exercises, and the whole family could enjoy the happiness of reunion. Lacquer hampers or carrying cases packed with desserts for the outing were mostly wood-padded lacquerware, also known as “travelling artifacts,” which were portable, durable, made of natural and safe materials, and dust-proof, featuring strong sealing performance and heat preservation, and could also greatly retain food freshness, make people comfortable and delighted while enjoying the food, and maintain decent ritual even outdoors.

The royal family in the Qing dynasty, especially during the periods of Emperor Yongzheng and Emperor Qianlong, represented the significant popularity of lacquer art with imperial supplies stated as “lacquerware in everywhere” (Min 2018). The emperors dining was a display of splendor with lacquer bowls and circular boxes as necessities, among which lacquer tea trays were fairly common. As recorded in *The History of the Palace*, lacquerware items were essential in the living allotment of imperial harems in the Qing dynasty, many of which were lacquer hampers and tea trays (Table 1).

Lacquer tableware in the Ming and Qing dynasties followed the traditional color matching of red, black, and gold and relatively delicate design, not suitable for the expression of grand themes, and thus adopted decorative flowers and plants as the pattern with a flexible design based on the actual utensil shape and usually presented in a symmetrical style. Nature-derived plant ornamentation together with elaborate lacquer art design would encourage those using the items, while enjoying tea and pastries, to feel grateful for the nature-given resources that humans have and stand in awe of strictly following the natural law of denying oneself and returning to ritual without breaking rules.

Table 1. Allocation list of lacquerwares for imperial harems in Qing dynasty.

Level of Imperial Harems	Allocation Standard of Lacquerware
Empress Dowager 皇太后	Two imported Japanese lacquer low tables, thirty lacquer boxes, fifteen lacquer tea trays, twenty five lacquer leather trays
Empress 皇后	Two imported Japanese lacquer low tables, twenty six lacquer boxes, fifteen lacquer tea trays, twenty five lacquer leather trays
Imperial Noble Consort 皇貴妃	Four lacquer boxes, two lacquer tea trays
Noble Consort 貴妃	Two lacquer boxes, two lacquer tea trays
Consort 妃	Two lacquer boxes, two lacquer tea trays
Concubine 嬪	Two lacquer boxes, one lacquer tea tray
Noble Lady 貴人	One lacquer box, one lacquer tea tray
First Attendant 常在	One lacquer tea tray
Second Attendant 答應	One lacquer tea tray

Data from “*The History of the Palace*” (E-Ertai and Zhang 1987) (collated by the Study).

3.2.2. Cleanness and Solemnness: Style and Ornamentation of Lacquer Art Vessels in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

The raw material of lacquer art works is natural Chinese lacquer, featuring strong sealing performance, moisture resistance, and corrosion prevention, portability and durability, and it had been used to make vessels since ancient times. All manufactured implements, from small lacquer rouge boxes to large burial coffins, were safe and serviceable. Lacquer vessels had a high fabrication cost in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The public passion for lacquerware was not influenced by the identity difference due to strengthened urban consumption capacity and narrowed differentiations among social classes. Moreover, the inner spiritual desire for a sense of ceremony and the overall change of the concept of social consumption further motivated the common class to be willing to pursue exquisite and unique things within their ability.

Small lacquer vessels in the Ming and Qing dynasties were mostly boxes and rectangular cases, middle-sized ones were cosmetic boxes and cases, and large-sized ones were cabinets and coffins, the use range of which covered all the basic necessities of life; they may be called “serviceable both in life and death.” In order to effectively contain things, the volume of the vessels was normally not too small and the surface left relatively sufficient space for pattern design. Lacquerers could bring their creativity into full play to present the most popular themes via various techniques.

From the relics of lacquer vessels from the Ming and Qing dynasties, except those utensils with auspicious patterns and special use functions, such as dragon designs on items used by the emperor, the character of “spring” on collection boxes used during the Spring Festival, and the scene of transformation of mortal into immortal on lacquer coffins, we can see that most of the themes displayed tended to express traditional historical stories of virtue and morality, or elegant social gatherings of scholars in the Song and Yuan dynasties (Yang 2017).

Lacquerware features cleanness and solemnness from ancient times. Lacquer vessels were frequently used in people’s lives in the Ming and Qing dynasties with the expression of theme acting as a communication source to make people gradually transfer the spiritual connotation and preaching morality and skills during daily use. Righteous principles such as the sense of ritual, justice, integrity and honor, loyalty, and filial piety could penetrate the user’s mind step by step via these delicate lacquer art patterns.

As the representative of fashionable luxury in society during the Ming and Qing dynasties, lacquerware guided consumers at all levels reaching for consumption enthusiasm and was a symbol

of class polarization, thus presenting a change in the human sense of values and recognition of the living style of special classes (Chen 2012). More than being material carriers with delicate and precious features, utensils delivered the significant spiritual sense contained in the materials. In simple terms, it can be interpreted as a direct connection with the implication of mainstream ideology of Chinese culture, and the inheritance and facilitation of China's traditional Confucian ritual spirituality.

3.2.3. Ancient Charm and Elegance: Style and Ornamentation of Lacquer Art Stationery in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

The fabrication of lacquerware in the Ming and Qing dynasties was mainly influenced by the Song and Yuan dynasties, when the highest social status was that of the scholar class. Being among the top of the four classes, scholars were born as common folk but had the opportunity to move up to the ruling class by imperial competitive examination, and functioned as a significant bridge between the public and the royal court. Until the Ming and Qing dynasties, scholars became academic advisers for handicraft manufacturing based on their own accomplishments and aesthetic ability. As Yang Zhishui, said “the ‘elegance’ in the Ming dynasty was a unique approach to elaboration; moreover, there seemed to be specially assigned scholars to offer guidance” (Yang 2017).

Scholars in the Ming dynasty upheld a delicate and cultivated literacy with morality expressed not only in culture, but also in the implements advocating for modesty, fineness, and exquisiteness. With the improvement of living standards, more people pursued spiritual satisfaction, most of whom got used to adopting past implement designs to be the carrier for pursuing their roots (Chen 2016). Scholars shouldered the responsibility of moral compliance and governance assistance and were social elites, consistently attaching importance to ritual, being particular about living and clothing, and doubtlessly placing more demand on the scholar wares that symbolized their status. Stationery items were made in Chinese lacquer, expensive in cost but featuring traditional historical charm and varied shapes due to the exquisite workmanship and ingenious structural design of lacquerware in the Ming dynasty. Penholders, ink stones, multi-purpose boxes, and bookshelves are some examples of lacquer stationery.

Apart from reminiscence, along with the introduction of foreign styles in the Ming dynasty, lacquer imported from Japan was favored by the scholar class at that time with its exquisite design and delicate workmanship (Xu 2017). Lacquer art stationery items began to have a unified style of elegance. The common expression was to realistically paint plants and insects with gold lacquer on a black background with a strong contrast from the coexistence of black and gold to highlight the vivid connotation of the delicate pattern. The color gold achieved elegance and dignity against the background of black paint, which helped remove its vulgar appearance. Scholars were fairly particular about their choice of stationery items for their own study. As mentioned by Wen Zhenheng, a learned scholar in the late Ming dynasty, in his *Superfluous Things* (Figure 2), “[stationery items are placed in] three compartments and one drawer, the latter is placed with one small Duan ink stone, one writing brush and ink stone, one book, one small mountain-shaped ink stone, one Xuande Ink and one ink cartridge for lacquer imported from Japan” (Wen 2017). As *The Analects of Confucius* indicates, “Good tools are prerequisite to the successful execution of a job. Good relationship with scholars in the state is prerequisite to the great expression of ritual” (Fan 2018). It is observed that this is the tradition of Confucian ritual moralization.

Lacquer stationery items in the Qing dynasty inherited the tradition of the previous dynasty and took techniques and skills from Japan, as imitated imported Japanese lacquer was particularly in full flourish in the reign of Emperor Yongzheng. In addition to natural creature patterns on the lacquer surface, themes of real life were gradually integrated. Since the reign of Emperor Qianlong, lacquer engraving had been in common use to cater to the merchant–scholar class with more diversified design styles to effectively promote social consumption.

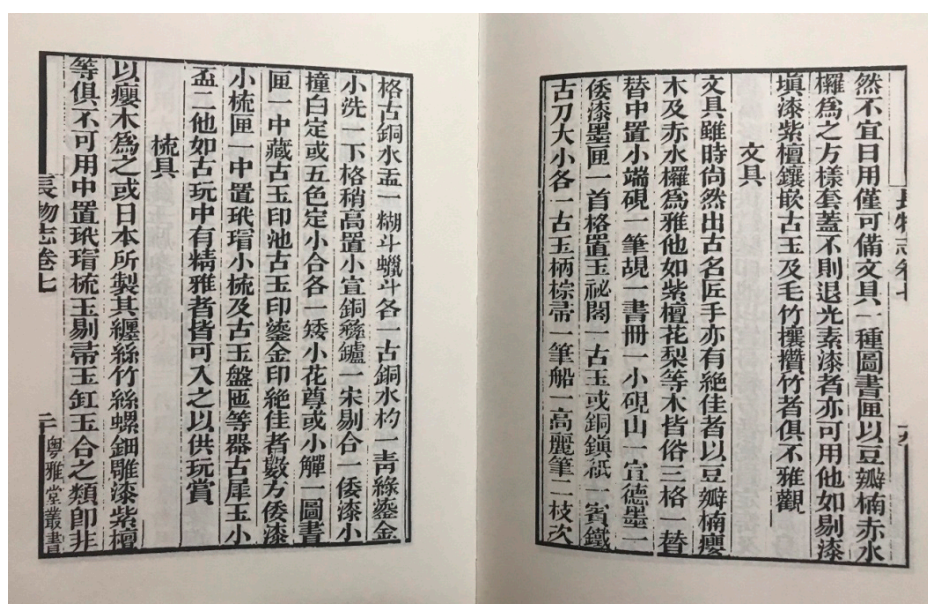


Figure 2. (Ming dynasty) Wen Zhenheng “Superfluous Things”, Volume 7, Stationery Section, from “Superfluous Things” (Wen 2019).

4. Conclusions

This study, focusing on the development of lacquer art design during the Ming and Qing dynasties, presents an objective view of the influence of Confucian ritual spirituality on social consumption by taking lacquer as the mirror, expressing morality through implements.

Under the prosperous urban economy and prevailing “valuing extravagance” among people during the Ming and Qing dynasties, by the extravagant social consumption habits gradually formed, lacquer art design consequently achieved the facilitating development. This study analyzes the modeling and ornamentation of lacquer art during this period, proceeds from the perspective of material research, and examines the historical origin of lacquer art’s function as “ritual vessel,” to explore the guidance of Confucian ritual spirituality on the concept of public consumption in the social environment of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

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