

How does Sancai-glazed pottery highlight the cultural exchange between Han and non-Han along during the Tang Dynasty?

Introduction

Objective

This essay endeavors to scrutinize the cultural intersections illuminated by tri-colored, lead-glazed ceramic vessels, commonly referred to as Sancai, during the Tang Dynasty. The focal point of this analysis is to discern the role of Sancai-glazed pottery as a medium reflecting the cultural interplay between the Han and non-Han communities in this era. Through a detailed examination of various Sancai art pieces, the intent is to unravel the complexities and intricacies of this significant cultural exchange.

Context and Facts

The artistic milieu of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) was distinguished by an unparalleled integration of foreign cultural elements. Chang'an, the epoch's eminent capital, stood as the world's most populous cosmopolitan center, housing a remarkable population of two million within its walls (*Foreign Influences in the Tang Dynasty* | *Encyclopedia.Com*, n.d.), and serving as the terminus of the Silk Road that extended westwards to Byzantium, Antioch, Damascus, and beyond (Major, n.d.). This network was instrumental not only in fostering connections with Western Asia but also in infusing and diversifying Tang art, especially evident in the realm of Sancai.

The emergence of Tang Sancai was far from coincidental; it sprang from the era's fertile social-political landscape. The dynasty's political stability and economic vigor created an ideal milieu for the flourishing of Tang Sancai. Concurrently, there was a transformation in burial customs, as death was seen as an “opportunity to fashion and convey social identities and memories” (Choo, 2022), necessitating the production of sophisticated wares synonymous with the living standards that Tang Sancai captured so eloquently (Xia & Yu, 2023).

Facts about Sancai Pottery

Sancai, meaning “three-colored”, is a prominent style of pottery primarily in hues of brown, green, and cream, which leads to a striking visual appearance. Despite the word “Sancai” referencing to the three main colors used, the letter “san” actually means “many” in traditional Chinese; Hence, the palette is not exclusively tripartite, as variants featuring hues like blue and additional shades of brown also exists (Cui et al., 2010).

Thanks to the vibrant color palette and the unique splash effects, Sancai pottery is no doubt a visual allure. These are achieved through a lead-bearing twice-sintered process, which is first fired at a high temperature of 1000–1100 °C without the glaze to achieve a hard pottery body, then at a lower temperature of roughly 700–900 °C after the glaze is applied (Ma et al., 2014). This technique was a significant advancement, as it allowed for much more vibrant colors, stylish looking, and durable adherence as seen in many Sancai pottery left till this day (*Tray*, 8th century).

Such unique glazing techniques found resonance far beyond China's borders, extending its influence across Asia. Through the Silk Road, a rich dialogue of artistic exchange flourished, with Chinese and Islamic potters drawing inspiration from each other's crafts. Islamic potters, by the 8th century, were producing lead-glazed wares so akin to Tang Sancai that only a trained eye could distinguish them. These pottery quickly gain popular in the Islamic world and were seen as highly prestigious at that time (Cui et al., 2010).

Analysis and Discussion

Tri-colored pot shaped phoenix head

The ewer shown in **Figure 1.1** suggests an obvious influence by foreign aesthetics. Standing 29.4 cm tall, the pot features a distinctive phoenix-head spout and an ovoid body, which is embellished with a one-legged phoenix perched on a lotus. Its slender neck and the handle's elegant curve resembles the repoussé silver ewers (a type of silver pitcher, shown in **Figure 1.2** from Iran or Central Asia, hinting its origin (Rawson, 2012). This is further validated as the was indeed derived from Sassanian silver ewers brought to China by merchants from Iran (*A Blue and Sancai-Glazed Pottery Phoenix-Headed Ewer*, n.d.).

The ewer's form and its Persian influence provides an illustrative example of the cultural amalgamation occurred along the silk road. Furthermore, the phoenix, a holy creature famously known in Chinese mythology, is depicted here in forms that are not traditionally Chinese but Persian, implying that Tang potters were not passive recipients of foreign influence, but active participants in cultural exchange. This level of integration highlights how the Tang Dynasty was an era marked by a confident openness to the wider world—when foreign culture is welcomed and assimilated.

Nevertheless, Rawson (2011) presents a contrasting perspective in her scholarly work. She posits that these wares were less a natural byproduct of cultural integration and were more to deliberately “foster a cosmopolitan court that matched their political aspirations” by the court. She argued that the specific combination of features in Sancai ceramics—their unusual shapes and decorations, their production in Chinese kilns, and their intended use for burial— suggests a more deliberate effort to create a cosmopolitan effect. Rawson also mentioned how most of these ceramics were found in elite tombs, suggesting their likely association with upper-class of Tang Dynasty, who are the main investors in projecting such cosmopolitan image.

Tri-colored non-Han nationalities

In **Figure 2.1**, we are introduced to a triadic depiction of a male figure, his facial features sharply defined by a prominent nose, deep-set eyes, and a beard that graces his cheeks. He is attired in a felt hat and pointed shoes, the recognized attire of the Hu people of the era (Chen & Chen, 2007, p. 5). Figure 2.2 echoes this imagery, also showing a male figure in standing pose, leading a horse—this representation is a frequent motif in Sancai pottery when it comes to depicting non-Han individuals. Notably, the recurrence of this theme extends to portrayals of horse-riding and camel-riding (Zhou & Gao, 2007), emphasizing

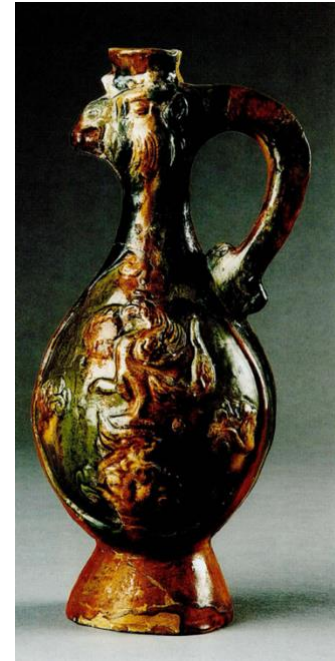


Figure 1:
Tri-colored pot shaped phoenix head, Tang Dynasty, Pottery, Second-class cultural relics, 29.4 cm in height



Figure 1.1:
Sassanian Silver Gilt Ewer with a Foliate Design, 6th-7th Century C.E., Silver gilt, 35.9cm



Figure 2.1:
Tri-colored horse-leading male figure with Hu's hat, Tang Dynasty, Pottery, First-class cultural relics, 22.5 cm in width, 14.5 cm in thickness, 67.5 cm in height



Figure 2.2:
Tri-colored horse-leading figure, Pottery, First-class cultural relics, 66 cm in height



Figure 2.3:
Tri-colored business figure of non-Han nationality, Tang Dynasty, Pottery, First-class cultural relics, 23.5 cm in height

the widespread presence of such activities during the Tang Dynasty. The prominence of these depictions reflects the extensive engagement of non-Han nationalities in the Tang society.

Figure 2.3 captures yet another portrait of a Hu person, who also features a felt hat, a bearded jaw, prominent nose, and deep-set eyes. This time, however, the figure is that of a merchant. He is depicted shouldering a heavy pack, his body tilted forward, legs spread as if to bear the weight as heavy as a mountain. This single pose conveys the everyday reality of a merchant of that era. And this particular merchant serves as a snapshot of the many traders who were the lifeblood of the bustling trade between the Tang Dynasty and the Western Regions, showcasing the prosperity of Tang's international commerce.

When viewed collectively, these Sancai pottery pieces become a tableau that vividly captures the dynamism and cultural interplay of the Tang period. They bring to life the bustling boulevards of Chang'an, thronged with foreign characters: some steering horses, others astride camels, having completed arduous journeys of commerce—all set against the backdrop of the city's thriving wealth. The mingling of the Han and non-Han people served as a testament to the Tang Dynasty as the cosmopolitan nexus of rich cultural exchange.

Tri-colored Horse-riding Figure

Figure 3 presents yet another piece of evidence of cultural interaction during the Tang Dynasty. Extracted from Li Zhen's burial site, this 35-centimeter-tall pottery illustrates a woman attired in Hu-style garments. Her outfit, a fitted robe with tapering sleeves and an asymmetrical closure, crowned by an elegantly folded hat, stands as a quintessential specimen of non-Han attire (Dong, n.d.).

The Hu wardrobe, versatile enough for both men and women, favored functional elegance with its sharply pointed felt hats, robes that featured a round neckline, and side slits that allow for free movement. This fashion was the height of trendiness during the Tang Dynasty, popular among all classes of society, from noblewomen down to the ordinary (*Tang Dynasty Non-Han Clothing*, n.d.).

To glean the cultural significance from this artifact, one must consider the broader implications of such a fashion statement during the Tang Dynasty. The adoption of Hu clothing indicates not a transient trend but a deep-seated appreciation and assimilation of external influences. By integrating elements of non-Han attire into their daily wear, the people of the Tang Dynasty were not merely participating in a cultural exchange; they were actively redefining their own cultural identity.

This sartorial inclusivity is indicative of a society where the interchange with foreign cultures was not only normalized but celebrated—an ethos where the new and diverse could find harmony with tradition. The tangible presence of such garments in everyday life underscores the extent to which these external influences were absorbed into the very social fabric of the Tang era. It reflects a cultural sophistication where differences were not merely tolerated but woven into the civilization's collective narrative. Thus, through the lens of fashion, we witness the profound ways in which the Tang Dynasty's interactions with the world beyond its borders shaped and enriched its cultural legacy.



Figure 3:
Tri-colored female figure riding horse, Tang Dynasty, Pottery, 28 cm in length, 36 cm in height

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