



# The Light of Chinese Lacquerware - Dynastic Contribution and Exploration of Cultural Connotation

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## ABSTRACT

Chinese lacquerware, as a bright pearl of the cultural and artistic heritage of the Chinese nation, has a remarkable history dating back to ancient times. This study retraces its history, detailing the outstanding contributions and innovations in lacquerware techniques during the Han, Tang, and Ming dynasties, and highlighting the strong impetus these historical points have given to the development of the art of lacquerware. The study also analyzes the symbolic and cultural significance of lacquerware, examining its widespread use in rituals and daily life, as well as its unique contribution to Chinese aesthetics, and emphasizing its cross-generational cultural connectivity.

Through comprehensive analysis, this study enhances our insights and perceptions of this ancient artistic heritage and its cultural impact, effectively deepening our understanding and perception of this ancient Chinese art form and its enduring influence on Chinese culture.

**Keywords:** Chinese lacquerware, Artistic heritage, Cultural Connotation, Symbolism, Innovation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction to the background of the study

Chinese lacquerware occupies a high position in the hall of arts and crafts, and its exquisite skills have been deposited for thousands of years, carrying, and telling the essence of China's long history, culture, and art. According to archaeological discoveries, China's lacquerware-making skills can be traced back to the Neolithic Age, about 8,000 years ago. It has continued since then to the present day. With the change of dynasties and times, each dynasty has its unique historical imprint and continues to breed unique design concepts and craftsmanship skills. In addition to the external visual aesthetics, Chinese lacquerware also contains deep cultural symbolism, and its patterns, symbols, and color systems contain many mysterious meanings and cultural cores. For example, the frequent embellishment of auspicious motifs such as dragons, phoenixes, deer, and peaches in lacquer decorations vividly reflects people's aspirations and beliefs in the beautiful visions of honor, blessing, good fortune, and wealth (Zhang et al., 2023). However, these symbolic elements' accurate interpretation and vivid expression cannot be separated from lacquerware artisans' extraordinary skills and excellent aesthetic qualities.

### 1.2 Problem statement

Chinese lacquerware is renowned for its long history and superior craftsmanship, a harmonious unity of artistic expression and functional design. Despite the cultural significance of Chinese lacquerware, there are still significant gaps in the current academic understanding of its artistry and craftsmanship. The lack of a comprehensive exploration

of these essential elements in contemporary academia hinders a comprehensive understanding and appreciation of this traditional art form(Lian, 2018).

With time, the evolution of craftsmanship, regional differences, and social and cultural influences on Chinese lacquerware have been profoundly affected, and the incompleteness of Chinese and foreign lacquerware research literature is even more evident today. This study endeavors to fill the gaps in the relevant research, combing through historical documents and meticulous analysis and generalization reveals the subtle relationship between cultural background, artistic style, and craftsmanship technology, which constitutes the characteristics of Chinese lacquerware art and technology. The understanding of these complex phenomena aims to satisfy the need for an all-round knowledge of lacquerware, effectively bridging the gap in understanding, and providing substantial theoretical support and practical insights for enhancing the academic accumulation in the field of traditional Chinese art, promoting the inheritance and innovation of the techniques, and strengthening the protection of this precious cultural heritage.

### 1.3 Research questions

1. What inheritance and innovation has Chinese lacquerware undergone?
2. How was Chinese lacquerware used in different social and cultural contexts?

### 1.4 Research objectives

1. Tracing the techniques of Chinese lacquerware.
2. Explore the social and cultural significance of Chinese lacquerware.

## 2. INHERITANCE AND INNOVATION OF CHINESE LACQUERWARE

The introduction and application of lacquerware in the long history of ancient China tells a fascinating story that combines artistic skills, traditional customs, and a harmonious relationship between artisans and the environment. Mulberry wood lacquer bow was unearthed by archaeologists at the site of the Cross Lake Bridge in Xiaoshan, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, in 2002 (Fig. 1)(Yuan, 2013). The discovery of the bow, measured by carbon 14 and thermoluminescence, brought the history of Chinese lacquerware forward by a thousand years to more than 8,000 years, the earliest discovery of lacquerware in the world, and the discovery rewrote the history of lacquerware in the world. Chinese lacquerware craftsmanship is widely distributed, in Beijing, Jiangsu, Shanghai, Sichuan, Chongqing, Fujian, Pingyao, Shanxi, Dafang, Guizhou, Tianshui, Gansu, Yichun, Jiangxi, Feng, Shaanxi and so on. All of these places have profound lacquerware skills and cultural heritage(Xie, 2014).



Figure 1 Mulberry wood lacquer bow

(Sources: Xiaoshan Kuahuqiao Site Museum, <https://www.khqyz.cn/index.htm>)

Through in-depth research and analysis of ancient Chinese literature on lacquerware and its application areas, classic texts such as the Book of Songs and the Book of Rites reveal the important role of lacquerware in rituals, celebrations, and daily life, as well as providing



background information on the importance of lacquerware in ancient Chinese society(Du, 2021), revealing the profound cultural significance and symbolism embedded in the craft of lacquerware.

### **2.1 Contributions and Innovations in Lacquerware during the Han Dynasty**

The Han Dynasty (202 B.C. to 220 A.D.) was the period of the opening and emergence of the Silk Road, and a key period in the development of Chinese lacquerware(Chen et al., 2017). This dynasty witnessed significant innovations and contributions to the craft and pushed lacquerware to a new artistic peak. Lacquerware of the Han Dynasty not only realized the sublimation of practicality and functionality but also transformed it into an elegant art form, which powerfully demonstrated the social, cultural, and artistic prosperity of the time.

The innovative breakthroughs in lacquerware craftsmanship during the Han Dynasty are particularly emphasized in this work on Chinese lacquerware in the History of Chinese Lacquerware Art and Art History(Shao, 2020). Its research has largely absorbed archaeological discoveries and findings, providing new perspectives on the development of lacquerware technology and the invention of the art form during the Han Dynasty. One of the noteworthy technological innovations is the development and refinement of "dry lacquer". This subversive process involved layering multiple layers of lacquer on top of cloth or linen fabric to create a strong and lightweight substrate that allowed for more intricate carvings and decorations(Li, 2022). Thanks to the new technique, artisans and artists were able to create larger and more elaborate lacquerware pieces such as furniture, musical instruments, and even architectural decorative components.

This innovation broadened the scope of lacquerware from everyday lacquerware to an art form used at court and by prestigious families. Decorated with intricate mythological motifs, scenes from daily life, and symbolic imagery, the lacquerware demonstrates the artistic flair and attention to detail of Han craftsmen. The use of contrasting colors (often achieved by layering different colors of lacquer) adds vibrancy and complexity to these masterpieces.

Lacquerware was circled as Diplomatic Gifts and Rewards during the Han Dynasty(Yang, 2023), at the same time, the role of Han Dynasty lacquerware as a tool for identity and political expression grew. Ornately decorated lacquerware such as boxes and trays were used as gifts and tributes to foreign guests, symbolizing the wealth and cultural taste of the Han Empire. The imperial workshops in Chang'an (present-day Xi'an) played an important role in the production of lacquerware at the court and contributed to the standardization of lacquerware styles and the spread of the craft throughout the country. The cultural connotation and symbolic significance of Han lacquerware is highlighted by its function as a diplomatic gift and its significance as a symbol of imperial wealth and exquisite culture.

In addition, the funeral customs of the Han Dynasty demonstrated the pinnacle of lacquerware craftsmanship. Our knowledge is further enriched by the fact that lacquerware unearthed in ancient tombs of the Warring States and Han Dynasties is usually well preserved. For example, the lacquerware coffins, burial objects, and artifacts symbolizing the social status of the deceased unearthed in the tombs of the Warring States and Han dynasties not only testify to the superior skills of the craftsmen but also highlight the profound symbolic significance of lacquerware in the funerary rituals(Zhang & Yang, 2023). This provides historians with a more detailed historical background for interpreting the symbolic and functional importance of lacquerware in burials.

The "lacquerware coffins" unearthed at the Mawangdui Han Tomb in Changsha, Hunan Province (Fig. 2) were a groundbreaking discovery that not only confirmed the superior skills of the lacquerware craftsmen but also provided a canvas for intricate painting.



Figure 2 Lacquerware coffin  
(Sources: Hunan Museum, <https://www.hnmuseum.com/>)

The Han Dynasty's contributions and innovations in the field of lacquerware marked a transitional period that profoundly influenced the development of this ancient craft. The leaps in technique, the refinement of artistic styles, and the widespread use of lacquerware in everyday life and the imperial court together form the cornerstone of the perpetual legacy of Chinese lacquerware. The extensive and detailed literature on Chinese lacquerware further deepens our understanding of the profound influence of the art and craft of Han dynasty lacquerware.

## **2.2 Contributions and Innovations in Lacquerware during the Tang Dynasty**

The Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) was a prosperous and powerful era in Chinese history, with a vast territory (Zhang, 2005). The Tang Dynasty made outstanding achievements and significant innovations in the field of lacquerware. Based on inheriting the essence of their predecessors' art, the Tang lacquerware craftsmen fused various lacquerware techniques, opened up the field of application of lacquerware, and ushered in a new era of lacquerware art (Wang, 2023).

Craftsmen of the Tang Dynasty made great progress in the painting process, especially the practice of incorporating precious metal elements such as gold and silver into the design of lacquerware. This sophisticated painting process greatly enhanced the luxury and ornamental appeal of lacquerware and was therefore very popular (Yang, 2020).

During the Tang Dynasty, poetry and calligraphy were famous all over the world, and there were many talented men and women, and the scene of cultural prosperity also penetrated lacquerware art. Literary items such as ink boxes and books were often decorated with poems and calligraphy reflecting the spirit of the times, and during this period, Tang Dynasty lacquerware became an important carrier of literary expression.

In addition, the tomb figurines and burial lacquerware used in the funeral customs of the Tang Dynasty undoubtedly show the artistic standard of the time, vividly reproduce the life scenes of the time, and provide a window for future generations to understand the prosperous social culture and art of the Tang Dynasty.

The Tang Dynasty was an outstanding period of history, characterized by tremendous progress in the fields of culture, art, politics, and diplomacy. In addition to these remarkable achievements, these elements were skillfully interwoven and combined to form an unprecedented historical peak. The lacquerware of this period made unique contributions in terms of stylistic design, use of color, and inlay techniques, leaving a profound and lasting impact on future generations.

## **2.3 Contributions and Innovations in Lacquerware during the Ming Dynasty**

The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) was a high point in Chinese cultural and artistic



achievement. During this period, the Ming craftsmen inherited the traditional techniques and innovated, and their exceptional sculptural talents pushed lacquerware craftsmanship into a new artistic and technological realm.

These craftsmen meticulously carved intricate floral patterns, vivid narrative scenes, and delicate motifs on the surface of the lacquerware. Their works, such as lacquerware boxes, screens, and furniture, all show the exquisite craftsmanship of the Ming lacquerers.

Craftsmen of the Ming Dynasty created a unique process of vermilion lacquer carving. The whole process of creation involves brushing multiple layers of red lacquer on the objects and then carrying out complex and delicate carvings after the lacquer dries. As a result, vermilion lacquer carvings skillfully utilize the contrast between black and red to create a layered and contrasting visual effect, giving the lacquerware a vivid and delicate texture.

While inheriting and developing the inlay techniques of the Tang Dynasty, Ming lacquerware was deeply integrated with other art forms, especially the combination of inlay techniques and metal craftsmanship (Mei, 2010). Ming craftsmen were ingenious enough to incorporate materials such as inlays, ivory, and precious metals into the design of lacquerware, which greatly enhanced the visual impact of the lacquerware and made it glitter.

Lacquerware of the Ming Dynasty achieved a breakthrough in the size of objects, no longer confined to small objects, but extended to larger and more exquisite objects, such as lacquerware screens and furniture. Exquisite lacquerware screens were usually decorated with intricate scenes and patterns, fully demonstrating the mastery of Ming craftsmen. Furniture such as cabinets, tables, and chairs were generally decorated with lacquer, skillfully integrating practical function with artistic expression, and exerting a far-reaching influence on the development of traditional Chinese lacquerware furniture and large-scale decorative objects.

In sum, the contributions and innovations of Ming lacquerware reflect a flourishing of artistic expression, technical expertise, and multi-material fusion. From exquisite carving techniques to the development of vermilion lacquerware, the Ming lacquerware legacy embodies a high degree of fusion of the rich cultural and artistic essence of this vibrant and creative period of Chinese history and has had a profound impact on the art of lacquerware, which continues to attract many enthusiasts to this day.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The research strategy employed in this study aims to comprehensively examine the historical, artistic, and socio-cultural aspects of Chinese lacquerware. Given the diversity of research objectives, this study employs qualitative research methods to address specific research questions to ensure a comprehensive understanding of this complex art form.

#### *3.1 Literature review:*

A systematic review of existing literature on Chinese lacquerware, including historical documents, academic journal articles, and conservation research results. This work not only provides the necessary background information for research and design, but also helps to clarify the history of lacquerware development, the ins and outs of technological innovations, and the gaps in the existing body of knowledge.

#### *3.2 Historical analysis:*

Utilizing historical research methodology, in-depth excavation of archival materials, historical records, and physical remains related to Chinese lacquerware. The plan is to outline the evolutionary trajectory of lacquerware craftsmanship and identify key turning points through meticulous research of core materials such as ancient books, documents, and cultural relics, to reveal the deep-rooted factors that have influenced its long-term development and wide-ranging impact.



This study is dedicated to an exhaustive exploration of the exquisite artistic qualities and fundamental essence of Chinese lacquerware. Historical perspectives, aesthetic theories, socio-cultural contexts, and modern interpretations are integrated to gain a comprehensive and detailed understanding of this rich cultural heritage.

Ultimately, this research not only contributes to the enrichment of academic knowledge but also plays an important foundation for the preservation and continuation of this extremely valuable Chinese lacquerware art tradition.

## **4. SYMBOLISM AND CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS**

### **4.1 Main uses of lacquerware**

#### *4.1.1 Application in Chinese Traditional Ceremonies*

Lacquerware, with its deep cultural connotation and symbolic significance, has become an indispensable element and carrier of ceremonial objects in many ceremonial occasions of traditional Chinese culture. Its durability, smooth mirror-like surface, and exquisite craftsmanship make it a medium for carrying spiritual trust and reinforcing the sense of ritual. Especially in the ritual system, tea utensils and related vessels made of lacquerware ware occupy an important position, and with their symbolism of harmony, respect for the beauty of nature, and rich artistic expression, they inject a strong cultural heritage into the traditional tea ceremony. Meanwhile, lacquerware such as plates and bowls also play an important role in religious ceremonies, providing a solemn and pious platform for the display of symbols such as offerings of fruits and flowers. In addition, lacquerware products such as incense burners, candlesticks, and various statues are also used to decorate altars and temples in religious ceremonies. These pieces are often integrated with intricate carvings and inlays to create a solemn, sacred, and serene spatial atmosphere.

Red lacquer is widely used in lacquerware craftsmanship. Its color signifies good fortune, happiness, and prosperity, giving lacquerware a solemn and formal atmosphere. Lacquerware with dragon and phoenix motifs was especially common in royal ceremonies, where the dragon and phoenix symbolized power and respectability, respectively (Shang, 2023). The lacquerware pieces inlaid with complex auspicious patterns further enriched the multi-layered cultural and spiritual connotations of the rituals, signifying beauty, and good fortune.

The inheritance and preservation of traditional lacquerware have taken place over generations. Ancient lacquerware in museum collections, as artifacts that have been used and renewed through generations, not only bear witness to their historical weight but also convey a sense of continuity and reverence in ritual practice. Lacquerware (e.g., lacquerware cups and lacquerware containers) plays an important role in rituals because of its unique qualities. In each case, the lacquerware vessel occupies a central position, embodying the feelings of reverence and gratitude inherent in traditional Chinese rituals.

In essence, the combination of lacquerware and traditional Chinese rituals reflects cultural heritage, spiritual symbolism, and exquisite craftsmanship. From the elegance of a tea ceremony to the solemnity of a religious ceremony, lacquerware not only serves a practical function, but also becomes an indispensable part of the ceremonial experience, infusing sacred moments with rich cultural connotations and deep spiritual underpinnings, and becoming a carrier of cultural continuity, embodying the essence of traditional Chinese etiquette.

#### *4.1.2 Applications in everyday products*

Known for its durability, craftsmanship, and unique beauty, lacquerware is integrated into every aspect of daily life, achieving a balance between functionality, practicality, and artistry.

Lacquerware is widely used in the field of tableware, widely used for bowls, plates, spoons,

and various utensils. These utensils have smooth and shiny surfaces and are durable and corrosion-resistant. It is because of these characteristics that not only greatly enhance the quality of things, but also introduce refined aesthetics into the daily eating scene and enhance the sense of dining ritual. Taking the "Bowl with reddish cloud and dragon design" (Fig. 3) as an example, the bowl is painted with a dragon motif, signifying strength, and good fortune, as well as highlighting the owner's noble status. In addition, kitchen utensils made of lacquerware are characterized by their ease of cleaning and resistance to dirt, making them a useful aid in the daily cooking process. A noteworthy example is the "Modern Yi Lacquerware Spoon" (Fig. 4), which is painted with delicate patterns, infusing ordinary cooking activities with an elegant tone, thus enhancing the user's sense of well-being.



Figure 3 Bowl with reddish cloud and dragon design  
(Sources: The Palace Museum, <https://www.dpm.org.cn/Home.html>)



Figure 4 Modern Yi Lacquer Spoon  
(Sources: Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum, <http://www.3gmuseum.cn/>)

The application of lacquerware is not limited to utensils; its influence extends to the field of storage containers. Containers such as boxes and casts are also treated with lacquerware. The unique properties of lacquerware, such as excellent resistance to moisture and insects, play an important role in ensuring the long-term integrity of stored items.

Lacquer can be used not only for practical products and works of art but also for everyday objects and people's lives. Lacquer artists broadened the decorative possibilities of everyday items such as combs, mirrors, jewelry boxes, and women's hairpins. These lacquer jewelry and decorative items were loved by women for their unique qualities. The "Dynasty Jewelry Lacquerware Jewelry Box" is one of them. With its lovely, noble inlays and symbolic motifs, it elevates an ordinary jewelry box life to an artistic meaning. Ancient women would also like to match expensive jewelry boxes and lacquerware jewelry boxes because of their expensive jewelry.

We have seen many examples and historical sources that show that lacquerware is an art



form that is integrated into everyday life and customs. It has evolved from austere utilitarianism to an art form that appealed to the common man as well as the aristocrat.

## **5. EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF LACQUERWARE ON CHINESE ART AND AESTHETICS**

Chinese lacquerware is a closely related art form. Elements of painting, architecture, furnishings, rituals, and daily life all contain it. It is a perfect blend of artistry and utility and has had a significant impact on Chinese artistic aesthetics and technological innovation.

Historically, the role of lacquerware in Chinese art dates back to ancient times(Lu, 2015). The earliest lacquerware remains unearthed by archaeologists not only demonstrate the practical function of lacquerware as a living utensil but also the characteristics of lacquerware art that have remained well-preserved after more than 8,000 years. Lacquer, as a medium of artistic expression, carries profound historical significance and plays a key role in the construction of Chinese artistic narratives. Lacquerware production and decorative crafts have become an important part of China's artistic development, nurturing and influencing the development of lacquerware art and lacquerware craft culture in neighboring regions and ethnic groups, and also making important contributions to the development of lacquerware art and lacquerware culture in the world(Wang, 2015).

### **1. Cultural symbols:**

The dragon is an important symbol in Chinese culture, a powerful and benevolent creature that symbolizes kingship, power, and good fortune in lacquerware. Often accompanied by the dragon, the phoenix represents feminine grace, nobility, and virtue, adding color to lacquerware. In Chinese mythology, the phoenix is a symbol of rebirth and rejuvenation. Peony is the national flower of China, with elegant and plump flowers, known as the "King of Flowers", symbolizing nobility, purity, and wealth(Zhang, 2018). It symbolizes nobility, purity, prosperity, and affluence. Lacquerware featuring peonies often signifies good fortune, beauty, and prosperity. Bamboo symbolizes temperance and righteousness in traditional Chinese culture. The artistic spirit of bamboo is loved for its lightness and serenity(Yang, 2010). Plum blossoms bloom even in harsh winters and symbolize perseverance. Plum lacquerware represents strength and the ability to overcome adversity. Double happiness is a common theme in Chinese weddings, representing marital bliss, fulfillment, and harmony. Lacquerware with the character "Fu" is mostly used in weddings, symbolizing wishes for a happy and fulfilling marriage. The character Fu means good fortune and is a common decorative motif in Chinese culture and art. Each different motif has a beautiful cultural identity, spiritual beliefs, and good wishes, giving life and vitality to every otherwise lifeless artwork.

### **2. Traditional Crafts Discussion:**

The craft of lacquerware production is known for its subtlety and complexity, with each step of the process requiring a high degree of patience and long hours of meticulous carving. From the collection of raw lacquer to the layering of lacquer, to the application of carvings, the whole process is a vivid interpretation of high artistic attainments and handcraft skills. Lacquerware craftsmanship has been passed down from generation to generation, contributing to the inheritance of traditional Chinese art techniques.

### **3. Integration with other art forms:**

Lacquerware art has integrated sculpture, calligraphy, poetry, and other art forms in the process of development(Yan, 2019). Especially embodied in the creation of lacquer paintings, artists use richly colored layers of lacquer to artfully construct complex and vivid visual narratives or decorative compositions. Due to the characteristics of lacquer, its smooth and flat texture gives the art of calligraphy a new dimension of expression, allowing ink and wash to take on a deeper texture and three-dimensionality in such a medium, and the lines of the brush and ink seem to be brought to life on the surface of the lacquer. In addition, lacquerware carving fully demonstrates its artistic potential in three-dimensional



space through the integration of relief techniques. These exquisite decorative elements not only enrich the visual level of the sculpture but also highlight the three-dimensional aesthetic value of lacquer art.

We can regard the great influence of lacquerware on Chinese aesthetics and art as a history of creative exploration spanning several historical eras. China's long history has provided rich soil for the prosperity and development of lacquerware, which has been handed down with enduring charm, showing distinctive national characteristics and vitality of the times. From the function of carrying historical memories and cultural symbols to the organic interaction and innovative fusion with various art forms, lacquerware has continuously demonstrated extraordinary adaptability and innovation in the profound Chinese art system, establishing its status as an art carrier full of vitality and revolutionary spirit.

## 6. SUMMARY

The systematic study of Chinese lacquerware is like the careful drawing of a magnificent picture scroll blending history and art, which delicately and vividly demonstrates the historical evolution of this craft, its rich cultural connotations, and its unparalleled craftsmanship. Our exploration begins with a detailed survey of China's existing ancient lacquerware artifacts, not only for the appreciation of the physical treasures that still shine after years of polishing but also for the understanding of the historical background of its birth and the practical application environment. During the Han Dynasty, lacquerware craftsmanship was greatly innovated and developed, becoming a symbol of the royal court's distinguished status. By the Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing Dynasties, lacquer art became even more prosperous. With the introduction of new technologies and the expansion of application areas, an in-depth analysis of the diversity of practical types and functions reveals the inherent complexity and delicacy of this ancient craft.

Lacquerware contains deep cultural connotations and symbolism. Its long history and the esteem in which it was held by the court show that lacquerware has transcended the category of general handicrafts and is a vivid testimony to the spiritual vitality of Chinese civilization. In addition to its dazzling exterior, lacquerware's interior contains a profound understanding of the characteristics of the material, a persistent pursuit of artistic originality, and a deep connection to the spiritual world. These qualities continue to inspire contemporary artists, making lacquer a bridge between the past and the present, and reminding us to cherish the timeless mark that this ancient and extraordinary craft has left on China's artistic and cultural heritage.

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