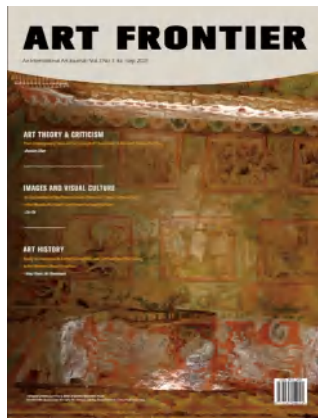




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The Concept of Confucian-Daoist Complementarity in the Art of Court-Produced Ru Ware of the Northern Song

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Abstract

During the reigns of Emperor Zhezong and Emperor Huizong of the Northern Song Dynasty, which lasted about twenty years, Ru kilns only made celadon for the royal family. Its main features are the sky-blue glaze (tianqing glaze), grey body (xianghui clay), sesame-like pinholes, and crab-claw crackle. Thanks to its superb craftsmanship and fine quality, Ru ware won mainstream approval and is one of the five famous kilns of the Song dynasty. During the Northern Song, porcelain was officially established as the standard ritual ware, marking a shift in the ritual system's focus from the value of materials to the essence of spirit. The forms of Ru ware conform to the intrinsic functions of the vessels, with the sky-blue hue as the most esteemed. The glaze, which is lustrous and softly radiant, precisely aligns with the Daoist (道家) concepts of “simplicity (樸素)” and “profound tranquility (玄淡).” This quality enabled the vessels to move beyond the symbolic functions of color and form, becoming a vehicle for the scholar-officials to “ride the things to wander the mind (乘物以遊心)” and embody their transcendent sentiments.

Key Words

Ru kiln, complementarity of Confucianism and Daoism (儒道互補), ritual vessels, imperial porcelain (宮廷瓷器)

According to the archaeological analysis of the Baofeng Qingliangsi Ru kiln site (寶豐清涼寺汝窯遺址), as detailed in *New Discoveries of the Ru Kiln* (《汝窯的新發現》), and the study of extant Ru ware artifacts, it is known that the Ru kiln began firing in the early Northern Song Dynasty and long functioned as a folk kiln. It was not until the late Northern Song period, approximately during the twenty years from the first year of the Yuanyou reign period (元祐元年, 1086 AD) of Emperor Zhezong (宋哲宗) to the fifth year of the Chongning reign period (崇寧五年, 1106 AD) of Emperor Huizong (宋徽宗), that, after producing large quantities of folk wares for a

long time, the kiln was selected by the court for its superb production quality and was subsequently commissioned to produce imperial wares.¹ The subject of this study is the batch of imperial celadon (hereinafter referred to collectively as Ru ware or Ru porcelain) fired by the Ru kiln for the court during this aforementioned twenty year period. These vessels are characterized by their plain and elegant form, pure and moist color, with the sky-blue glaze, an ash-gray body, sesame-seed spur marks, and crab-claw crackles as their main features. It was this batch of ceramics, with their exceptional craftsmanship and quality, that secured Ru kiln's place among the Five Great Kilns of the Song Dynasty. Compared to the folk ceramics of the Ru kiln, this group of imperial wares—produced for a short period, small in quantity, and more refined in quality—is the Ru porcelain most widely known to the public. As imperial tribute ritual vessels produced for court use against the backdrop of the Northern Song ritual system reform, they embody the standards of Confucian Li (rite, 禮), while simultaneously featuring aesthetic characteristics that permeate Daoist thought. By integrating both Confucian and Daoist philosophies within a single vessel, they fall under the aesthetic category of the complementarity of Confucianism and Daoism.

Confucianism and Daoism are the two core intellectual traditions of Chinese culture, together shaping the spiritual essence and the underlying values of Chinese culture. The complementarity of Confucianism and Daoism is a new proposition introduced by Li Zehou (李澤厚) in his 1981 publication *The Course of Beauty* (《美的歷程》) as the main thread of Chinese intellectual history. It was later fully expanded in *The Chinese Aesthetics Tradition* (《華夏美學》) as the main thread of ancient Chinese aesthetic history. Li Zehou's view on the complementarity of Confucianism and Daoism is that Daoism, represented by Zhuangzi, serves as both a counterpoint and a complement to Confucianism, represented by Confucius. Although the proposition of the complementarity of Confucianism and Daoism put forward by Li Zehou has been widely accepted, his specific thesis that the relationship is one in which “Confucianism is primary, and Daoism is supplementary (以儒為主、以道為

補)” has been met with both support and skepticism among scholars. Nevertheless, applying his perspective to the analysis of Northern Song Ru porcelain, which possesses the attributes of a ritual vessel while exhibiting Daoist aesthetic characteristics, is a reasonable approach.

1. “The Vessel Houses the Rites (器以藏禮)”—The Normative Role of Confucian Rites in Ru Porcelain

1.1 The Ritual Vessel Attributes of Ceramics

In Confucian philosophy, li (禮) isn’t just about simple rituals; it’s the core principle for keeping social order, managing relationships, and passing on beliefs. Vessels (器), as the concrete carriers of rites, function as a material medium that transforms abstract ritualistic thought into something perceptible and practicable. In the *Analects* (《論語》), Confucius raised a question: “They say, ‘Rites! Rites!’—is it just jade and silk? They say, ‘Music! Music!’——is it just bells and drums? (禮雲, 禮雲, 玉帛雲乎哉? 樂雲, 樂雲, 鐘鼓雲乎哉?).” In Confucius’ view, jade, silk, bells, and drums are merely the carriers, not the essence, of Li and Le (music, 樂), fully reflecting his idea of “containing vessels within rites.” Generally speaking, ritual vessels are objects that incorporate a didactic function and serve a social purpose under the norms of Confucian rites. Besides the jade, silk, bells, and drums mentioned by Confucius, other common ritual vessels include bronzes and ceramics, all used in ancient ritual activities.

The Chinese civilization has a long history of using ceramics, in which porcelain developed from earthenware. Earthenware first appeared during the transition between the late Paleolithic and early Neolithic periods; the pottery excavated from the Xianrendong site in Wannian, Jiangxi (江西萬年仙人洞遺址), dating back about 13,000 years, is currently the earliest known example of pottery in the world.² The earliest forms of porcelain appeared during the Eastern Han Dynasty, following advancements in raw materials, firing temperatures, and technology in the pottery production techniques. Initially, ceramics were used as daily necessities due to their

heat resistance, ease of shaping, and low cost. Later, with the formation of the social ritual system and the strengthening of political authority, they acquired the function of ritual vessels alongside their practical use. They began to symbolize social status and maintain the hierarchical order, and were subject to official regulation across successive dynasties. Legend holds that an office of Tao Zheng (陶正) existed during the time of the Yellow Emperor (黃帝), and that Emperor Shun (舜) personally made pottery by the riverbank.³ Official positions specifically managing ceramic production, such as Tao Zheng and Tao Ren (陶人), existed as early as the pre-Qin period. The *Book of Han* (《漢書》) records that the Qin Dynasty established the Shao Fu (少府) and Jiangzuo Shao Fu (將作少府) to oversee potters, with subordinate officials managing specific tasks; the Han Dynasty followed the Qin system with minor adjustments.⁴ Clear systems for supplying ceramics (貢瓷制度) to the court were in place during the Tang and Song dynasties, with local areas regularly paying tribute of high-quality porcelain to the central government. The Northern Song saw the emergence of truly official porcelain kilns, which were funded by the government and whose product flow was controlled by the state. These included the Ru kiln, the Guan kiln (官窯), and the Jun kiln (鈞窯). During the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the strengthening of imperial absolutism, dedicated Imperial Kilns (禦窯) emerged exclusively for the court and royalty, such as the Jingdezhen Imperial Kiln (景德鎮禦窯), Jiangxi. The requirements for making ceramics are really strict, and the products are made exclusively for the royal court. Private production and circulation among the people are banned. All of the above fall under official kilns.

1.2 Ru Porcelain in the Context of Northern Song Ritual System Reform

The Northern Song Dynasty made Confucianism the guiding principle for governing the country, so respecting Confucianism and valuing ancient traditions became really popular. The country places special importance on etiquette. In the face of the chaos left behind during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, Confucian ideas about etiquette became really important for rebuilding social order and strengthening

governance. Over more than a century, the Northern Song underwent multiple ritual reforms, during which ritual texts such as the *Kaibao Tongli* (《開寶通禮》) and the *Taichang Xinli* (《太常新禮》) were compiled, thereby constructing a formalized ritual system. This ritual reform reached its zenith during the reign of Emperor Huizong, with the core goal being to standardize national sacrifices and court assemblies to reinforce autocratic imperial power through a clearly defined hierarchy and political stability.

The Northern Song ritual reform was also accompanied by changes in ritual vessels, the most significant of which was the shift in materials, transitioning from bronze, gold, and silver to ceramics. In the sixth year of the Yuanfeng era (元豐六年, 1083 AD), civil officials and ritual specialists proposed a discussion on the system of ritual vessels to Emperor Shenzong (宋神宗). The emperor subsequently issued an edict to use ceramics for making some ritual vessels. Historical records state: “Vessels shall be made of pottery and gourd to symbolize the nature of Heaven and Earth... Currently, the ‘lan, gui, zun, dou’ (簋、簠、尊、豆, types of vessels) used in suburban sacrifices are not ceramic, which does not accord with the intent of the Rites. It is requested that in the two places of Huanqiu (the circular mound for worshipping heaven) and Fangze (the square marsh for worshipping earth), as well as in the sacrifices at the main and auxiliary positions, all the ritual vessels, such as lan, gui, zun, and dou, used should be changed to pottery (器用陶匏, 以象天地之性.....今郊祀簋簠尊豆皆非陶, 未合於禮意, 請圖丘方澤正配位所設簋簠尊豆改用陶器.....).”⁵ This shows that the Northern Song court, when choosing materials for ritual vessels, wasn't just about chasing changes in form. On the contrary, it closely follows the Confucian philosophy of 'harmony between heaven and humanity,' trying to enhance the sacredness and rationality of these rituals by aligning the materials of the vessels with nature and the universe. Ceramics were officially recognized as standard sacrificial vessels, breaking away from the previous tradition of focusing rituals on bronze, gold, and silver as symbols of wealth and power. On the contrary, it

pays more attention to the ceremonial intentions shown by the objects, marking the shift in the Northern Song ritual vessel system from valuing material preciousness to emphasizing spiritual essence.



Figure 1. Zhao Ji, *The Literary Gathering*, painting detail, Northern Song Dynasty. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

In this context, Ru kilns stood out among the many kilns. The celadon it produced is characterized by a fragrant ash-colored body, sky-blue glaze, crab-claw patterns, and sesame-like speckled tails, which earned favor and praise from officials. In the surviving Northern Song documents, Xu Jing's *Xuanhe Tribute to Goryeo Illustrated Record* (宣和奉史高麗圖經) mentions 'ancient secret-colored ware from Yuezhou, new porcelain from Ruzhou (越州古秘色, 汝州新瓷器)',⁶ directly comparing Ru ware to the Tang and Song tribute-producing Yue kiln, substantiating its status. In the painting 'Wen Hui Tu (《文會圖》)', it is said that Emperor Huizong created this artwork, which depicts a gathering of the Northern Song emperor and his ministers. Many of the ceramics on the table resemble Ru ware in both glaze and shape (figure 1). Since Emperor Huizong's reign was indeed the peak period for Ru kiln porcelain production, some scholars speculate that these are actually Ru kiln porcelains. Although it's hard to confirm further because the painting is very old, the ceramic details are hard to make out, and there's a lack of clear written evidence,

there's no doubt that Ru ware enjoyed a high reputation both officially and among the people during the Northern Song period.

The period during which the Ru kiln operated as an official kiln was brief. Following the Jingkang Incident (靖康之變) and the southward relocation of the Song court, Ru ware production ceased abruptly. The core ceramic techniques were unfortunately lost during the turmoil of war. Extant artifacts became increasingly rare due to wartime damage and dispersion, leading to the situation where, as early as the Southern Song Dynasty, Ru porcelain was already especially hard to acquire, thus highlighting its extreme rarity. The Qing scholar Sun Hao (孫灝) lamented the then “empty kiln and cold smoke” state of the Ru kiln in his poem: “What to do about the empty kiln and cold smoke? Wild coal emerges in spring on the ancient plain (窯空煙冷其奈何？野煤春生古原草),”⁷ expressing feelings of nostalgia and sorrow for the present.

Both the Ming and Qing dynasties highly regarded the Ru kiln and gave it extremely high praise. Lü Zhen's *Xuande Ding Yi Pu* (《宣德鼎彝譜》), a canonical work compiled specifically to standardize ritual and sacrificial vessels during the Xuande (宣德) reign, states: “The elegant styles of the famous kiln wares—Chai, Ru, Guan, Ge, Jun, and Ding—stored in the Imperial Treasury shall be sketched and submitted for selection (內庫所藏柴、汝、官、哥、鈞、定等名窯器皿款式典雅者，寫圖進呈挑選).”⁸ Ru ware was thus listed, alongside other famous kilns, as a reference standard for ritual vessels. Dong Qichang's *Thirteen Discourses on Antiquities* (《骨董十三說》) records: “The world refers to the Five Kilns: Chai, Ru, Guan, Ge, and Ding (世稱柴、汝、官、哥、定五窯，以此著焉者),” classifying the Ru kiln as one of the Five Great Kilns of the Song Dynasty. In *Kui Tian Wai Sheng* (《窺天外乘》), Wang Shimao (王世懋) stated: “The ceramics of the Song Dynasty regard Ruzhou as the first, and the Official Kiln made in the capital second (宋時窯器以汝州為第一，而京師自製官窯次之),”⁹ placing the Ru kiln as the foremost among Song famous kilns. Although the Ming and Qing dynasties attempted imitations, the

core techniques were missing, and aesthetic tastes differed, making it impossible to truly replicate the spiritual charm of Song Ru kiln; their creations were only referred to as Ru-style porcelain (仿汝窯瓷器).

In conclusion, pottery has been used in human society since prehistoric times, and from its earliest emergence, it has possessed ritual and sacrificial functions beyond the practical, such as the painted pottery tubular vessels and ritual vessels combining jade and pottery of the Hongshan culture (紅山文化), the black pottery ritual vessels of the Liangzhu culture (良渚文化), and some painted pottery of the Yangshao culture (仰韶文化). During the Eastern Han Dynasty, breakthroughs in raw materials, temperature, and technology in pottery craftsmanship gave rise to the earliest porcelain, marking its first appearance in the history of Chinese civilization. By the Song Dynasty, under a culture that emphasized rites and officially designated ceramics as sacrificial and ritual vessels, the Ru porcelain commissioned by the court became a quintessential example that both inherited the tradition of “the vessel houses the rites (器以藏禮)” and perfectly met the ritual needs of the era.



Figure 2. *Ru Ware Pale Sky Celadon-glazed Tripod Furnace* (汝窯淡天青釉弦紋三足樽式爐), ceramic, Northern Song Dynasty, Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing.

2. “The Vessel Carries the Dao (器以載道)”—Daoist Aesthetic Manifestations in Northern Song Ru Porcelain

From the perspective of function, Ru kiln, as an official kiln producing porcelain for the court, was regulated by the imperial ritual system and thus functioned as a ritual vessel within the context of the ritual reform in the Northern Song Dynasty. From an aesthetic perspective, Ru kiln was profoundly influenced by the aesthetic trends of the time, predominantly manifested in Daoist aesthetic characteristics. Daoism experienced two major periods of official endorsement during the Northern Song Dynasty.

The first occurred from the reign of Emperor Taizong (宋太宗) to that of Emperor Zhenzong (宋真宗), when the state promoted Daoism to maintain rule and appease the populace.

The second peak happened during the reign of Emperor Huizong. Huizong called himself the Daoist Emperor (道君皇帝). He placed Daoism above Confucianism and Buddhism. Through this official promotion, Daoist thought spread through many levels of society. Its aesthetic ideas were increasingly shown in artistic works. The Ru kiln's imperial porcelain was also affected by this trend.

In form and function, Ru ware was mainly used for sacrifices and rituals. It also included everyday wares. Overall, Ru ware looks dignified, archaic, restrained, and elegant.

For example, there is a Ru Ware Pale Sky Celadon-glazed Tripod Furnace (汝窯淡天青釉弦紋三足樽式爐, figure 2). It is kept at the Palace Museum in Beijing. It mostly imitates Han Dynasty bronzes. Its shape is regular. It has a straight-barrel form. It has faint raised bands (淺弦紋). It has no complex patterns or exaggerated forms. This design follows the Daoist principle of "the great way is simple" (大道至簡). It showcases the spirit of 'reaching the ultimate in emptiness and maintaining calmness (致虛極，守靜篤).' In this way, objects avoid being overly decorated, so as not to affect the peaceful appreciation.

There are also biomimetic designs (仿生設計), exemplified by the *Lotus-Shaped Warming Bowl in Light Bluish-Green Glaze, Ru Ware* (汝窯青瓷蓮花式溫碗, figure 3) at the National Palace Museum, Taipei, and the *Ru Kiln Azure Enamel Mandarin Duck Type Smoke Furnace* (汝窯天青釉蓮瓣鴛鴦形熏爐蓋紐, figure 4) at the Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural Heritage and Archaeology. The lotus-shaped warming bowl adopts the form of a half-open lotus flower, and the mandarin duck smoke furnace is modeled after a mandarin duck. By integrating the natural charm into the vessels, these pieces embody “the spirit of emulating nature (師法自然).” Overall, Ru ware’s forms conform to the intrinsic functions of the vessels, representing the embodiment of the Daoist concept of “can you cleanse your insight and be without fault? (滌除玄覽，能無疵乎),” aiming for a state of washing away the artificial and returning to unadorned simplicity.

When it comes to glaze color, Ru kilns really value the sky blue after the rain. The glaze is shiny, with a subtle and restrained luster. Ru kiln added agate into the glaze, giving the surface a shine like set cream, with bubbles sparse like morning stars. This creates a natural, inherent texture. This calm and subtle celadon color perfectly matches Taoism's pursuit of simplicity and mysterious tranquility. Craze in the glaze is another main feature of Ru ware. Cao Zhao's 'Essential Discussion on Ancient Models (《格古要論》)' says: 'Ru ware...light blue in color; the ones with crab-claw patterns are authentic, but the ones without patterns are even better(汝窯器...淡青色，有蟹爪紋為真，無紋者尤好).'¹⁰ The cracks on the surface of Ru ware are fine and dense, not deliberately added as decoration, but naturally formed due to the different shrinkage rates of the body and the glaze. This perfectly reflects the Daoist 'wu wei(無為)' aesthetic: it doesn't strive for flawlessness, but appreciates the beauty of imperfection that comes naturally. This is quite different from Confucianism's focus on symmetry and standardised aesthetics, putting more emphasis on simple authenticity.

In summary, Northern Song Ru ware, as imperial court ware, deeply integrated

Daoist thought into its aesthetic manifestations. Whether it is “the great way is simple” and “emulating nature” in its form, which pursues an antique, back-to-simplicity (返璞歸真) state, or the beauty of simplicity and profound tranquility embodied by its noble sky-after-rain blue glaze, or the aesthetic of non-action contained in the natural crackles—all clearly delineate the profound influence of the Daoist aesthetic on court art within the Northern Song’s specific historical context. Ru ware is not merely a ritual vessel under the Northern Song ritual system; it became a carrier of the Dao, demonstrating, through its subtle and elegant artistic language, the Song people’s spiritual pursuit of achieving emptiness, maintaining tranquility, and washing away artificial ornamentation, thus becoming a classic example of “the vessel carries the Dao (器以載道)” in the history of Chinese ceramics.



Figure 3 *Lotus-Shaped Warming Bowl in Light Bluish-Green Glaze, Ru Ware* (汝窯青瓷蓮花式溫碗), ceramic, Northern Song Dynasty, Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

3. The Aesthetic Ideal of Complementarity between Confucianism and Daoism in Northern Song Ru Porcelain

3.1 The Complementarity of Confucian Ethical Concepts and Daoist Aesthetic Thought

In *The Course of Beauty*, Li Zehou points out that although Confucian and Daoist philosophies appear to be opposed—Confucianism emphasizing engagement with the

world (入世) and active commitment, and Daoism advocating transcendence from worldly affairs (出世) and withdrawal— they are, in fact, complementary. He suggests that “‘governing the whole world’ and ‘maintaining one’s own integrity’ constitute complementary life paths of the scholar-official, while ‘being in the world’ and ‘keeping the imperial court in mind’ represent their habitual mentality and artistic conviction (“兼濟天下” 與 “獨善其身” 是士大夫的互補人生路途, “身在江湖” 與 “心懷魏闕” 是其常規心理及藝術信念).”¹¹



Figure 4. *Ru Kiln Azure Enamel Mandarin Duck Type Smoke Furnace* (汝窯天青釉蓮瓣鴛鴦形熏爐蓋紐), ceramic, Northern Song Dynasty, Collection of the Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural Heritage and Archaeology.

First, Confucianism and Daoism are fundamentally opposed to each other. From a Confucian perspective, Ru porcelain, as a form of tribute ware produced under the Northern Song ritual reforms concerning court vessels, strictly adhered to imperial ritual norms and represented one of the highest standards for court porcelain at the

time. The *Xuanhe Fengshi Gaoli Tujing* places it alongside the tribute wares of the Yue kilns of the Tang and Song periods, while Southern Song sources such as “abandoning Ding in favor of Ru (棄定用汝)” and “Ru kiln as the foremost (汝窯為魁)” likewise rank it at the top of Song ceramics. Its rarity and elegance became a symbol of social status, representing the worldly and institutionalised aspect of Confucian rites on a material level. From the perspective of Daoism, Ru ware takes simplicity and plainness as its aesthetic core. The whole piece is glazed, treating natural cracks as a kind of beauty, and shows a soft blue like the sky after rain. It pursues the ideal of ‘cleansing the mysterious reflection (滌除玄鑒)’ and reflects the Daoist spirit of being extraordinary and detached from the mundane.

However, Confucianism and Daoism can also be complementary and harmonious. Li Zehou’s concepts of the complementary paths of “governing the whole world” and “maintaining one’s own integrity,” as well as the conventional psychology of “being in the world (身在江湖)” and “having the court in mind” (心懷魏闕),” help to elucidate the underlying logic of the Confucian-Daoist complementarity embodied in Ru porcelain. For Confucianism as taught by Confucius, “ordering the state and bringing peace to the world (治國平天下)” is not the sole or ultimate meaning of human life. After the fulfillment of social responsibilities and moral self-cultivation, the ideal of “achieving success and retiring (功成身退)” and self-love represent a higher state of life. Just as in the dialogue between Confucius and his disciples, Zeng Xi’s (曾皙) pursuit of a state of “singing and returning home (詠而歸)” after worldly achievements (人際功業) were made and musical cultivation (禮樂教化) represents a higher aspiration than the emphasis on worldly success and ritual order displayed by Zilu (子路), Ranyou (冉由), and Gong Xihua (公西華). In the quote, “Knowing it is not as good as loving it; loving it is not as good as delighting in it (知之者，不如好之者；好之者，不如樂之者, *The Analects*, Chapter 雍也), knowing how to do and loving to do cannot compare to delighting in it. Therefore, compared with an exclusive emphasis on worldly relations such as “loving

others (愛人)” and “being loved (人愛),” this focus on one’s own inner spiritual world—expressed as a reflective turning toward the self (愛己)—constitutes a higher life ideal with Confucianism, and this very state shares common ground with the transcendent spirit of Daoism as advocated by Zhuangzi, making the complementarity between Confucianism and Daoism possible. It is precisely because of this non-utilitarian, transcendent spirit or attitude that scholar-officials (士大夫) across dynasties, while striving for achievements and serving the public, could gain powerful spiritual support. This spirit is not primarily reflected in their life paths, but rather manifests more profoundly in artistic creation and aesthetic appreciation. As Li Zehou stated: “Zhuangzi helped Confucianism establish a genuine aesthetic attitude toward life, nature, and art.”¹²

The success of Ru porcelain lies in its perfect integration and complementarity of the worldly norms of Confucian ethics and the transcendent spirit of Daoist aesthetics within a single object. It employs the standardized forms of Confucianism to embody ritual order and ethical values, satisfying the institutional and ritual demands of the Northern Song court for “using pottery and gourd for vessels (器用陶匏).” Simultaneously, it employs the pure glaze color and natural texture associated with Daoism aesthetics to endow this ritual vessel with a transcendent, unadorned, and authentic aesthetic meaning. Together, they satisfy the dual spiritual needs of the scholar-official class. Ru porcelain’s worldly attributes made it a medium for expressing authority and maintaining ritual order, aligning with the Confucian ideal of “ordering the state and bringing peace to the world (治國平天下).” Conversely, its transcendent and detached aesthetic corresponds with their spiritual pursuit of “singing and returning home” and “maintaining one’s own integrity.” When they practiced their Confucian aspirations in their careers, Ru porcelain served as a symbol of the ritual system; when they engaged in spiritual cultivation and aesthetics beyond the political sphere, Ru porcelain became an aesthetic vehicle for conveying their ideological sentiments. This unity of “The Vessel Carries the Dao” and “The Vessel

Houses the Rites” represents the extremely high aesthetic realm achieved by the cultural and ideological concept of the complementarity of Confucianism and Daoism in the material civilization of the Northern Song Dynasty.

3.2 The Construction of Confucianism and the Deconstruction of Daoism

Chen Yan (陳 炎), by absorbing and developing Li Zehou’s concept of the complementarity of Confucianism and Daoism, argues in his essay “The Construction of Confucianism and the Deconstruction of Daoism (《 儒家的 “ 建構 ” 與道家的 “ 解構 ” 》)” that views emphasizing one philosophy over the other—whether prioritizing Confucianism over Daoism, or vice versa are unilateral and fail to grasp the dialectical relationship between Confucian and Daoist.

He uses the construction of Confucianism and the deconstruction of Daoism to elaborate this complementary relationship. The core of Confucian construction lies in providing aesthetic activities with an orderly, ritualized, and symbolic set of rules, such as the integrated system of poetry, music, and dance within li-yue culture, thereby establishing the collective aesthetic mentality of the nation.¹³ The core of Daoist deconstruction lies in dissolving the alienation produced by Confucian construction—such as excessive formality and utilitarian tendencies—through the dissolution of ornamentation, rules, and symbols, thus preserving the free creative vitality of art.¹⁴ The logical premise of this theory of complementarity is that Confucian being (construction) precedes Daoist non-being (deconstruction), and this sequence cannot be reversed. Daoist non-being functions as a dissolution of the excessive prescriptiveness of Confucianism. Confucian construction requires Daoist deconstruction as a safeguard against alienation, while Daoist deconstruction requires Confucian construction as a safeguard against nihilism; the two interact dialectically.

The construction of Confucianism provides aesthetic activities with orderly, ritualized, and symbolic rules and conventions. In Ru porcelain, this form of construction is embodied in its material attributes and ethical norms as a ritual vessel.

Construction of Symbolic Rules: Ru porcelain, as the imperial ritual ware

produced under the ritual reforms of the Northern Song Dynasty, is itself a symbolic manifestation of Confucian Li, fulfilling the function of enshrining ritual. Its firing standards were exceptionally high. Its ware was extremely rare. Because of this, it became a material symbol of hierarchy and imperial authority. This emphasized the social principle of differentiated love (愛有差等).

Ru porcelain aims for regularity, dignity, and stability in its form. It deliberately avoids novelty and cleverness. This is the visual expression of the Confucian ideal of 'moderation (中和)'. Its qualities of subtlety, restraint, and inwardly contained luster correspond to the Confucian moral standard that “a gentleman compares virtue to jade (君子比德於玉),” thereby requiring that the vessel conform to the cultivated character of a gentleman (君子), who is described as “both refined and unadorned (文質彬彬).”

The deconstruction of Daoism, by eliminating ornamentation, rules, and symbols, counters the potential alienation arising from Confucian construction, thereby maintaining the free creative vitality of art. The aesthetic features of Ru porcelain constitute a powerful deconstruction of the overly formalized Confucian construction.

Deconstruction of Ornamentation, Return to Simplicity: In its pursuit of refinement, Confucianism can easily drift towards the alienation of intricate carving and excessive formality. With form grounded in the principle that “the Great Way is simple,” and with its pure sky-after-rain blue glaze, Ru porcelain deconstructs such excessive ornamentation. It pursues the state of “beholding the simple and embracing the uncarved block, reducing the self, diminishing the desires (見素抱樸，少私寡欲),” restoring artificial beauty to a primordial and uncarved state, and thereby achieving the aesthetic realm of “cleansing the profound mirror and returning to unadorned simplicity (滌除玄覽，返璞歸真).”

Deconstruction of Principles, Appreciation of Non-Action: Confucian aesthetics often constructs artistic principles according to the ethical standard of “expressed in emotion and restrained by ritual and righteousness (發乎情，止乎禮義).” The

naturally formed crackles on the surface of Ru porcelain, however, deconstruct this man-made principle. These crackles are a natural texture produced by the differing shrinkage rates of the body and the glaze, rather than intentional decoration by the artisan. This embodies the Daoist thought of the “Dao follows nature (道法自然)” and the ideal of non-action, which does not seek moral perfection or flawlessness, but instead appreciates the imperfect beauty brought forth by natural authenticity. In this way, it transcends the limitations of ethical standards and enters an artistic realm of purposiveness without purpose.

3. Deconstructing symbols and seeking deep tranquillity: Confucianism built a system of symbols in language and colour by maintaining order. On the other hand, Taoism believes that “the Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao (道可道，非常道)”, meaning that finite symbols—like shapes, colours, and names—can't express the infinite Tao. The post-rain sky blue glaze of Ru porcelain is light and elegant, subtly glossy, and can be seen as a deconstruction of the strong colour symbolism warned against in the saying “five colours dazzle the eyes(五色令人目盲).” Through its mysterious and tranquil tones, it achieves the aesthetic ideal of “great form has no shape” (大象無形) and emphasises the state of mind of “being so pleased that words are forgotten”(得意而忘言). In this way, objects go beyond just being symbols of colour and shape, becoming a medium through which scholars and officials can 'let their minds wander with things' and show a sense of detachment.

During the Northern Song dynasty, Ru ware gradually showed an aesthetic that blends Confucianism and Daoism through a dialectical unity of construction and deconstruction. It maintained the cultural order of the Song Dynasty through the standardised forms of Confucian ritual vessels, while at the same time breaking the formalism and sense of alienation of traditional ritual vessels through the simple and natural aesthetics of Taoism. This kind of tension allows Ru porcelain to achieve aesthetic freedom and continuous creative vitality, making it a classic example of harmony between beauty and truth in Chinese art history.

4. Conclusion

Although the history of Northern Song kiln celadon is short, it is very brilliant. It is a typical example in the history of Chinese ceramics. It shows the complementary philosophical ideas of Confucianism and Daoism. It was a royal piece made for the court in the late Northern Song dynasty. Its core aesthetic value lies in the fusion of Confucian ritual norms and Daoist transcendental aesthetics.

From a Confucian perspective, Ru ware became a court ceremonial vessel during the ritual reforms of the Northern Song dynasty. Through its standardized form, excellent quality, and rarity, it is the material embodiment of “vessels embodying etiquette(器以藏禮)”. It reflects Confucian ethics in the real world. These ethics build social order and maintain hierarchy.

From a Taoist perspective, the blue glaze of the sky after the rain, the shapes that reflect the “great Tao is simple(大道至簡),” and the naturally formed crack patterns are all aesthetic expressions of “the vessel carrying the way(器以載道).”

These traits reflect Daoism's spirit of transcendence, breaking down the sense of formality and distance that might come from Confucian structures, aiming for simplicity, deep calm, and the ideal of non-action. The artistic achievement of Ru ware lies in how it balances the Confucian ideas of structure and morality with the Daoist ideas of simplicity and nature. It not only fulfilled the political ambitions of the scholar-officials to govern the world, but also met their spiritual need to maintain their own integrity. The unity of the vessel carries the Dao and the vessel holds the rites not only solidified its status as the top of the five famous kilns of the Song Dynasty, but also reflected the high aesthetic level that ancient Chinese philosophy reached in the realm of material civilization.

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