

Passing the Imperial Examinations: A Study on the "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" Theme in Ming and Qing Porcelain

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Abstract: During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the imperial examination system prevailed. Decorations related to imperial examinations and official careers occupied a significant proportion in the ornamentation of daily necessities such as porcelain. These decorations were characterized by diverse expressive contents and a multiplicity of forms.

Keywords: Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations; Confucian ethics; Decorative Patterns Related to Official Career

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Introduction

Chinese traditional auspicious patterns integrate external forms of expression with internal connotations seamlessly. By means of symbolic implications, they convey the wishes of ancient ancestors for a happy and fulfilling life, giving rise to numerous expressions that share a unified concept yet vary in form. They have become a distinctive form of design and decorative art with profound national cultural characteristics, representing precious legacies of traditional Chinese culture and art. The theme of imperial examinations for official careers is one such traditional auspicious pattern, embodying the hopes of ordinary families that their descendants will pass the imperial examinations, obtain official positions, and enjoy promotions and increased emoluments. In ancient times, there were four great joys in life, and "being named on the imperial examination list" was one of them. These aspirations led to a flourishing of official - career - related decorative patterns.

Influenced by the imperial examination system of that era, numerous elements related to passing the imperial examinations, such as "Success in the Imperial Examinations at Every Step," "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations," "Picking the Osmanthus in the Moon Palace," "The God of Literature Pointing at the Stars," and "Winning the First Place," were incorporated into the decorative patterns and shapes of porcelain. This article focuses on the "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" theme. It reflects people's eager anticipation for passing the imperial examinations at that time, as well as Confucian educational theories, and conveys the common psychological and spiritual culture of the people of that era.

1. The Origin and Meaning of "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations"

The origin of "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" can be traced back to the story of "Dou Yanshan Teaching His Sons." Historical records state: "Dou Yi was highly erudite and had an elegant demeanor. His younger brothers, Dou Yan, Dou Kan, Dou Cheng, and Dou Xi, all passed the imperial examinations one after another." This was an extremely rare and laudable accomplishment at that time, and thus the story of "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" spread far and wide. In "Compendium of Historical Anecdotes of the Song Dynasty" by Jiang Shaoyu of the Song Dynasty, it is recorded that Dou Yujun and his sons were all learned, held important political positions, were highly esteemed by the court, and were proficient in music and astronomy. In "The Three - Character Classic," there is a line: "Dou Yanshan had proper ways of teaching. He taught his five sons, and their names became well - known." This story has been passed down extensively and is a well - known example among the Chinese people. The story of "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" reflects the ancient Chinese cultural tradition of highly valuing education

and advocating the imperial examination system. It embodies people's hopes that their children will be well - educated and pass the imperial examinations, symbolizing the success of family education and the achievements of descendants.

In ancient culture, the number "five" was often regarded as a symbol of good luck and harmony. For instance, idioms like "The Five Blessings Descend upon the House" (longevity, wealth, health, virtue, and a good death) expressed people's yearning for a good life. The earliest record related to "five sons" can be traced back to the allusion of King Wu of Zhou having "five sons and two daughters," which was intended to praise the large number of offspring. Influenced by the ancient concept of fertility worship, as well as the desire for prosperous descendants and hope for life, patterns of "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" mostly feature the images of five children. Using "five" metaphorically to represent a large number, these patterns imply the continuous inheritance of descendants and a household filled with children and grandchildren, reflecting the common people's concept of having a large family at that time.

As time progressed, "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" evolved into various variant images, such as "Five Sons Competing for the First Place," "Five Sons Snatching the Lotus," "Five Sons Rising in Rank," "Five Sons Striving to be the First," and so on. These images often depict the five sons competing for items like a helmet or a lotus, climbing a tree, or ascending, symbolizing their pursuit of success. Additionally, the five sons are sometimes represented metaphorically by symbolic objects like five mice or five roosters. Roosters were often used to imply "official positions and fame." As the saying goes, "A rooster wearing a crown is a symbol of culture." The tall crown of a rooster could symbolize the hats of civil officials. Since the Chinese characters for "crown" and "official position" are homophonic, and the "gong" in "rooster" and "achievement," as well as the "ming" in "rooster crowing" and "fame," are also homophonic, many works depicting roosters were created to suggest "official positions and fame" or "being promoted to an official position." Moreover, as roosters are singing birds, the pronunciation of "jiao" (crow) is the same as that of "jiao" (teach), which implies "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations."

The meaning of "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" is rich and profound. Firstly, it reflects people's eager hopes for their descendants to achieve remarkable accomplishments. Secondly, it demonstrates people's high regard for knowledge and education. Thirdly, it expresses people's longing and pursuit for a better life. Throughout the long history, "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" gradually became a cultural symbol with auspicious connotations, inspiring countless families and individuals to strive for their dreams and goals.

2. The Characteristics of the "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" Theme in Ming and Qing Porcelain

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the imperial - examination - centered culture was in vogue. The theme of "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" became a medium to represent the imperial examination system. It was widely used in the decoration and shaping of porcelain and presented diverse expressive forms, mainly through patterns, character scenes, clay sculptures, the implied meanings of animals through homophony, and direct inscriptions.

2.1. Design of Character Elements

Due to the distinct social contexts of different periods, the combinations and implied meanings of this theme varied. The typical image of "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" usually features a composition of five children and an elder. Sometimes, the elder might be replaced by an official of heaven or a woman, and they interact with the five children.

The blue - and - white covered jar with children - playing patterns from the Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty serves as a prime example (As shown in Figure 1). In the picture, an elder, slightly taller than the children, occupies the central position. The five children exhibit different postures. Some are intently reading at a desk, one is kneeling in front of the elder, and the elder is looking at him while making a pointing gesture with his right hand, as if imparting teachings and guidance. Some children are pulling a small cart with a pagoda - like object on it, some are walking with a wooden stick, exuding a sense of ease and leisure. Another child is dancing, full of childlike innocence and vitality. The image on this blue -

and - white jar is not only a vivid reproduction of the story but also reflects the emphasis that society placed on education and talent cultivation at that time.



Figure 1 Blue and White Covered Jar with Children at Play Decoration

Recovered from the "Wanjiao No.1" sunken ship

Both the multicolored "Five Sons Competing for the First Place" children - playing jars from the Chongzhen period of the Ming Dynasty (As shown in Figure 2) and those from the Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty depict five children playing around an object symbolizing victory or success - an official hat. This represents the good wishes that the family's children will achieve excellent results in future imperial examinations and enter the officialdom.

2.2. Inscription Elements

In addition to expressing the theme of "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" through images, some people directly inscribed their wishes for passing the imperial examinations on the porcelain body. For example, there is the blue - and - white bowl with the inscription "Being Named on the Imperial Examination List" from the Ming Dynasty. (As shown in Figure 3) The bowl is thinly glazed both inside and outside, and the glaze color is white with a tinge of blue. On the outer wall of the bowl, the four - character running script "Being Named on the Imperial Examination List" is inscribed in under - glaze blue and white. Inside the bottom of the bowl, there is a blue - and - white double - circle pattern, and a blue - and - white character "Gui" (meaning noble) is painted inside the double - circle pattern. The workmanship of this bowl is slightly rough, with obvious glaze shrinkage and iron spots on its surface. It is likely a folk - kiln product from the Tianqi and Chongzhen periods of the Ming Dynasty. From the inscriptions on the bowl, one can sense the hopes and longings of the ancient people in the Ming Dynasty to enter the officialdom through the imperial examinations.



Figure 2. Wucai Jar with the Pattern of "Five Sons Striving for the First Place" and Children at Play in the Chongzhen Reign of the Ming Dynasty

The picture is sourced from *Identifying the True Folk Kiln Porcelains of the Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties

At that time, the imperial examination system was an important means for people to change their social status, and "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" represented the glory and prosperity of the family. The display of such images on porcelain was not only an artistic expression but also a form of cultural inheritance.



Figure 3. Blue and white bowl with the inscription of "Success in the Imperial Examination" in the Ming Dynasty
Collected by Jiangxi Provincial Museum

3. The Cultural Significance Embodied in "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations"

3.1. Confucian Educational Concepts in "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations"

The story of "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" is not merely a symbol of good luck in Chinese traditional culture; it also profoundly reflects Confucian educational ideas. Confucianism places great emphasis on education, stresses moral cultivation, and pursues the harmonious development of individuals and society. These aspects are crucial for cultivating talents, inheriting culture, and achieving social harmony and progress.

Confucianism holds that a gentleman should possess not only good cultural attainments but also noble moral character. "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" does not merely mean that the five children achieved excellent academic results and enjoyed high reputations in the social and political arenas of that time. More importantly, they demonstrated extremely high standards in personal and moral cultivation. According to "The History of the Song Dynasty - Dou Yi's Biography," Dou Yujun's sons were not only outstanding in learning but also had upright conduct and were renowned for their virtue, winning the respect of people. This is in line with Confucius' concept of "cultivating oneself to bring peace to others," which means that a person should first improve themselves before they can better serve others and society. Moreover, "The Three - Character Classic" emphasizes: "It is the father's fault if he does not educate his children. It is the teacher's laziness if he does not teach strictly." This statement highlights the unshirkable responsibility of parents and teachers for the moral development of students. Therefore, in the story of "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations," one can observe a comprehensive educational system. It includes both the care and guidance within the family and the strict external discipline. These two aspects complement each other and jointly promote the all-round development of children.

Mencius said: "Seek and you will obtain; give up and you will lose. This kind of seeking is beneficial for gaining, as it is seeking within oneself." In the story of "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations," Dou Yujun and his descendants regarded reading as a lifelong pursuit. This spirit is highly consistent with the ideal of traditional Chinese Confucian education, which aims to achieve the realm of "being a sage internally and a king externally" through continuous learning and personal cultivation. In this realm, one is able to cultivate their moral character, manage their family well, govern the state effectively, and bring peace to the world.

"Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" also highlights the importance of family ethics. The family is the basic unit of society, and the relationships and interactions among family members play a crucial role in the growth of individuals and the stability of society. In this story, the parent-child relationship between Dou Yanshan and his five sons and the brotherly affection among the brothers embody the traditional family ethical values of family harmony, parental

kindness, filial piety, and fraternal love.

"Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" not only brought glory to individuals and families but also carried broader social significance. In ancient China, the imperial examination system was not only the main approach to selecting officials but also an important link connecting the fates of individuals and the country. Therefore, the story of "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" actually affirmed and supported the entire social value orientation, encouraging more people to actively participate in national construction.

In summary, the Confucian educational concepts reflected in "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" cover multiple aspects, including the significance of family education, moral cultivation as the core, the educational goal of pursuing sagehood, and a strong sense of social responsibility.

3.2. The Significance of Traditional - Culture Inheritance in "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations"

As a classic image in Chinese traditional culture, "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" holds great significance and serves as one of the key carriers of traditional - culture inheritance. In ancient society, the imperial examination system was a crucial path for many scholars to change their fates and fulfill their ambitions. The fact that all five sons could pass the imperial examinations represented the remarkable academic achievements of a family. Behind this lay their tireless pursuit of knowledge and their unwavering dedication to learning day and night. This respect and eagerness for knowledge are precious treasures in traditional culture, inspiring generation after generation to strive hard and use learning as a means to scale the heights of life.

"Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" also embodies a strong sense of family. In Chinese traditional culture, the continuation and prosperity of the family are of utmost importance. "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" is not just an individual's honor but the pride of the entire family. It reflects the cultivation and expectations of the elders for the younger generations within the family, as well as the younger generations' commitment to defending and inheriting the family honor. This family concept emphasizes the close - knit blood relationships and mutual support among family members, reflecting people's sense of responsibility and belonging. The story of "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" has become an integral part of family culture, uniting the spiritual strength of the family.

Furthermore, "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" reflects society's emphasis on talent and the selection mechanism. In ancient times, the imperial examinations provided an opportunity for people from ordinary backgrounds to enter the officialdom and showcase their talents. This demonstrated the openness and fairness of society, giving people the chance to change their fates through their own efforts. This emphasis on talent and the selection system provided a continuous driving force for social development and became a positive aspect of traditional culture.

4. Conclusion

Porcelain with the theme of "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" is not merely a practical item or a decoration. It carries people's earnest expectations and blessings for future generations and also reflects the high regard that society had for education and the imperial examination system at that time. "Five Sons Achieving Success in the Imperial Examinations" has become a common cultural symbol and a shared value among the Chinese nation. Regardless of differences in regions, social strata, and eras, people widely agree on the values of achieving personal and family development through education and contributing to society. This cultural consensus helps to enhance national cohesion and unity, thereby promoting the inheritance and development of national culture.

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