

# The Emperor's Nature: A Study of Naturalism in Qing Dynasty Imperial Ceramics from the Nanjing Museum Collection

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**Abstract:** As a quintessential representation of court art under the feudal imperial system, Qing Dynasty imperial kiln porcelains embody both the imprint of imperial will and the cultural ethos of their age. Their decorative systems serve as a vital medium for interpreting Qing political ideology and aesthetic orientation. The extensive use of naturalistic elements was not a mere artistic choice, but rather a manifestation deeply rooted in the emperors' complex needs for power construction, cosmological understanding, and cultural expression. Taking the Qing imperial porcelains housed in the Nanjing Museum as primary research objects, this paper focuses on the depictions of plant motifs, animal imagery, and natural landscapes, systematically analyzing the modes of naturalistic expression. In doing so, it reveals the imperial nature embedded within these decorations—encompassing not only the logic of sovereign supremacy and the emulation of natural order, but also the projection of personal tastes and the psychological pursuit of auspicious blessings. Furthermore, by examining the interplay of sociopolitical conditions, levels of economic development, intellectual trends, and individual imperial factors, this study clarifies the formative mechanisms of this stylistic phenomenon, thereby offering a new academic perspective on the interactive relationship between Qing court art and imperial ideology.

**Keywords:** Qing imperial porcelains; naturalism; imperial nature; Nanjing Museum.

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## 1. Introduction

The production of Qing imperial kiln porcelains was always under the direct control of the emperors. From the design of vessel shapes to the choice of decorative motifs, every aspect reflected courtly aesthetic standards and political intentions, rendering these porcelains distinctive cultural carriers that bridged material craftsmanship with elite ideology. Within their intricate decorative system, motifs centered on natural imagery occupy a particularly prominent position<sup>[1]</sup>. These designs, which appear to portray plants, birds, animals, mountains, and clouds, in fact conceal profound meanings that transcend aesthetics. The Nanjing Museum preserves a rich collection of Qing imperial porcelains, whose naturalistic expressions exhibit distinct stages of evolution: while retaining the genetic imprint of traditional craftsmanship, they also display strong period characteristics shaped by imperial intervention. Investigating how these naturalistic motifs were imbued with symbols of power, notions of order, and personal sentiments not only clarifies the transformative trajectory of natural imagery in Qing court art, but also decodes the spiritual world of the emperors through material artifacts, providing concrete case studies for understanding the mechanisms of interaction between imperial authority and culture in the Qing dynasty<sup>[2]</sup>.

## 2. Forms of Naturalistic Expression in Qing Imperial Porcelains

### 2.1. Analysis of Plant Motifs

Within the established aesthetic system of the Qing court, plant motifs emerged as the core vehicle for naturalistic expression in imperial kiln porcelains. Owing to their close

affinity with nature and their capacity to embody rich cultural symbolism, plant motifs adhered to the principle of “deriving images from heaven and modeling after nature.” This approach not only emphasized faithful depictions of natural forms but also valued artistic refinement as a means of conveying spiritual connotations. Designers carefully observed plants' growth cycles and morphological features, abstracting scenes such as blossoming flowers and spreading branches into stylized patterns. These motifs were arranged in close harmony with vessel contours—for example, the entwined lotus on the shoulder of a meiping vase had to follow the natural curve of its profile, while the cut-branch chrysanthemums within circular dishes had to complement the balance of the round composition. Stylistic variations across imperial reigns were pronounced: the Kangxi era favored vigorous and forceful renderings of leaves and stems; the Yongzheng period pursued spacious and ethereal arrangements with deliberate blank spaces; the Qianlong court, in contrast, sought lavish density, creating an effect of exuberant blossoms in profusion.

### 2.2. Animal Motifs and Mythological Imagery

In contrast to the relative stillness of plant motifs, animal motifs leveraged their dynamic qualities and symbolic structures to become a more narrative mode of naturalistic expression in Qing imperial porcelains. A representative example is the Kangxi-period copper-red-decorated “sea beasts” bottle (Fig. 1), whose exterior wall, covered with a milky-white glaze, features fourteen auspicious beasts and four transformed dragons rendered in copper red. The depiction is meticulously detailed, with shading variations used to convey the undulations of muscles and the textures of scales, thus achieving a remarkable degree of biological

precision. Equally notable is the blue-and-white dish with “fish-to-dragon transformation” design, also from the Kangxi imperial kilns, which exemplifies the fusion of myth and reality<sup>[3]</sup>. On its surface, a dragon leaps from crashing waves while a carp bursts upward from the opposite side; the dragon’s form departs from convention, integrating the strength of land animals with the agility of scaled creatures to

present a distinctive mythological figure. In the court’s deployment of animal motifs, both realistic depictions and mythological reconstructions were simultaneously pursued, generating a unique visual discourse. The juxtaposition of real and mythical animals allowed these porcelains to serve as material bridges between the natural world and the spiritual domain.



Figure 1. Kangxi copper-red bottle with “sea beasts” motif

### 2.3. Natural Landscapes and Abstract Representation

In Qing imperial porcelains, natural landscape motifs functioned as vehicles for constructing spatial atmospheres. Their creation drew upon the aesthetic principles of traditional landscape painting, yet developed distinctive modes of expression shaped by the unique characteristics of porcelain as a medium. This category became a crucial branch of naturalism, combining both representational and abstract qualities<sup>[4]</sup>.

Landscape compositions adhered strictly to the principles of *gaoyuan* (high distance), *shenyuan* (deep distance), and *pingyuan* (level distance), employing the brush methods of

rendering rocks, the flowing lines of water, and the arrangement of trees to evoke a layered natural scenery within the confined space of a vessel’s surface. Cloud and mist motifs, expressed through fluid curvilinear lines, conveyed the dynamic movement of air, their shifting forms echoing the philosophical notion of yin–yang transformation. On certain porcelains, natural landscapes were subjected to a high degree of abstraction: mountains were reduced to triangular color blocks, while waves were distilled into parallel linear patterns. Such stylization preserved the recognizable features of landscapes while enhancing decorative rhythm. The interplay between abstraction and figuration endowed these motifs not only with the beauty of nature but also with a formal dynamism reminiscent of modern art aesthetics (see Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of natural landscape motifs in Qing imperial porcelains

Motif Type	Core Concept	Techniques of Representation	Artistic Effect	Reference from Nanjing Museum Collection
Landscape Motifs	“Three-Distance” composition principle	Cunfa (texturing) for rocks, flowing lines for water, layered depiction of trees	Recreates the sense of natural depth	Qing Yongzheng Blue-and-White Vase with Landscape Design and Handles
Cloud Motifs	“Transformation of Yin and Yang”	Flowing curves to show gathering and dispersal, often combined with dragons and phoenixes	Symbolizes the circulation of cosmic vitality	Qing Qianlong Yellow-Ground Green-Enamel Bowl with Cloud Patterns
Abstracted Landscape Motifs	Stylized deformation while retaining identifiable features	Mountains rendered as triangles, waves as curved lines, clouds as clustered motifs	Enhances decorative rhythm	Qing Kangxi Doucai Plate with Floral Medallions

### 3. The Manifestation of Imperial Nature in the Naturalism of Qing Imperial Porcelain

#### 3.1. Assertion of Absolute Imperial Power and Political Will

In the strictly hierarchical society of the Qing dynasty, decorative systems on material artifacts functioned as direct reflections of power relations. As vessels produced exclusively for the court, imperial porcelains bore naturalistic motifs that were deeply imbued with political attributes, serving as implicit tools for consolidating imperial authority<sup>[5]</sup>. Following prescribed imperial standards, natural motifs were transformed into exclusive symbols of sovereignty. For instance, the five-clawed dragon was reserved for the emperor, while phoenix patterns were strictly aligned with the ranks of empresses and consorts. This monopolization of natural elements represented a comprehensive control over symbolic resources. The visual presentation of motifs also served power narratives: dragon motifs were often combined with clouds and flames, their dynamic tension evoking the majesty of the “mandate of heaven,” while the endlessly looping tendrils of lotus patterns symbolized the perpetual continuity of imperial rule. In this way, porcelain transcended its utilitarian function to become a mobile declaration of authority.

#### 3.2. Reverence for and Imitation of Natural Order

Under the traditional Chinese philosophy of “unity between heaven and humanity” (*tianren heyi*), natural order was regarded as a model for social order. Qing emperors infused this recognition into porcelain design, employing naturalistic fidelity to construct visions of governance aligned with their ideals. Artisans were required to adhere to the intrinsic logic of natural cycles: floral motifs needed to reflect

growth phases, while bird-and-beast designs had to correspond with ecological habits<sup>[6]</sup>. This faithful imitation of natural states conveyed imperial recognition of a cosmos where order reigned, mirroring the conviction that human governance should proceed with the rhythm and inevitability of the four seasons. The symbolic composition of motifs further embedded governance philosophy. For example, the “sea and cliff” pattern mirrored the hierarchical gradation of waves with bureaucratic ranks, while the solidity of rocks symbolized dynastic stability. The visual transposition of natural order thus embodied imperial visions of constructing an idealized social order.

#### 3.3. Projection of Personal Aesthetics and Cultural Refinement

Enjoying exclusive privileges over porcelain production, emperors infused their personal tastes into contemporary court art, with naturalistic motifs serving as vivid reflections of their cultural identity. A representative example is the set of twelve flower-patterned cups from the Kangxi reign, housed in the Nanjing Museum (Fig. 2). Each cup depicts the flower of its corresponding month, accompanied by poetic inscriptions and the seal “shang” (to appreciate), demonstrating Kangxi’s pursuit of literati ideals and cultural cultivation. The *qinghua fen shui* (blue-and-white shading) technique heightened the layered delicacy of the floral designs. During the Yongzheng reign, *doucai* porcelain bowls with bamboo-and-rock motifs displayed his preference for the “subtle and sparse” literati aesthetic, with brushwork and blank space evoking refined restraint. In contrast, the Qianlong period produced works such as the revolving vase with blue glaze, gilt decoration, and famille rose panels depicting the emperor’s hunting expeditions. Combining multiple techniques and vivid colors, this piece conveyed imperial grandeur while recording the emperor’s achievements. Through such works, emperors articulated their personal aesthetics and cultural refinement.



Figure 2. Kangxi reign blue-and-white cups with twelve monthly floral motifs

#### 3.4. Psychological Pursuit of Blessings and Auspiciousness

In an era of limited scientific knowledge, emperors—despite wielding supreme authority—sought supernatural means to alleviate anxieties over governance. Naturalistic motifs on imperial porcelain thus became intermediaries

linking reality with belief, embodying a complex psychology of auspicious wishes. The choice of patterns heavily relied on folk symbolic systems: peonies paired with bulbuls signified “wealth and longevity together,” while pines and cranes symbolized “longevity and health.” Such auspicious combinations not only expressed imperial hopes for personal

well-being but also revealed a deeper desire for dynastic stability<sup>[7]</sup>. In certain periods, motifs carried even more targeted meanings: the “abundant harvest” pattern addressed the threat of famine, while the Guangxu reign’s “dragon-and-phoenix auspiciousness” motif implicitly conveyed aspirations for dynastic revival. The auspicious functions of natural motifs thus essentially served as spiritual defense mechanisms employed by emperors in confronting crises of rule.

## 4. Factors Influencing the Formation of Naturalistic Style in Qing Imperial Porcelain

### 4.1. Socio-Political Environment

As handicraft products directly serving the imperial court, the stylistic evolution of Qing imperial porcelain closely mirrored the fortunes of the dynasty, with the stability of political power directly shaping demands for cultural expression and, in turn, the representation of naturalistic motifs. Following the unification of the empire, rulers urgently needed cultural symbols to integrate Han and Manchu groups. Imperial porcelain thus frequently featured motifs such as plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum—favored by the literati—which symbolized “gentlemanly virtues” while simultaneously bridging ethnic divides through familiar cultural imagery. During the Yongzheng reign, the establishment of the Grand Council marked a new peak of centralization, and imperial control extended to every detail of porcelain decoration. The composition, color, and even brushstrokes of natural motifs required direct imperial approval, producing highly codified patterns—for example, the number and orientation of petals in scrolling lotus designs were fixed by rule. By the late Qing, however, after the Taiping Rebellion and fiscal crises strained the court, imperial control over kilns weakened. Increased involvement of civilian artisans introduced more everyday motifs such as dandelions and wild chrysanthemums, unintentionally fostering a trend toward secularization in naturalistic style<sup>[8]</sup>.

### 4.2. Level of Economic Development

The material foundation not only determined the scale of porcelain production but also shaped the technical possibilities for expressing naturalistic style. The prosperity of the Kangxi–Qianlong era provided ample resources for exquisite naturalistic renderings. With steady state revenues, imperial kilns enjoyed generous funding to support technical experimentation. Jingdezhen workshops could source premium cobalt from Yunnan and enamel pigments from Europe, enabling unprecedented brilliance in blue-and-white tones and enamel glazes. These materials supported refined realism, such as using *fen shui* (wash shading) to model the concave and convex sides of petals or the *zhadao* technique to simulate the texture of bird feathers. By contrast, during the Jiaqing reign, repeated Yellow River floods and the White Lotus Rebellion depleted the treasury, and imperial kiln budgets were halved. Natural motifs were simplified: distant mountains once built up with three glaze layers were reduced to single-line outlines, and delicate double-lined leaf veins were replaced with coarse strokes. At the same time, the growth of commodity markets spurred cross-regional technical exchanges. For instance, ivory-white porcelain technology introduced from Dehua kilns enabled imperial workshops to replicate the soft translucency of magnolia

blossoms. Thus, economic circulation became a hidden driver of innovation in naturalistic style.

### 4.3. Cultural and Intellectual Currents

The interplay of diverse intellectual traditions in the Qing imbued naturalistic motifs with meanings beyond decoration. Confucianism, the state orthodoxy, promoted the cosmology of “unity of heaven and humanity,” making natural motifs vehicles for linking cosmic and social order. When artisans painted farming scenes, for example, they meticulously aligned crop growth with seasonal phenology according to the 24 solar terms, thereby expressing the agricultural ethic of “following heaven and responding to time.” Daoist thought encouraged more expressive renderings, such as the Yongzheng-era ink-color landscapes, where mountain outlines were deliberately softened and misty brushwork evoked “distant hills in haze,” embodying the Daoist principle of “following nature.” With the relaxation of maritime bans in the Qianlong era, Western missionaries introduced perspective and chiaroscuro, infusing naturalistic motifs with novel elements<sup>[9]</sup>. Jesuit artist Giuseppe Castiglione (*Lang Shining*) designed enamel-painted bird-and-flower patterns that employed shading to highlight the three-dimensionality of feathers and petals, breaking from traditional flat color techniques. This fusion of Chinese and Western methods gave naturalistic motifs both realistic precision and poetic depth. Meanwhile, the spread of Tibetan Buddhism at court extended the symbolic system: lotus motifs evolved from representing “purity unsullied by mud” to signifying “perfect Buddhahood.” Such cultural cross-currents continually expanded the semantic range of naturalistic ornamentation.

### 4.4. Imperial Personal Agency

Within the autocratic framework of “I am the state,” the personal will of emperors exerted decisive influence on porcelain styles, with naturalistic motifs often serving as direct reflections of their inner worlds. Kangxi, fascinated by Western natural science, emphasized realism in ornamentation. He commissioned Jesuits to produce the *Imperial Almanac of Monthly Orders* and required porcelain florals to strictly conform to its illustrations, as seen in Kangxi blue-and-white lotus bowls where petal counts and vein patterns matched the atlas with scientific precision. Yongzheng, deeply influenced by literati painting, frequently offered personal critiques of designs. The okra-pattern plates he commissioned used light ink outlines and literati brush styles, revealing his taste for refined simplicity. Qianlong, by contrast, demanded visual manifestations of “all nations paying tribute.” His *famille rose* vase with “myriad flowers” design—now housed in the Nanjing Museum—features densely packed blossoms of dozens of species, using floral abundance to symbolize imperial grandeur<sup>[10]</sup>. In this way, imperial personalities were transmuted into the defining marks of naturalistic style.

## 5. Conclusion

The naturalistic motifs on Qing imperial porcelain were far more than decorative symbols; they embodied vivid projections of imperial nature onto material objects. As evidenced by pieces preserved in the Nanjing Museum, patterns inspired by flora, fauna, and landscapes not only carried the logic of sovereign authority but also conveyed reverence for natural order, reflected emperors’ personal aesthetic preferences, and expressed their aspirations for

blessings and longevity. The interplay of shifting political contexts, fluctuating economic conditions, evolving cultural currents, and individual imperial will collectively shaped the stylistic trajectory of naturalism. Through these motifs, one discerns how Qing emperors employed natural imagery to construct political legitimacy and articulate their inner worlds. This study thus enriches our understanding of Qing court art and provides a meaningful reference for examining the dynamic interaction between imperial power and material culture in traditional society.

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