

Jingdezhen Cultural Symbols from English Ceramic Reports on the Belt and Road Portal and Their Application in International Chinese Language Education

Linglin Wu*, Fei Peng

Jingdezhen Ceramic University, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, 333000, China

ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of the in-depth advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, official English-language media have emerged as a critical channel for cross-cultural communication. Among them, the English ceramic reports published by the Belt and Road Portal provide an important discourse platform for the international dissemination of Jingdezhen ceramic culture. Concurrently, international Chinese language education is gradually transforming toward a "culture-empowered" model, urgently demanding high-quality and representative regional cultural resources as support. Jingdezhen ceramic culture, in turn, serves as an ideal carrier bridging external cultural communication and Chinese language teaching practice. Taking the relevant English ceramic reports from the Belt and Road Portal as the research corpus, this study extract the core symbolic system of Jingdezhen ceramic culture constructed in these reports. On this basis, it further explores how such symbolic resources can be transformed into teaching materials applicable to international Chinese language education, an important carrier of cross-cultural communication.

KEYWORDS

Cultural symbols; The Belt and Road Portal; International Chinese language education

1 Introduction

In the context of the deepening development of globalization and the systematic "going global" of Chinese culture, international cultural communication and international Chinese language education, as the two pillars of the national language and culture strategy, are increasingly intersecting and synergizing. On the one hand, the official international propaganda discourse system under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative is committed to transforming rich elements of Chinese culture into "cultural symbols" with strategic communication value, so as to shape the national image and promote mutual learning among civilizations. On the other hand, international Chinese language education has entered a new stage of high-quality development, and its cultural teaching is facing an urgent need to transform from superficial "general knowledge introduction" to in-depth "cultural understanding" and "value dialogue". Against this dual background, this study selects Jingdezhen ceramic culture as the core carrier to explore how it can serve as a bridge connecting national narratives and teaching practice. In the Belt and Road narrative, Jingdezhen ceramic culture has been endowed with new-era connotations such as a "pearl on the Silk Road" and an "envoy of civilizational dialogue". This unique quality, which integrates regional, national and global attributes, makes Jingdezhen ceramics an excellent sample for observing how the official reconstructs traditional culture and exploring how such reconstruction outcomes can be transformed into Chinese language teaching resources. This research is carried out at the intersection of international communication and Chinese language education, aiming to explore theoretical paths and practical schemes from national discourse production to educational practice application.

2 Theoretical Foundations

This study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis as its core methodology, Cultural Semiotics as a tool for meaning interpretation, and integrates Content-Based Instruction and Intercultural Communication Theory to guide educational transformation, forming a complete logical chain from "discourse deconstruction" to "pedagogical construction".

First, Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis serves as the cornerstone for deconstructing the discursive practices in the English ceramic reports on the Belt and Road Portal. This model guides the research to unfold systematically across three levels: at the textual dimension, it conducts a fine-grained analysis of linguistic features in the reports, including lexical choices, transitivity systems, and metaphorical rhetoric; at the discursive practice dimension, it focuses on examining how texts, through intertextual strategies, organically embed the discourse of Jingdezhen ceramics into grand national narratives and strategic frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative and

the Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture; at the social practice dimension, it elaborates on how such discursive practices specifically serve macro-socio-political goals, including national image building and the enhancement of cultural soft power.

To deepen the understanding of the mechanisms of cultural meaning production, this study also introduces Roland Barthes' theory of Cultural Semiotics as a key interpretive lens. Drawing on Barthes' concept of "myth", specific artifacts, craftsmen, techniques, and scenes in the reports are regarded as first-order signs. The study focuses on analyzing how these signs, through specific narrative combinations and rhetorical packaging, collectively point to deep cultural ideologies such as "craftsman spirit" and "win-win cooperation", namely the second-order "myths". This theoretical perspective not only facilitates the systematic extraction of the core cultural symbol clusters constructed in the reports but also reveals how these symbols are "naturalized" into self-evident cultural truths, thereby clearly demonstrating the inherent mechanism by which external propaganda discourse elevates regional culture to a national strategic symbol.

Finally, in the critical transition from discourse analysis to pedagogical application, this study primarily relies on Content-Based Instruction and Intercultural Communication Theory to construct the transformation pathway. Content-Based Instruction advocates driving language learning through systematic and authentic disciplinary content, which provides the core concept for designing modular courses themed on the "ymbol System of Jingdezhen Ceramic Culture". Meanwhile, Intercultural Communication Theory emphasizes cultivating learners' comprehensive abilities to understand, compare, reflect on, and negotiate cultural differences, guiding learners to dialectically examine the construction process of cultural symbols and their multiple underlying meanings.

3 Construction of the Jingdezhen Cultural Symbol System in English Ceramic Reports on the Belt and Road Portal

The English ceramic reports on the Belt and Road Portal actively construct a hierarchical and interconnected symbol system through a set of sophisticated and coordinated discourse strategies. Oriented fundamentally toward serving the national narrative of the Belt and Road Initiative, this system transforms regional cultural resources into global cultural symbols with strategic communication value. Its construction process reflects the high degree of consciousness and sophisticated techniques in meaning production within official international propaganda discourse.

3.1 Macro Narrative Framework and Collaborative Discourse Production

The reports first endow all specific symbols with holistic meaning through a stable macro narrative framework. The core feature of this framework is the dialectical unity of time and space, which deliberately deconstructs the binary oppositions between history and modernity, China and the world, and shapes a continuous and interconnected view of cultural development. For instance, when covering the Jingdezhen International Ceramic Fair, reports typically open by tracing its historical origins to the ancient "Porcelain Road" trade, framing the contemporary commercial exhibition as a contemporary echo and active continuation of a millennium-old dialogue among civilizations. This narrative strategy successfully transforms "history" from a static backdrop into a dynamic "living heritage" that legitimizes and deepens current events.

Within this macro framework, the platform's reports construct a meaning-production network featuring collaboration among diverse subjects. Discursive power is not evenly distributed but organized in an organic, hierarchical collaboration, which verifies and deepens previous findings on "subject composition". Official institutions act as definers and anchors, setting the value tone for the entire symbol system through authoritative statements. Industrial and market players serve as verifiers, translating abstract values into tangible narratives. Cultural elites function as interpreters, infusing the symbols with emotional warmth and aesthetic depth. International actors act as validators: their direct quotations, as third-party testimonies, greatly enhance the cross-cultural credibility and appeal of the symbols.

3.2 In-depth Extraction and Discursive Construction of Core Symbol Clusters

Based on the relevance of reports on the Belt and Road Portal to the research theme, this study systematically ranks all candidate reports from high to low, and finally selects the top 14 reports as the core analytical sample (see Table 1). Driven by the macro Belt and Road narrative framework, these reports systematically construct four major core cultural symbol clusters through the focus and elaboration of specific images, figures, and events. Drawing on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, these clusters function as first-order signs (signifiers).

Table 1 News Headlines Reporting on Jingdezhen Ceramics

Sample No.	News Headline	Key Symbolic Orientation
1	Jingdezhen ceramics shine bright under BRI(2023/10/23)	Win-win cooperation, historical inheritance
2	Jingdezhen and Iznik's Ceramic Dialogue on the Silk Road(2025/6/12)	Win-win cooperation, historical inheritance
3	International ceramic fair for China's porcelain capital (2020/10/12)	Win-win cooperation, innovative vitality
4	Int'l artists explore ceramic heritage of ancient Chinese village (2025/5/8)	Historical inheritance, innovative vitality
5	Turkish ceramic artist meets new opportunities in China's "porcelain capital" (2021/10/26)	Innovative vitality, win-win cooperation
6	Int'l ceramic art show held in Jingdezhen to promote cultural exchange between China, Britain (2022/9/13)	Win-win cooperation
7	Xinhua Headlines: China's "porcelain capital" fosters intercultural exchanges to preserve ceramic heritage (2024/10/29)	Historical inheritance, craftsmanship spirit
8	Cross-millennium ceramics trade bears witness of China-Africa trade exchange (2023/6/26)	Historical inheritance, win-win cooperation
9	Worldwide ceramic innovators drawn to Jingdezhen, China's porcelain capital (2024/6/11)	Innovative vitality
10	To the land of porcelain: Jingdezhen offers numerous opportunities for foreigners, says Turkish ceramic merchant (2023/10/24)	Innovative vitality, win-win cooperation
11	German ceramicist embraces East-meets-West experience in China's "porcelain capital" (2025/4/24)	Craftsmanship spirit, innovative vitality
12	China's porcelain capital nurtures dreams of global youth (2023/7/10)	Innovative vitality, craftsmanship spirit
13	German ceramist learns porcelain art in China's Jingdezhen (2025/4/22)	Craftsmanship spirit
14	China's porcelain capital showcases porcelain culture in London (2024/9/18)	Win-win cooperation

3.2.1 The "Millennium Porcelain Capital": A Symbol of Historical Inheritance as a Civilizational Continuum

The construction of this symbol relies primarily on the solidification of appellations and the chaining of history. By repeatedly using the undisputed title "China's porcelain capital" (e.g., Samples 7, 12, 14), the reports anchor Jingdezhen's status as the origin of ceramic civilization in global discourse, establishing it as a self-evident historical starting point. A deeper discursive strategy lies in actively weaving this "origin" into a trans-temporal and trans-spatial network of civilizational exchange. For instance, Sample 8 (Cross-millennium ceramics trade bears witness of China-Africa trade exchange) uses "millennium-old ceramic trade" as empirical evidence, portraying Jingdezhen as a historical hub connecting China and Africa and witnessing long-standing cross-civilizational economic and trade interactions. Sample 2 (Jingdezhen and Iznik's Ceramic Dialogue on the Silk Road) revives the "dialogue" with Iznik, Turkey—a historically important ceramic center—and subtly places Jingdezhen within a framework of civilizational dialogue extending from the ancient Silk Road to the present. These narratives collectively point to a core "myth": Jingdezhen represents not only the exquisite craftsmanship of Chinese civilization but also a living tradition that has deeply participated in and continuously promoted exchanges and mutual learning across Eurasia since ancient times. Its "millennium" history is thus constructed as an open, dynamic history of global communication, rather than a closed local history.

3.2.2 The "Hands of Craftsmanship": A Symbol of the Craftsman Spirit as the Embodiment of National Spirit

The reports' portrayal of the craftsman spirit transcends abstract value advocacy, instead achieving personification and universalization by focusing on the gaze and experience of "the Other". The core strategy is to depict how international participants are deeply attracted to and transformed by Jingdezhen's craftsmanship. Sample 13 (German ceramist learns porcelain art in China's Jingdezhen) and Sample 11 (German ceramicist embraces East-meets-West experience in China's "porcelain capital") detail the journey of German ceramicists who systematically study and integrate Eastern and Western techniques locally. Such narratives of "the Other" actively seeking knowledge and immersive experience are more persuasive than any direct praise, indirectly confirming the exceptional value and profound heritage of Jingdezhen's traditional craftsmanship. Meanwhile, Sample 12 (China's porcelain capital nurtures dreams of global youth) and Sample 7 (Xinhua Headlines: China's "porcelain capital" fosters intercultural exchanges to preserve ceramic heritage) frame Jingdezhen as an active "cultivator" and "nurturer". This closed-loop narrative of "attraction–transformation–cultivation" dynamically constructs "craftsmanship" from a static Chinese cultural concept into a globally appealing spiritual pursuit and quality standard that can be learned and shared. Its deep signified is contemporary China's profound confidence in its cultural traditions and its ability to transform them into global cultural capital.

3.2.3 The "Hotbed of Creativity": A Symbol of Innovative Vitality as a Marker of an Open System

To thoroughly deconstruct the stereotype that "tradition equals conservatism", reports on the Belt and Road Portal strive to construct Jingdezhen as a symbol of a global creative "magnet" and "melting pot". The discursive core is to portray an ecosystem where "international talents converge spontaneously, and tradition and the present collide passionately". The title of Sample 9 (Worldwide ceramic innovators drawn to Jingdezhen, China's porcelain capital) itself serves as a manifesto. Samples 5 and 10 reinforce the narrative of "boundless opportunities" through the success stories of Turkish artists, while Samples 11 and 13 do so through the deep engagement of German ceramicists. Sample 4 (Int'l artists explore ceramic heritage of ancient Chinese village) depicts international artists actively venturing into Chinese villages to explore ceramic heritage. Collectively, these reports paint a vivid picture of "the global creative class drawn to an ancient tradition, where they inspire new ideas and create new value". The deep "myth" constructed is that Jingdezhen (and the excellent traditional Chinese culture it represents) is not merely a museum for admiration, but an open, fluid, and productive contemporary creative engine—one that successfully transforms cultural resources into the attractiveness and inclusivity driving global innovation.

3.2.4 The "Silk Road Porcelain Discourse": A Symbol of Win-Win Cooperation as a Relational Bond

This represents the final stage of the symbol system's realization of strategic significance, constructed by the reports through a composite narrative of "from culture to commerce, multi-party win-win". On the one hand, there is soft dialogue and exhibition at the cultural level. Sample 2 (dialogue with Iznik), Sample 6 (China-UK art exhibition), and Sample 14 (cultural showcase in London) explicitly position ceramics as a medium for promoting "cultural dialogue" and "exchange". The International Ceramic Fair in Sample 3 builds a platform integrating culture and trade. On the other hand, the narrative further extends to tangible benefits and opportunities at the developmental level. The repeated emphasis on "opportunities" in Samples 5, 9, 10, and 12 transcends the purely artistic realm, implying broad commercial, professional, and developmental possibilities. All narratives ultimately converge under the most comprehensive title of Sample 1 (Jingdezhen ceramics shine bright under BRI): Jingdezhen ceramics glow brilliantly under the light of the Belt and Road Initiative. The ultimate signified of this cluster is to shape Jingdezhen ceramics as a multifunctional strategic relational medium: it connects history and reality, communicates China and the world; it conveys cultural emotions to achieve "people-to-people bonds" and creates practical value to promote "common development", thereby serving as a perfect cultural footnote interpreting the spirit of the Belt and Road—"peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit, and win-win results".

4 Application of Jingdezhen Ceramic Cultural Symbols in International Chinese Language Education

Integrating the four core cultural symbols of Jingdezhen ceramics extracted above, and drawing on Content-Based Instruction, Intercultural Communication Theory, and Second Language Acquisition Theory, their application in international Chinese language education is highly feasible. It not only aligns with the needs of teaching transformation but also enables the synergistic empowerment of language teaching and cultural communication.

In terms of teaching goal compatibility, the core of the "culture-empowered" transformation in international Chinese language education is to cultivate learners' intercultural communicative competence and Chinese application ability. The cultural symbols of Jingdezhen ceramics precisely build a bridge connecting "language carrier—cultural connotation—intercultural understanding". Regarding the inherent characteristics of the symbols, the four cultural symbols present the advantages of "clear hierarchy, rich connotation, and adaptability to diverse teaching scenarios". From the perspective of practical teaching value, the application of Jingdezhen ceramic cultural symbols can address the current dilemmas in international Chinese language education, such as "fragmentation of regional cultural materials" and "disconnection between cultural teaching and language teaching". Based on the unique attributes of the four ceramic symbols and the hierarchical needs of international Chinese language education, the precise transformation of abstract symbols into teaching resources centered on physical Jingdezhen ceramics, production processes, and original report texts can simultaneously achieve the three goals of language acquisition, ceramic cultural learning, and intercultural thinking development.

Beginner Learners (Symbol Recognition + Basic Language Training): Focus on the superficial ceramic imagery of historical inheritance (Yuan blue and white porcelain, Imperial Kiln Factory) and craftsmanship spirit (basic movements such as clay throwing and glazing). Select concise opening paragraphs from Jingdezhen ceramics shine bright under BRI for Chinese-English comparison, with a focus on explaining core ceramic-specific vocabulary (porcelain clay, glaze, kiln fire, blue and white, porcelain capital), supported by high-definition picture cards. Use short videos of Jingdezhen's "Four Famous Ceramics"—blue and white porcelain, translucent eggshell porcelain, famille rose porcelain, and color-glazed porcelain—to demonstrate the five basic processes: "kneading clay—throwing—trimming—glazing—firing". Design

implementable tasks: picture description using the basic sentence pattern “This is ____ (ceramic name). Its color is _____. It is used for ____ (purpose)”. Classroom quizzes adopt “ceramic picture—Chinese vocabulary” matching exercises.

Intermediate Learners (Symbol Interpretation + Pragmatic Competence Development): Cover the complete connotations of the four ceramic symbols. Select narrative paragraphs from German ceramist learns porcelain art in China’s Jingdezhen and Jingdezhen and Iznik’s Ceramic Dialogue on the Silk Road for intensive text reading: analyze how the reports reinforce the craftsmanship spirit through “a German ceramist learning the ‘trimming’ process among the seventy-two procedures” and embody win-win cooperation through “the joint ceramic exhibition of Jingdezhen and Iznik, Turkey”. Design situational tasks: simulate bargaining in a Jingdezhen ceramic market (“How much is this blue and white teacup? Can you make it cheaper?”) and write a short essay titled A Day When I Visited the Jingdezhen Imperial Kiln Factory.

Advanced Learners (Symbol Critique + Intercultural Critical Thinking): Focus on the deep construction logic of ceramic symbols. Based on Critical Discourse Analysis, set up debatable topics for debate: Should Jingdezhen ceramics adhere to all seventy-two manual procedures or introduce 3D printing to improve efficiency? Invite inheritors of intangible cultural heritage from Jingdezhen (such as masters of handmade blue and white porcelain) to deliver online lectures, allowing learners to ask questions in Chinese (e.g., “What are the differences in decorative patterns between modern blue and white porcelain and traditional blue and white porcelain?”). Add intercultural comparison tasks: compare the craftsmanship and cultural connotations of Jingdezhen blue and white porcelain with Dutch Delft blue porcelain and Turkish Iznik porcelain, and write an academic essay titled An Intercultural Dialogue of Three Blue Porcelains. The evaluation criteria explicitly include three indicators: “accuracy of Chinese expression”, “depth of understanding of ceramic culture”, and “reflection of critical thinking”.

5 Conclusion

This study constructs an analytical framework of “discourse deconstruction—symbol extraction—teaching transformation”, systematically examining the construction and transformation of Jingdezhen cultural symbols in English ceramic reports on the Belt and Road Portal. The study finds that through specific narrative and discourse strategies, the reports systematically construct four core symbols: the “Millennium Porcelain Capital”, the “Hands of Craftsmanship”, the “Hotbed of Creativity”, and the “Silk Road Porcelain Discourse”, making them strategic signifiers carrying the Belt and Road narrative. This symbol system is authoritative, structural, and cross-culturally adaptable, providing high-quality resources for international Chinese language education.

On this basis, this study proposes a hierarchical, task-driven teaching transformation model, designing a progressive path from cultural cognition to critical thinking for learners at different Chinese proficiency levels, realizing the creative transformation from national discourse to teaching resources. This study not only provides a paradigm for the teaching development of regional cultural resources but also broadens the practical path for the coordinated development of external communication and language education.

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