The Cultural Implication and Artistic Features of the Craft of Zhuang Brocade

Jia Li and DiYa Tang

ABSTRACT
As a traditional handcraft of Zhuang nationality, Zhuang Brocade is the most representative symbol of ethnic culture. This paper introduces the cultural implication and artistic features of the craft of Zhuang brocade through five aspects which are historical development, weaving techniques, decorative motifs, color language and its role in Zhuang people’s life rituals.

Keywords: Zhuang brocade, the cultural implication, artistic features.

The craft of Zhuang brocade was selected for the first batch of China Intangible Culture Heritage List in 2006. As a traditional handcraft of Zhuang nationality, Zhuang brocade is the most representative symbol of ethnic culture as well as bearing rich implications of Zhuang nationality’s cultural heritage and national spirit. It is famous throughout the world with its long standing historical accumulation, exquisite weaving techniques, multiplex decorative motifs, glorious color language and its indispensable role in Zhuang people’s life rituals, and evokes modern aesthetical identification.

I. Deep Historical Accumulation
The formation of the craft of Zhuang brocade is a long process of technical accumulation. Currently available information shows that Zhuang ancestors have mastered linen manufacturing, linen brocade, cotton manufacturing and cotton brocade, those help to bring about the ultimate Zhuang brocade. The name of Zhuang brocade has successively experienced several changes as ‘Langan percale’, ‘kapok cotton’, ‘Tian’, ‘Huashu’, ‘Guangxi brocade’, ‘Tongjin’, the weaving technology had become increasingly mature and gradually turned into the art form of Zhuang brocade we see today.

Jia Li, School of Fine Arts & Design, Hubei University for Nationalities, Enshi 445000, China
Diya Tang, School of Art, Guilin University of Technology, Guilin, 541004
Ordinary funding project of scientific research of higher education institutions in Guangxi in 2013 (project number SK13YB046)
1. Bast Fiber Manufacturing and the Craft of Bast Brocade

The ancestors of Zhuang nationality are Yue people who lived in the southern region of China in ancient times, which has a subtropical climate and is suitable for the growth of hemp plants. Archaeological excavation and historical records prove that as early as the Neolithic, people who lived in Guangxi had already mastered the skill of linen fiber manufacturing. Till Han Dynasty, linen fiber manufacturing became mature and textiles became good in quality. In 1976, a large tomb of Han Dynasty was found at Dapolling on the northern bank of Xijiang River of Luobo Bay in Gui County of Guangxi[1]. There are also many black and vermilion fragments of meander brocade in the No.7 coffin.

They were very colorful when they were unearthed but they cannot be extracted [2]. As we know, the most notable contrast between Zhuang brocade and other brocade is that Zhuang brocade is made of linen thread and silk thread or cotton thread and silk thread. Therefore, based on this archaeological excavation, we can infer that the original Zhuang brocade had been formed early in Han Dynasty and it was a kind of linen brocade made of linen and silk.

2. The Craft of Cotton Manufacturing

In ancient times, cotton was called ‘Kapok’, ‘Ceiba’, ‘Gubei’, and was divided into tree cotton and herbaceous cotton. In the Northern and Southern Dynasties, both tree cotton and herbaceous cotton can be used to make yarn and fabric, and were dyed into kapok cotton. At this time, kapok cotton was woven with dyed cotton threads, which can also be viewed as a phase of the development of Zhuang brocade. The form of the craft of dyed cotton, the weaving of kapok cotton, the maturity of the technology of Gui Cloth manufacturing and the good texture laid the technical foundation for the further development of Zhuang Brocade.

3. Brocade Technique

There is record in Shu Jin Pu written by Fei Zhu in Yuan Dynasty that ‘In the sixth year of Yuanfeng period (1083), Duke Ji of Lv started to build a brocade institute at the east of the government seat, recruited five hundred soldiers and artisans to weave brocade, and designated officials to govern the institute... The brocade woven at that time has four types: brocade as tribute, Guan Gao brocade, brocade for clothing of officials, Guangxi brocade. According to this, we can infer that before the establishment of the Sichuan brocade institute in Northern Song Dynasty, Guangxi brocade had already been famous for its good quality and it’s weaving craft and methods became a reference model for Sichuan brocade institute to produce tribute. ‘Guangxi brocade’ is the name of Zhuang brocade in Song dynasty. In Ming dynasty, Guangxi brocade became tribute. The name of Zhuang brocade appeared in annals until Qing dynasty Qianlong years.

II. Exquisite Weaving Techniques

Zhuang Brocade is woven by cotton threads and silk threads or linen threads and silk threads. It is ingeniously made by means of sorting the warp and separating the weft, taking plain colored slender cotton threads or linen threads as the warp, and taking multicolored silk threads or knitting wool as the weft.
1. The procedure of weaving

The weaving process of Zhuang brocade can be divided into seven procedures: the first is spinning out the thread and using cotton, ramie and silk to spin out cotton threads, linen threads and silk threads; the second procedure is dyeing, which means dyeing the weft according to needed pattern and color; the third is sizing process, which means using rice water or powder syrup to steep threads prepared for weaving so as to make them stiff and smooth; the fourth procedure is skidding threads, which means using spinning wheels to skid starched cotton threads into the spindle; the fifth procedure is beam-warping, i.e., warping the warp, which means using the warping machine to organize the warp; the sixth procedure is threading, which means making organized warp thread the reed on the head of the weaving machine in order, and fixing the weft according to the configured order of the pattern’s color; the seventh procedure is weaving on the machine, which means producing multicolored Zhuang brocade according to designed pattern and specification [3].

2. Types of Weaving Machines and Regional Differences

The determining factors of Zhuang brocade’s form are shape and structure of the weaving machine and weaving technology. The weaving of Zhuang brocade in different regions differs in the structure of weaving machines. There are mainly three types of the weaving machine. People living in Huanjiang area used Huanjiang brocade weaving machine. People in Binyang and Xincheng used bamboo weaving machine. And People in western Guangxi used Jingxi brocade weaving machine. Scholars once respectively conducted the thorough research of weaving machines in Huanjiang, Binyang and Jingxi. And they believed that although the shape and structure of them were different, the machine and weaving technology in different regions all contained the cross-stitch theory of the early brocade weaving machine. Therefore, it can be said that the three kinds of machines all developed from the original spinning wheel [4].

3. Same Craft Characteristics

Although Zhuang brocade weaving machines are different in their shape and structure because of the different regions, and different machines differ in weaving methods, Zhuang brocade produced by weaving machines in different regions has the same craft characteristics. Generally, these characteristics can be summed up as two points: the fist is that the warp is slender and the weft is thick. Use the weft to cover the warp. The warp is the background and the weft forms the design. Patterns are all formed by colorful weft; the second point is the weaving method of sorting the warp and separating the weft. Decorative pattern formed by closely spaced weft shows on the ground warp to create the three-dimensional quality as a sculpture.

III. Multiplex Decorative Motifs

There are dozens of traditional patterns of Zhuang brocade. With the development of the society, Zhuang brocade weavers created many new patterns reflecting life of the time and social scenes. According to decorative motifs, these patterns can be divided into the following types:
1. **Geometric Modeling**

Decorative patterns of Zhuang brocade are most famous for geometric patterns, including cloud thunder pattern, woven pattern, pattern of fret, bow string pattern, etc. Compound geometric patterns are composed of singular geometrical pattern through the composition form of double-square and four-square principles. The extensive use of geometric modeling was caused by three reasons. Firstly, it was determined by the craft and method of Zhuang brocade manufacturing. Using the Zhuang brocade craft of ‘sorting the warp and separating the weft’ was the most convenient way to weave geometric patterns. Secondly, it was an inheritance of primitive Zhuang people’s heavy use of geometric patterns on the pottery. Thirdly, the aesthetic feeling of order brought by geometric patterns strengthens the visual effects of Zhuang brocade.

2. **Concrete Expression**

There are also many concrete patterns used in Zhuang brocade, including patterns about plant patterns, animal patterns, scenic spots, folk tales, actual life, etc. Plant patterns mainly include plum-blossom design, the lotus pattern, the peony pattern and the pomegranate; animal patterns are mainly about butterflies, mandarin ducks, bats and fishes; the scenic spots include Guilin Scenery, revolutionary shrine, etc.; the folk tales include Lu Sanjie, etc.; the actual life mainly contains 4 types of harvest, ethnic unity, etc. These patterns were all sourced from the plant, animals, characters, scenery in real life and nature. The patterns have distinct characteristics. They are vivid and so true to life. These patterns are the expression of Zhuang brocade weavers to show concrete images in nature and life through imitation, which reflects Zhuang people’s love of and longing to a happy life.

3. **Auspicious Supplication**

In Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties, the method expressing auspicious supplication in brocade through characters became more popular and formed the decorative law of ‘the pattern must be meaningful and the meaning must be auspicious’. The methods can be summarized as pictographs, overtone, analogy, symbol representation, partial tone, characters, etc, and these methods are also often used in several combinations. The completion of ‘bureaucratization of native officers’ from the middle of Ming dynasty to the thirteenth year of the reign of Emperor Yongzheng in Qing Dynasty, promoted the greater development social economy and cultural in Zhuang-inhabited areas. The appearance of ‘Fu, Lu, Shou’, ‘the eight auspicious symbols’ and other patterns on the Zhuang brocade indicates that the influence of the Sinic culture on Zhuang-inhabited areas was further deepened. These auspicious graphics are popular among people and express Zhuang people’s supplication for the auspicious and happy life through partial tone and symbols, and also they reflect the communication and merging between Sinic culture and Zhuang ethnic culture.

4. **Primitive Worship**

Many decorative motifs of patterns in Zhuang brocade remains the vestiges of Zhuang nationality’s primitive worship. The decorative motifs of primitive worship can be divided into following types: (1) Cultural worship. Zhuang people offered sacrifices
to sun since ancient times. In Zhuang brocade, the sun becomes the pattern of octagonal star after abstraction and geometrization, which is also called octagonal pattern. Patterns of clouds and lighting and patter of water ripple are also common patterns in Zhuang brocade. (2) Reproductive worship. The ‘flower goddess’ derived from ‘Muliujia’ (also called Miliujia) in the creation myth is the fertility goddess in the folk beliefs of Zhuang nationality. The girls of Zhuang nationality wove various patterns of flowers with their clever fingers, and this is a way for them to express their wishes for the prosperity of their family. (3) Totemism. Ancient Zhuang people believed that they were descendants of snacks and took snack as their totem. The Fangshengwen, which is common in Zhuang brocade, is evolved from diamondback consisting of black brown and light brown on both side of the long-noded pit viper. Patterns of dragon, phoenix, snack, frog, etc. in the Zhuang brocade are the expression form of symbolization and tokenisation of totems during the development of Zhuang nationality, and they are indispensable parts of the ethnic culture.

IV. Glorious Color Language

The use of color in weaving Zhuang brocade is closely related to the life custom and aesthetic orientation of Zhuang people. There is no fixed method of color matching in brocade. The matching is mainly based on the personal experience of the weaver and the weaving effect imagined by weavers themselves. The use of color is also not stuck to the inherent color of the objects, and only pursues the gorgeous color, striking contrast and strong ethnic characteristics in the brocade. Common methods to use and match colors in Zhuang brocade can be roughly summarized as the following types:

1. **Match bright colors when using deep colors as the background.**

Because no matter matched with how bright colors, the brocade doesn’t look garish as long as using dark colors like black or dark indigo as the base color, and meanwhile background of dark colors can bring out the beauty of design and color, and the comeliness of patterns. Zhuang people adore black and blue, which is originated from an ancient legend.

2. **Use black, white and gray to space the pattern when the contrast is strong.**

Contrasting colors are often used in Zhuang brocade. However, large-scale use of contrasting colors will lead to visual stimulation and a sense of disharmony. Clever Zhuang weavers use black, white or gray lines to divide adjacent contrasting colors, which not only enriches the structural levels of the brocade, but also brings the gorgeous, fresh and bright, colorful but not vulgar style to the brocade, so as to make the brocade filled with strong flavor of life and great decorative effects.

3. **Change area to moderate effects of adjacent high-purity colors.**

When more than two adjacent high-purity colors are in one photograph, if the proportion of each color is similar, the photograph will have a strong sense of conflict. Clever Zhuang brocade weavers change the proportion of colors to make bright colors in the brocade set off each other, and to show richness in honesty, glamour in elegance.
V. Abundant Life Rituals

The cultural significance of Zhuang brocade is indispensable in the life of Zhuang people. Zhuang brocade is involved in every important event in all Zhuang people’s life since their birth.

1. Birth

In Zhuang nationality, on the third day of the birth or the day of the baby’s first month of life, his or her grandmother brings personally woven Zhuang brocade-made objects like slings, quilts with auspicious patterns on them, and holds solemn grandma-send-sling rituals. Families of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law send their best wishes to the new life by singing in antiphonal style. Patterns on the sling sent by grandma are meaningful. Other people know the sex of the baby according to the pattern. The fruit means a boy and the flower means a girl.

2. Choosing a Mate

Zhuang females learn the craft of Zhuang brocade manufacturing from female elders since they were a child, and they also love using Zhuang brocade to make accessories. Headscarves and handkerchiefs made of Zhuang brocade are what girls of Zhuang nationality carry around all the time. There is a prevalent custom in Zhuang region, Jingxi, that if a young man meets an eligible girl on his way to a fair, he will snatch her headscarf. If the girl has no feeling for him, she will get her headscarf back; if the girl also likes the young man, they will come to an agreement of the time and place they will meet each other next time, or exchange pledges. Headscarves and handkerchiefs made of Zhuang brocade carefully by Zhuang girls play a role as a red line of a matchmaker in their choosing the life companion.

3. Marriage

In Zhuang-inhabited areas, the reverse side made of Zhuang brocade is an essential one of the dowry when a girl gets married. In the Republic China, Records of Jingxi County records that: ‘As usual, betrothal presents from the groom’s family contains money, pigs, sheep, geese, ducks, chickens, alcohol, seafood, candies, etc. The dowry from the bride’s family contains Tujia brocade, quilts, cotton-padded mattress, blankets, bed-curtains, drapery, shoes, socks, cases, pots, bowls, lamps, etc.’ In dowry, more objects made of Zhuang brocade indicate the diligence and cleverness of the bride, and meanwhile show the wealth of the bride’s family.

VI. Conclusion

As a specific symbol in the ethnic culture of Zhuang nationality, the art of Zhuang brocade has experienced historical changes. The development of Zhuang brocade is also the weaving of each happy moment of Zhuang people’s life with exquisite weaving techniques, various decorative motifs and glorious color language, and bears cultural tradition and national spirit with ethnic characteristics. It is the emphasis on mutual learning and tolerance of the ethnic culture of Han, Miao, Dong, and Yao nationalities during the historical development of Zhuang brocade art that makes the Zhuang brocade keep the creative vitality, blend into the international culture today and attract the world’s attention.
References


