Reflection and Enrichment of Farming Culture in Folk Art—A Case Study of Central Shaanxi Plain

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Abstract. Based on the context of Central Shaanxi Plain, the authors probe into the aesthetic features of local folk art from perspectives of time of creation, theme, modeling, material and color through a review of the implication and essence of local farming culture and local folk art. In addition, the authors make a brief analysis of how to enrich local farming culture and inherit local folk art.

Introduction

Since ancient times, farming culture is mostly represented, inherited and spread through people's memory and word-of-mouth, or via tutor-to-apprentice teaching, rather than by printed works or classics. [1] As an important cradle of Chinese civilization, Shaanxi province becomes a significant place for Chinese folk art because of its profound history and culture. Farming culture in Central Shaanxi Plain has witnessed several different stages of development from the embryo to the infant stage, followed by further development and prosperity periods. Farming culture in Central Shaanxi Plain, which has been blended and interacting with various folk customs, lifestyles, and splendid folk art, has become the treasure of Shaanxi local folk art and even of Chinese folk art thanks to its profound history and culture and unique characteristics.

Being the basis and foundation of traditional Chinese art [2] folk art not only represents the most direct physical expression of farming culture, but also reflects the real scenario of production and life and embodies ordinary labor workers' emotions, aspirations and aesthetic sense. Farming culture in Central Shaanxi Plain constitutes a full display of the essence of Chinese farming culture, which includes coordinated and harmonious perceptions of the world, value and life, a philosophy of farming which lays emphasis on right timing and prevention of disadvantages, a concept of land which is oriented towards subjectivity, an idea of recycling which favors turning wastes into something useful, and an opinion of frugality that advocates a thrifty lifestyle. [3] The unique characteristics of farming culture in Central Shaanxi Plain find their complete manifestation in folk art.

Connotation of Folk Art and Farming Culture

It is well-known that imperial style art created by imperial artists, which centers on life and governance of feudal emperors, focused on pursuit of elegance, grandness, sophistication and indifference. Another group of artists are upper class intellects, who
cared more about ordinary people and scholars, adopted more flexible ways of artistic expression in their works. In contrast, composition of folk art tends to be more diversified, symmetric and harmonious, because these folk artists are mostly the working class craftsmen or farmers.[4] The specialty of folk art lies in its artists, targeted buyers and influence and a wider choice of themes and forms as well. In addition to painting, Chinese working people have created numerous other forms of art such as clay sculpture, paper-cutting and shadow puppet.

In the agricultural society where materials were in rarity, people's daily life began as the sun rose and ended as the sun went down. The primary purpose of any activity is to meet physical needs. Spiritual needs came second. That is why folk art is always presented or performed on important ceremonial occasions, such as weddings, funerals, Spring Festivals, holidays, birthdays and ancestor worships. Featuring a combination of entertainment and education, folk art represents a casual and colorful lifestyle during the slack season. In this sense, folk art is the reflection of farming culture on the psychological or spiritual level.

Being an indispensable part of farmers' life, folk art is a significant way of presenting Chinese farming culture and an extension of ancient Chinese agricultural civilization. According to Lu Xun, it is the “art of producers” (cited from Huabian Literature published on Nov. 1, 1934). The development of each form of folk art is closely related to farming culture. Folk art represents the reflection of farming culture in the field of art, a way of publicizing farming culture, and a kind of entertainment for rural residents.

Review of Folk Art in the Context of Farming Culture

The source and permanent theme of folk art in Central Shaanxi Plain has always been farming culture, agricultural production and rural life, the choice of which shows people’s reliance upon and worship for land, rich farming customs and rules of activity during different farming seasons.[5] These three aspects have become a code of conduct guiding folk art creation in terms of choosing theme and form.

Folk art is created out of the day-to-day farming work. Therefore, it tends to apply symbolism more frequently, expressing emotions through artistic techniques of implication, exaggeration and deformation. As time goes by, artistic works gradually develop into a kind of aesthetic sense and temperament embodied in folk customs which will be inherited. On the one hand, Confucian culture has exerted a huge influence upon folk art in Central Shaanxi Plain, while sorcery culture has affected it in a more implicit way. On the other hand, traces of traditional opera in Shaanxi province can be found in folk art, whether regarding content, image or aesthetic expression. As a result, folk art works develop characteristics of simplicity, boldness, exquisiteness and diversity, with a variety of forms such as New Year paintings, embroidery, paper-cutting, dough modeling, peasant paintings, cloth paste paintings, paper handworks, festive lanterns, shadow puppet and facial makeup. These works show the essence of farming culture in Central Shaanxi Plain. Aesthetic appreciation of these works from the perspective of folk art can start with the time of creation, theme, modeling, material and color.

Time of Creation

Responding to the philosophy of farming which lays emphasis on right timing and prevention of disadvantages, folk art works are mostly created during slack seasons or at important moments of life. The main crop in Central Shaanxi Plain is winter wheat,
which is sowed between October and November and harvested between May and June, leaving a relatively long slack season for folk art creation. Forms of folk art include: 1) Shadow puppet, also referred to as shadow puppet show, is a way of celebrating autumn harvest. Hua county is most famous for shadow puppet. 2) New Year painting. As its name indicates, it refers to painting posted inside houses during the Spring Festival like the door-god pasted on the door and it is the most popular form of folk art. Other figures of New Year paintings include fortune-God, Zhong Kui (a person in Chinese literature who catches ghosts in Spring Festival) and Yuchi Jingde (a famous general in Tang dynasty). New Year painting is used as a decoration to enhance the festive atmosphere and to express New Year wishes. So far, the best-preserved ones are the wooden New Year paintings in Feng Xiang County, which are well-known for their simplicity, brightness and boldness. 3) Paper-cutting. Paper-cutting is used for decoration purpose and enhancing atmosphere, especially in weddings, funerals and Spring Festival. It is usually pasted on windows or eaves. The most famous places for paper-cutting are the Central Shaanxi Plain, Zhou Zhi county and Zhao Yi county. 4) Festive lanterns. Festive lanterns, also called decorative lanterns, represent an integral part of traditional Chinese customs, especially during the Lantern Festival. The most famous place for festive lanterns is Gao Ling County. 5) Dough modeling. It is also called flour modeling. On the turning points of four seasons and eight solar terms and on such occasions as birthdays, weddings and funerals, women hand-make steamed buns of different forms and images, including mountains, rivers, grasses, woods, flowers, birds, the Chinese zodiacs, figures, architecture and Chinese characters. These images look vivid and lively, expressing people’s emotions and beliefs. The most famous places for dough modeling are Da Li County and He Yang County.

Theme and Image

Folk art in Central Shaanxi Plain, which is oriented from the filial culture advocated by Confucianism and aims to reproduce farmers’ daily work and life, is a form of art where symbolism is often applied and on which Shaanxi opera (Qinqiang) has exerted influence. In terms of choice of themes and images, folk artists combine natural elements of mountains, rivers, grass, woods, birds, fish and insects with their imagination. Artistic works created in such a way is highly abstract, free from constraints of any object itself. While clearly delivering artists’ philosophy, these works leave large room for audiences to unleash their own imagination. For example, in image of lion-ball dance, lion implies male while ball female. Dates, peanuts, longan and lotus seeds are put together to symbolize giving birth to babies as early as possible. Using peach and Chinese characters of Fu and Lu (because their homophonic in Chinese sounds similar the pronunciation of longevity) to indicate longevity. These examples reflect ordinary people’s simply mindset and aspiration for a better life.

Paper-cutting. Paper-cutting is a form of folk art where scissors or graver is used to cut papers into different shapes[6]. It is reputed as “the cradle of Chinese art, the dynamic carrier of culture and the symbol of life”. As in most cases paper cuttings are pasted on windows, they are also called “window paper-cutting”, “decorative paper-cutting”, “engraved decoration”, and “cut decoration”. Thanks to the easy availability of tools and materials, paper-cutting is the most common form of folk art in Central Shaanxi Plain. The basic technique of paper-cutting is hollow-cutting. Paper-cutting art in Central Shaanxi Plain features delicacy and more frequent use of curves. For instance, lines from works in Qin Shan County and Feng Xiang County are so thin that they resemble the pinpoint. Images of works in Xun Yi County are more
vivid and dynamic, similar to the images in shadow puppet. Paper-cuttings in San Yuan County prefer images of flowers with the use of simple composition and strong contrastive colors. Paper-cuttings in Fu Ping County are more diversified in forms, with smooth flow of cutting lines and moderate contrast between bright and dark colors. Themes of paper-cutting mainly come from legendary stories, wishes, mascots and life scenarios. Take the famous color paper-cutting works in Xun Yi County as an example: inspirations mostly originate from figures, animals, flowers, folk customs, folk songs and religious beliefs. With the magnificent and mysterious skills of creating romance and exaggeration, they adopt techniques of cutting, pasting and lining to complete a final piece of work.

**Peasant Paintings.** Developed in the 1950s, peasant painting represents a mixture of traditional paper-cutting, embroidery, local opera, dancing, festive activity, hobbyhorse, land boat, and dragon lanterns. It is a perfect combination of modern painting and traditional folk art, usually describing the life and work scenario of peasants. Peasant painting applies the technique of realism, with an extraction of images limited by the size of painting yet unconstrained proportion of figures, which keeps the figures vivid, lively and relatively exaggerative. Such bold colors as bright yellow, orange and dark green are used to increase the festive atmosphere. Peasant painting, featuring simple yet rich composition, rich imagination, extravagated figures and bold color usage, is the most representative of the innocence, simplicity and loveliness of peasant artists and local residents’ unique aesthetic sense.

**Shadow Puppet.** Shadow puppet, made out of leather of donkey, sheep or cow, can be preserved for a long time. Different images of shadow puppet are created through the complicated processes of leather working, marking, engraving and binding. A shadow puppet show is where light is adopted to reflect the shadows of different images on the screen, and at the same time artists behind the screen operate puppets and sing and talk to their movements. Shadow puppet used to be the most popular form of folk art during the 1980s. Production of puppets is central to the success of a shadow puppet show, which is also referred to as “puppet drama”, “light shadow play” or “shadow play”. Classic shadow puppet shows include the Top ten, Generals of the Yang Family, The Legend of Yue Fei and Water Margin. Shadow puppet of Central Shaanxi Plain is of high artistic and traditional value because of its special design, delicate engraving, contrastive color usage and exquisiteness. So far, workshops have been built to produce shadow puppets, which, together with embroidery and paper-cuttings, have become the main souvenirs in Central Shaanxi Plain.

Embroidery is traditional form of decoration adopted by Chinese women in their sewing where special needles and colorful threads are used to draw different images and styles on clothes or textiles. Most embroidery works are created to show the farming culture where men are responsible for farm work while women for weaving. Works in Central Shaanxi Plain are no exception. Embroidery in Xi Qin County, Cheng Cheng County and Da Li County have been enlisted as the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Shaanxi Province. Themes of embroidery are mainly flowers, plants and figures to express people’s aspiration for a better life. For example, embroidery on wedding occasions tends to use images and themes of dragon and phoenix, mandarin ducks, one hundred children, and a harmonious wedlock lasting a hundred years to express best wishes for newly-wed couples. These themes were developed from the belief that the more sons, the better, because in the farming society, farming work required a lot of strong labors. While embroidery seen on skirts, shoes, hats, purses, belly wrappers, waistcoats, bellybands and handkerchiefs is mostly animal images such as lion, tiger,
frog, phoenix and swallow, embroidery on birthday curtains, screens, table skirt and flags tends to be Kylin, lotus, buddhism godness Guanyin, five son all succeeding in the Imperial Examination, blessing of happiness, three stars of luck, prosperity and longevity, lions rolling balls made of strips of silk, a hundred birds are paying homage to a phoenix, dragon and phoenix bringing prosperity, and sea under the rising sun. These images look rather vivid and lively as a result of beautiful lining, delicate techniques and proper use of colors.

Choice of Materials

Choice of materials is guided by principles of frugality and recycling, which echo the similar philosophies in farming culture.

Pieces of Old Cloth or Rags Pasted together to Make Cloth Shoes. In the farming society where materials were in scarcity, supply of cloth was rather limited, not to mention that cloth itself was low-abrasive. Small left-over pieces were collected and pasted together on a plate (or a shoe sole model) by glue. Then, they would be exposed to the sunshine and be used to make shoe soles once they got dry. Nowadays, with improvement of people’s life, pieces of old cloth or rags are rarely seen, even in rural areas of Central Shaanxi Plain. Surprisingly, a French TV station leant about this skill and visited rural areas of Central Shaanxi Plain to shoot a special documentary, in which such a skill is called “Picasso in Reality”.

![Pieces of old cloth or rags pasted together to make cloth shoes.](image)

Cloth-pasting Picture. Cloth-pasting picture, as its name indicates, applies pasting, embroidery and dyeing techniques to make coarse cloth into handcraft. As cloth is easily available and environmental-friendly, in the manufacturing process, even if there are damages or fault operations, cloth will not be effected and can still be re-used. This idea of recycling is influenced by the farming civilization.

Dough Modeling

Dough modeling is a special way of artistic expression in farming culture, wheat culture in particular. Wheat flour is used to make steamed buns of various shapes, including flowers, birds, fish, insects, Chinese Zodics, rooster fighting against snake and birthday celebration. In whatever shape it is, dough modeling is a way of expressing wishes that can be seen on various occasions such as weddings and funerals. Dough modeling of different regions in Central Shaanxi Plain features different shapes and
colors, some of which is more complicated and colorful while others simpler and pure white. What is common to all regions is the use of wheat flour as the raw material. On the one hand, flour can be easily shaped into various forms; on the other hand, it will not be wasted as dough modeling products will eventually be eaten. It is believed that eating the dough modeling products will bring good luck and fortune.

**The Connotation of Farming Culture as Reflected in Color**

Color represents the most dynamic element of folk art in Central Shaanxi Plain. The strong contrastive visionary effect of art works is impossible without the flexible use of colors. Highly-saturated colors like red, peach, bean green and peacock blue are mixed with colors of black, white, gold and silver. Cool and warm colors are combined to create the contrastive visionary effect. In addition, techniques of color lump alternation, overlapping, overprinting and color line arrangement are also adopted. For example, red and yellow are the typical colors for bride’s dress. In the farming era, people’s life followed a rather simple routine when spring is the season for land plough, summer for seed-sowing, autumn for harvesting and winter for leisure. Therefore, most art works were created in the slack season of winter. However, few plants and animals grow in winter and therefore the colors found in winter are rather monotonous. That is why folk artists prefer using rich and bright colors to convey people’s love of life and aspiration for a better future.

Another characteristic in color usage is that symbolic meanings of different colors are taken into consideration. For instance, red symbolizes loyalty, black bravery, yellow violence, and green perseverance. Choice of color not only serves to demonstrate the sense of stereoscopy and space, but also to deliver the symbolic implications of works. In a word, choice of color boosts strong regional characteristics.

**Enrichment of Farming Culture**

Driven by rapid economic development, accelerated urbanization and improvement of people’s livelihood, farming culture has been further enriched, as evidenced by remarkable changes in such aspects of clothes, vessels, customs, toys, sports facilities and farming instrument [7]. As far as artistic works are concerned, themes, content, way of expression and carrier have all witnessed tremendous changes. For example, window paper-cutting decorations have been replaced by gold powder printed decorations and handmade embroidery and paper-cutting by mass machine production. Meanwhile, modern art forms with themes of new customs have emerged, including silk works, sculptures, acrobatics and so on.

**Reflection of Inheritance of Farming Culture**

Folk art originates from real life and in turn enriches people’s life. It reflects the aesthetic sense of local people and also the historical context and spirit of artistic development in Central Shaanxi Plain.

To publicize farming culture through folk art is not only a way to protect and respect history, but also serves as the source of inspiration for a nation. Some part of farming culture, due to people’s pursuit of material increase to the neglect of spiritual civilization development, has lost their original context and integrity, which leads to the marginalization of many folk customs and a weaker awareness of inheritance. At the same time, folk art works are mainly traded in independent shops, small in business scale and poor in sales promotion. Reasons lie in three aspects, including lack of
professionals and government incentives, loose management, and weak awareness of market exploration. What is more, there is a serious lack of people to inherit the farming culture, resulting in the gradual disappearance of some forms of folk art. Under such a circumstance, it is high time that we strengthen efforts to protect folk art.

Folk art is developed out of the profound farming culture which has been accumulated over the past thousands of years. It is of great importance in cultivating Chinese people’s aesthetic sense, especially among university students. Inheritance and development of folk art are impossible without talents and professionals. For university students, knowledge and familiarity with folk art will enhance their understanding of rural areas, agriculture and farmers and will lay a solid foundation for cultivating aesthetic sense. Therefore, introducing farming culture into the university curriculum will raise students’ cultural awareness and confidence, and inspire their love of farming culture and folk art. Eventually, they will become the next generation to promote, inherit and innovate folk art and farming culture.

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