Clay Dolls: the Materialization Image of Folk Culture Life - a brief Review of the Development of Clay Dolls in Torch-Li Village, Huimin County

Ming LU

Professor, head of the Teaching and Research Section on literature and art in School of Medicine and Humanities, BinZhou Medical University, No. 346 Guanhai Road in Laishan District of Yantai city, Shantung Province

cn_luming@126.com

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Abstract. The essence of the China folk culture is the feature and representation of the spiritual demand. Henanzhang clay dolls, a type of folk art in Yellow River Delta is a materialized form of art that represents the wish of welfare and more offspring. Having smooth brush strokes, neat lines, warm and bright colors, the colored drawings of the Henanzhang clay dolls are highly decorative. Moreover, the dolls represent a wide range of themes, expressing a desire and expectation of a better life. Their unique design and color reveal a distinctive artistic charm. With the capability of comforting the people’s spirit and minds, Henanzhang clay dolls are indispensable to the public in bearing their hopes.

Introduction

The Henanzhang clay dolls are among the various types of folk art in Yellow River Delta. The Materialization Image of the Clay Dolls

The clay doll is another name of the "Little Clay", a small-sized folk clay sculpture, and it belongs to one of the categories of sculpture art. (see Figure 1)

The folk art clay dolls in Yellow River Delta are called “the Henanzhang clay dolls” because their birthplace is Henanzhang village in Huimin County. Henanzhang village locates on the south bank of a river about 15 mi. southwest of the Huimin County, Shandong province, where the clay sculpture has been passed on from the early Qing Dynasty and enjoyed a history of hundreds of years. As a local folk ballad goes: "With their doors facing the south, every household in Henanzhang village is making clay dolls." In the past years, almost all the villagers could make clay dolls – men and women, old and young. During the busy farming season, they managed to find time to do the initial shaping of the dolls with mud, and in the winter leisure time, especially during the Spring Festival, they pounder and color the basic shape and sell in the country fair the finished products. The dolls were even peddled by alienate businessmen that came from more than ten countries, spread almost all over the cities of North Shandong and transported to cities such as Cangzhou, Tianjin, Jinan. (see Figure 2)

In the Yellow River Delta, the development of the dolls not only closely corresponds to the local folk activities, but also is an important part of them. In China, there is a proverb that says, "In February the second, the dragon would raise its head, and it is time to give birth to a baby."1 February the second in the lunar calendar typically comes after the day of Awakening of Insects2. On the very day in northern China, the spring comes, and everything returns to its vitality. Despite praying for pleasant weather, good harvest, and beautiful life, people also hope for having more children; therefore the custom of Fastening the Dolls and Praying for Children comes into being. In

1Dragon is considered by Chinese the master in charge of rain, and when the dragon raise its head, the rainfall becomes sufficient, which is eagerly waited by the farmers. Children born at this special occasion are considered to have a prosperous future.

2It is one of Chinese solar terms.
a village in Huimin County, Shandong Province, almost every people would eagerly come, far and near, on the very day of February the second in the Lunar calendar every year, to enjoy the village temple fair and actively participate in the activity of fastening the dolls, and this custom has continued ever since. (See Figure 3)

The clay dolls, both in content and form, embody the positive philosophy of life and the spirits of moderation and amicableness contained in the traditional oriental culture. The most representative clay doll in this area is the Chinese Tumbler, which the upper part is made of paper, and the lower part of mud and which has a very heavy hemisphere at the bottom. It becomes an adorable and roly-poly character after coloring and painting that cannot be pushed down, so the local people call it the roly-poly. The symmetry of the design and the quality of not being pushed down revealed by the tumbler meet the natives’ needs of living in moderation and harmony, and the longing for a stable housing, the sticking to the land, and a regular and peaceful living state. The charmingly roly-poly characters in the meanwhile bear people’s strong wish in pursuit of life and living. The images such as lotus, fish, peach, pomegranate, chicken, unicorn all bear an auspicious meaning of hope, prosperity and a better life.

The reason for the continuance and vitality of this artistic tradition mainly lies, firstly, in its capacity of representation of the pure, simple fun and the kind soul of the people, and secondly, meet people’s spiritual and artistic needs, helping them gain their spiritual comforts and salvation by closely associated with folk activities.

The Artistic Features of the Clay Dolls

The Henanzhang clay dolls, by giving us an impression of unity, exaggeration, and valuing the essence through simple design, reflect the characters of valuing the integrity and moderation in Chinese traditional culture. The tumbler consists mainly of two bulbs, a large and a small one, giving the impression of roundness, simplicity, and self-consistency. It can stand straight independent of any external factors. After the perturbation from external forces, it can soon return to its original state after a short period of swinging. Its emblazonry is also featured by a circular pattern of wavy lines. Facial features are fit for the round face, and the curved eyebrows and eyes, the little round mouth and the decorative tiny flowers dotted in the middle of the two eyebrows, the round bun and flowers and grass around it, all shaped relying on center circle. The basic form of the emblazonry on the body is also featured by circles. It shows the strong living atmosphere and hope for a better life, as well as the characteristics of cohesion and independence, with its propitious and colorful emblazonry and the images of flowers, fruits, and vegetables in the daily life as its decorations. (see Figure 1)

The Henanzhang clay dolls are all handmade and hand-painted by the villagers. With the producers’ mind in a state of freedom and simplicity, the doll presents a bold, unadorned, simple, concise, and vivid form. Although the continuity of the production skills is based on the traditional family-operated way of teaching by the hand, leaving strong traces of stylized shape, they present us artistic features that distinctive of the unique beauty of oriental culture with the making of non-utilitarian, arbitrary, random, imagery and hand-crafted features. The tumblers of various styles and shapes having faces full blossom of flowers and so enchanting and obsessing if you are exposed to them playing with and appreciating, just like watching thousands of faces of human beings (see Figure 4).

The color of the Henanzhang clay dolls also shows a distinctive feature of the traditional oriental culture and shows a sharp contrast with the western way of coloring featured by analyzing the light color changes.

Western painting requires an accurate color use. When depicting a concrete object, the truthful portrayal of the relation of the color changes between the object color, the color of the surrounding environment and the light color is required. Take Monet's haystacks as an example. In order to explore the relationship between light and color, he rendered many different works depicting the same object at different time and different weather conditions. The works present different tones
and the colors of the haystacks are not the simple repetition of hay’s original color yellow, but rich and delicate color images changing according to the change of the light.

Figure 1. The tumblers.

Figure 2. People selecting clay dolls in the temple fair.

Figure 3. Fastening a lovely doll to bring back home.

Figure 4. Cute clay dolls of various kinds.

The use of color in the traditional oriental art can be described as the following methods. The first method is the use of color according to the category of the object, which is presented in traditional Chinese painting. That is, objects are to be painted according to their color categories. For example, the sky and the water are painted blue while the plants green so on and so forth. The second is the use of color on works of art in folk art that pure and bright color is used. In terms of painting, the colored drawings of the Henanzhang clay dolls are highly decorative with smooth brush strokes, neat lines. In order to give a warm and bright impression, such colors as red, pink, green, yellow and purple, single or mixed and added with a slight amount of Chinese ink and gold, are often used. People would coat the doll with a layer of glutinous white powder first and then paint it. After the painting, they cover it with glue to make it brighter. They do not advocate the use of colors that intimate the original color of the object, but value decorating and beautifying so as to reach the effect of variety and brilliance in color.

Folk artists are rich in experience in the use of color. In terms of color assortment, there are some proverbs like "putting red and green together will be very joyful; putting the red and green together will be very gracious" and "red should be made bright, green fresh and white pure" which reflect the aesthetic taste and need of the Oriental people. (see Figure 6) The color of the Henanzhang clay dolls is made from the local pigments made by the local folk artists. Therefore, the colors like red, pink, green, yellow and purple are highly purified and very colorful, and become shining and eye-catching in the sun. However, those colors can not be kept long and will fade away in two or three months in normal daylight, leaving only some slight signs. Fortunately, the time is provided sufficiently in meeting people’s spiritual needs and the needs of folk activities for a specific period of time. All these show the different features between the Henanzhang clay dolls and those of works of art for collection, in that the former is a kind of folk art purely used for folk activities with a very clear point in use.

The art language and images depicted are highly expressive and exaggerated. Going beyond the boundary of the shape of the real object, folk artists depict flowers, fruit and vegetable patterns according to their own life experiences and insights and chose selectively from a comprehensive
perspective. They simplify and make changes to the natural objects following their spiritual insights, highlighting the countenance features of the objects and shape them vividly and thoroughly. Most of the times, the artists make creations under the natural outflow of their subconsciousness and make changes according to different situations, letting the images freely coming out from their inspiration. Those images are called by the artists the “mind painting”, namely the painting subconsciously created which is just like traditional Chinese freehand painting. The free shaping method, the vivid expression, the complete and balanced composition style, the bright and warm colors altogether make the clay dolls not only retaining their traditional antique and rustic beauty but also coincided with some of the concept of modern art. The dolls, as a result, bear the quality of artistic charm and aesthetic value that go beyond time and space.

The Reasons for the Clay Doll’s Endurance

It is all the people’s wishes as well as the longings for the pursuit of the auspicious, peace and longevity and getting rid of the evil spirits and disasters. The habit of pursuing the auspicious as a traditional culture deeply rooted in the soil of the agricultural life is closely linked with people’s lives and has been continued for thousands of years.

In the past, the Yellow River Delta had been in a long-term state of economic backwardness and isolation. The struggle people suffered, together with the aggravation of the water diversion and flood violations caused by the Yellow River silt accumulation making people's longing for peace and happiness even more desperate. In such a situation, people’s psychological state and their expectations are reflected in folk art, creating a vast amount of works featured by praying for children and welfare as well as avoiding evil.

The Henanzhang clay dolls have a wide range of subjects like drama, all kinds of dolls, animals, animals together with human figures, and also fruits. The drama includes such Chinese traditional legends as "Butterfly Lovers", "Legend of Love", "the Tale of the White Snake" and "Monkey King Beats the White-boned Devil Three Times". Besides, there are various forms of dolls, such as "Tang Tang Wa "(sleeping dolls), "Baby Sitting"(dolls sitting on a lotus flower holding fish, peach, or pomegranate), the" Ring Doll "(dolls with whistle), the "Bada Doll "(dolls that can make a loud sound by shaking it in our hands). The animals include "Tiger Doll" "The Twin Lions", "The Shaking Monkey", "the Coking Rooster", "Goldfish", "Frog", "the Autumn Cicada", etc. There are also dolls with animals and people together, such as "the man on the horse ", "Wusong Beating a Tiger"1, and "Kirin Songzi"2. As for the fruits, there are "Peach", "Persimmon", "Apricot" and so on. People express their hope for better life through these auspicious, pleasant and beautiful stories. (see Figure 7)

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1Wusong is a famous heroic figure in Chinese history.
2Kirin is an imaginary animal which is considered auspicious by the Chinese.
The tumbler is of the most representative of all the dolls, and it is called Fu in some places. A legend goes that in the early years the locals suffered from extreme poverty because they were required to pay tribute to the emperor. Although they were poor, tribute gifts must be sent. So the ordinary people made a huge clay tumbler as a tribute to the emperor. Because it is just a piece of clay and not a rare treasure, the emperor was not satisfied with it and pushed it away with a hand wave. However, instead of falling down, the tumbler showed, with a turn of 180 degrees, a line of striking words written on its back that read "Great Qing Dynasty will never be overthrown". The line caught the eyes of the emperor, making him in such rapture that not only the official sending the tumbler was bestowed a reward, but also the artist making this tumbler was given the title "Henan Clay Figure Zhang".

Fastening the doll is an important activity of the local farmers in the temple fair on the February the second. On this very day, all the ladies, both the newly married and those not yet, would come and buy several clay dolls, praying for more children. The elderly and children would also buy some for luck and fun.

To the people, not being pushed down means blessings and prosperity.

Clay dolls bear people’s wishes of fortune, peace and more offspring, and become their spiritual comfort. They play an indispensable part in people’s lives, which makes them so enduring to go through historical changes for hundreds of years (see Figure 8).

The Form and Process of the Clay Dolls and People’s Desire

The making of folk art is characterized by choosing local materials and bearing people’s feelings.

Yellow River Delta came as a result of the Yellow River silt accumulation. The inexhaustible supply of mud provides sufficient materials for the making of the clay dolls and brings forth the artistic features of the Henanzhang clay dolls.

To make a clay doll, people should first make out a basic shape with mud, then dry it in the sun. After that, people would cover the basic shape with a piece of sticky paper and then brush the drawing area with white powder as the background, and then paint it. Finally, they make a braid with girls’ hair and colored paper and insert the braid into the top of the head of the doll, then a colorful and energetic doll comes into being.

People say that clay dolls are vulgar, which has two meanings. The first meaning is that they look vulgar, lacking in grace and elegance revealed by the works of scholars, and are not as skillful. However, As a piece of artwork that meets people’s spiritual needs, the social value and artistic value of the clay dolls stand comparison with that of the works of scholars. The other meaning is that it is made of clay, reflecting its uniqueness from other folk art, and showing its unique artistic feature and charm.

In the past, Yellow River Delta was a place in which every spring, the sand would rage all over, making the world the uniform yellow. In early spring, wheat has not yet resumed green growth, and
the bare branches of the leafless trees point directly to the sky. Farmhouses are made of adobe with a thick layer of reeds on their roofs. With the wind howling and raising incessant dust, everything beheld before people’s eyes is khaki so dusty, without any traces of vitality. People cannot tell in this environment whether they can have pleasant weather, a good harvest or sufficient food and clothes in the year to come. Their mind and spirit need to be placed and soothed. The Henanzhang clay dolls, therefore, ease their spiritual tensions, soothe their minds and bear their hopes (see Figure 9).

The design of the tumbler reflects the locals’ inner voice. They hope that life is just like a tumbler, never beaten and always favorably. The bright color of the tumbler eases peoples’ mood and, as a decoration placed in the house, it makes the hall very graceful. The essence of those activities like fastening the dolls and holding the Baby Dragon fulfill people’s prayer for welfare and more offsprings. All those make the Henanzhang clay dolls becoming indispensable to the public in bearing their hopes and feelings.

People’s strong desire for the prosperity of life cannot be overwhelmed by the barren land, the painstaking work, and the impoverished living conditions. Instead, they create various colorful figures of the dolls by using cheap and easily accessible materials and present their magical and ideal inner world in expression of moderate, tough and optimistic ideals and beliefs. Moreover, they fully reach their potential the wishes of peace, health and carrying on their family line through their own free creation. By using the specific image of the dolls, they interpret the essence of the Oriental culture in the most direct, concrete and materialized way.

(Photographer: Ming Lu)

References
