Symbol analysis of intangible heritage Miao paintings in Xiangxi of China

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Research

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Abstract

Intangible heritage Miao Paintings in Xiangxi is a Chinese symbol with great ethnic characteristics and a Chinese memory and living cultural gene worthy of further analysis. Its material form is a living manifestation of the Miao folk culture, and its material surface contains a narration of the national spirit. Its image symbols have magical powers of good fortune, awe, and imitation of natural objects and show the deepest spiritual core of the primitive Miao people. The construction of its symbolic system and the expression of its image show its direct transcendence of fatalism over the cycle of human life and death. The daily functions of Xiangxi Miao paintings have been gradually marginalized. Simultaneously, their additional functions (aesthetic and symbolic functions) have become increasingly prominent and show a vague value. This appearance from prosperity to decline represents the historical fate of the end of the agricultural era.

1. Introduction

The intangible cultural heritage of traditional handicrafts (hereinafter referred to as “intangible cultural heritage”) contains natural and simple beauty, which reflects the vitality of the people. Intangible cultural heritage is also a carrier of Chinese folk aesthetic culture. However, with the passage of time and urbanization, the traditional handicrafts that carry the national spirit are gradually declining and almost disappearing in people’s life practices. Merchandise produced on industrial assembly lines has replaced the concept of “craftsmanship” related to the traditional art of living. As proposed by existing literature, “when the material and social foundations on which traditional culture relies are fundamentally changed or even disappeared, other cultural forms and contents that can continue to exist and develop are important to identify” [1-3]. Other scholars also argue that traditional culture can be protected and inherited if it can be integrated into modernization and with modern culture [4-6]. Thus, in protecting and inheriting traditional handicrafts in the new era, in what form tradition should regrow in people’s lives needs to be identified. With social development and historical inheritance, traditional handicrafts have gradually evolved, condensed, and transformed into a spiritual cultural form that implies the rich emotional connotation and aesthetic taste of traditional craftsmen. Traditional handicraft is like a tangible cultural symbol that contains intangible artistic conception and humanistic ideals. Each traditional handicraft language and cultural symbol relying on profound philosophical and aesthetic thoughts has become the most distinguishing feature of the Chinese nation and culture. As daily necessities of the Miao people in Xiangxi, Miao paintings are excellent representatives of China’s unique traditional national culture.

Xiangxi Miao paintings have symbolic connotation and national characteristics. They reflect the belief and worship of the Miao people and contain their rich national culture and traditional customs. In a closed geographical environment, Miao paintings retain the form of belief in witchcraft in ancient times, implying the aesthetic taste and spiritual code of the agricultural civilization era. These paintings are a cultural symbol of the Miao people’s cognition of life in Xiangxi and have a unique Chinese style. They are also a lively display of folklore symbols, indicating the inheritance and development of folklore. In

2011, Miao paintings were included in the third batch of national intangible cultural heritage list. This article aims to take Xiangxi Miao paintings as the research object and explore the figure, color, and material contained in their material form as the symbolic system presented in their cultural form; as the various functions presented by their social form (including their aesthetic and derivative functions); and as the contemporary symptoms presented by the transformation of their functions. This article conducts the symbol analysis from the outside to the inside.

2. Method

As for the intangible heritage of Miao painting in Xiangxi, its artistic style and causes should be thoroughly studied. From the perspective of cultural semiotics, the signifier and the signified level in the intangible heritage of Miao painting in Xiangxi are researched by using the principles of symbolic aesthetics. The signified of the sign mainly refers to its meaning and ideological expression, and the signifier level mainly presents the form and structure of Miao painting art. Taking Miao painting as a typical case study, a micro-study of the form of Miao painting could be conducted from three aspects: pattern, ornamentation and color, combining the artistic research methods such as iconology and semiotics to grasp the formal law and aesthetic mechanism of the art style in intangible cultural heritage of Miao painting in Xiangxi, explaining the inner connection between art form and Miao people's life and emotion, refining the corresponding aesthetic connotation and artistic spirit. The schematic diagram of research ideas is showed in Fig.1.

3. Results And Discussion

3.1 Material form: symbolic analysis of Miao painting images in Xiangxi

In the article entitled "Encounter Miao Painting," Mr. Feng Jicai described that "the black background was painted with flowers, birds, and insects...the gorgeous birds and birds were decorated in pairs on the left and right, and the four corners were arranged with flowers and butterflies" [7]. Butterflies are a common and confusing image in Xiangxi Miao paintings. People from Miao Village passed down a story as follows: a long time ago, only one maple tree survived in the world. This stubborn tree of life experienced considerable torture from the sky and underground and transformed into all things. The maple tree's heart became Miao's ancestor Butterfly Mother. The eggs laid by the Butterfly Mother hatched out people and all things [8]. The common images of butterflies, maple trees, ridged birds, and deformed people in Miao paintings in Xiangxi tell the origin of the Miao nationality. Miao paintings are concrete manifestations of totem worship, ancestor worship, and nature worship.

The external factors, such as images, techniques, colors, and patterns, of Miao paintings form a living display of folk culture on the surface of their material and narrate the national spirit contained therein. As handmade products, Miao paintings pay attention to the response of heart and hands, and their value comes from hands and heart. The primitive Hmong people often attribute themselves to natural phenomena and external forces due to the limitation of their cognitive ability. Through the depiction of

objects and the use of colors, people instantly merge the wisdom of their souls, the aesthetics of their craftsmanship, and their moral ideals into the paintings. In terms of the basic appearance and spatial presentation of material forms, the interlacing of lines and surfaces and straightness and curvature is a direct transcendence of the fatalism over the human life and death cycle. However, Miao paintings that have been drawn, shaped, and painted are imaginative narratives and symbolic recreations, and they are the pursuit of happiness and longevity. Patterns and decorations are the concrete contents of Miao paintings. Trees, pomegranates, fish, and butterflies are the basic element shapes of nature, and they are the codes of real objects. The cosmology and life outlook of the traditional Miao nationality religion has inspired the patterns and decorations. The ancestors of the Miao nationality used all things in nature as their basic elements and their rich imagination to depict various geometric patterns. This process is a reproduction of people's dreams of growth and fertility. The Miao people in the primitive period had low productivity, and the size of their population determined the prosperity of the tribe. Under the dominance of the concept of "all things have anims" objects such as trees, peaches, pomegranates, and gourds have naturally become objects of worship. The craftsmanship and the images of Miao paintings symbolize the social and aesthetic ideals of the primitive Miao people through the imitation of the growth symbolized by natural objects, expressing their prayers for children, joy and auspiciousness, longevity, and great dream.

3.2 Cultural form: symbolic analysis of Miao paintings in Xiangxi

The collective memory, values, local knowledge, and social identity inherited by each unique cultural group and its traditions are all expressed through the construction of a symbolic system and imagery. Under the dominance of the concept of "all things have anims," the natural attributes contained in the graphic symbols of Miao paintings are endowed with spirituality and divine power. The activated hidden historical and moral content become the cultural mission of Miao paintings. Although the Miao nationality does not have its script, the ancient Miao paintings, which originated in ancient sacrificial gods and flags, were born out of Miao embroidery, are rooted in Miao cultural symbols, and have assumed the role of cultural heritage [9-11]. Miao paintings are drawn from nature's flowers, birds, insects, fish, mountains and rivers, clouds, sun, moon and stars, plants, bamboos, and vines. Given the unique natural environment of the Miao nationality in Xiangxi and the single inheritance method of Miao painting, the symbols of Miao paintings contain ancient information and primitive artistic characteristics. The mysterious totem worship and nature worship in traditional Miao folklore are embodied in Miao paintings, reflecting the inner feelings and spiritual world of the Miao people. This tradition also has profound cultural symbolic significance.

The folk oral narrative texts indicated that people, gods, and beasts shared the ancestor of the Miao society. All the heavens and the earth, the sun and the moon, the mountains and the grass and trees, and even the human body are all alive. In the cycle of life and death for people and all things from generation to generation, people, gods, and beasts are all born equal. Land → plants → seeds → corpse → land is a chain of the life and death cycle. All things return to the land after they die, and then a new life grows that transforms into all things, as shown in figure 1. This life-and-death cycle, along with magical power of

good fortune, shows the deepest spiritual core of the original Miao people and contains their tenacious outlook on life and primitive ecological ethics. Maple trees and butterflies are the mother bodies of all things and become the turning point of rebirth and metaplasia. The maple tree in the folk story came back from the dead and transformed into all things, becoming a material intermediary for the pursuit of transcendence. The generations of Miao ancestors’ respect for nature and their high regard for the ecology of the habitat reflect an impulse to transcend the cycle of life and death and a desire for “immortality.” The ancient Miao people’s concept of “all things have anims” integrates natural phenomena and objects into their lives and is a unique matrix born of their corresponding value system. At the social or historical level, given the fear of the Miao ancestors in primitive society to natural phenomena that they could not explain, they believed that nature is closely related to people’s lives. Thus, they attributed life to these natural phenomena and objects. They also believed that these unexplained events bless them with safety and fertility and consolidate the stability of their ethnic group. At the individual life level, Miao people rely on the spirituality of natural objects in the process of several births, deaths, or rebirths. Through the turning point of the rebirth of maple trees and butterflies, they express their spiritual belief of endless birth to reach people with the purpose of reproduction of all things and the rebirth of ethnic groups. At the material level, people use trees to build houses to avoid the cold and rocks to build tools and weapons. These materials are worshiped as gods and gifts during the use process. Table 1. shows the patterns and their meanings of Miao paintings in western Hunan.

Table 1 The implication of symbols in Miao paintings

Symbols in Miao paintings	Implication
Chi You	The Miao people devoutly worship Chi You as their ancestor god and distant ancestor hero.
butterfly	Butterflies have many children, admonish the descendants of the Miao people to reproduce.
maple	Maple is the ancestral tree, and the sweetgum tree multiplied the first ancestor of mankind, and then there are descendants of the Miao people.
ridge bird	The ridged bird is slightly changed from the maple tree. After the mother butterfly lays twelve eggs, it is hardly hatched by the ridged bird for 12 years. There are many bird patterns in Miao's paintings, all of which are grateful and nostalgic for the birds.
dragon	The Miao people regard the dragon as a symbol of wealth and auspiciousness, and worship it as the god of fighting epidemics and reducing blessings.
Sending a child map	Generally, butterflies, phoenixes, horses, elephants, etc. are surrounded by patterns, and a child is held by a god or Buddha in the middle. It represents the Miao people’s emphasis on people and nature, close and harmonious coexistence, great unity and vitality, and also represents the Miao people. I hope to expand the development of the people and have many children and grandchildren.

3.3 Social Form: Symbolic Analysis of the Function of Miao Paintings in Xiangxi

Miao paintings were originally used as a draft for Miao female members' embroidery. The pattern was cut out and hinged and then pasted on the fabric to be embroidered for artistic creation. Finally, the "form" and "content" were all presented through superb skills. Miao painting is a kind of exquisite handicraft created by penetrating and embroidering on a black fabric, using ink as thread and pen instead of needle to draw the "real" world and amazing handicraft symbols. As far as the production is concerned, Miao paintings transform the initial actions of smearing, portraying, and stitching into proportions, symmetry, and colorful patterns and other aesthetic forms, which point to the aesthetic experience through the grasp of the initial human modeling ability. At present, it is a skill for humans to use their own body and a coordinated fusion of physical sensations and spiritual appreciation. It is also a process of aesthetic sublimation. It is a pursuit of the satisfaction of the senses and the poetic enjoyment of the soul. Subsequently, it becomes the achievement of the detachment of the present and the transcendence of the individual life, thereby attaining spiritual freedom. The beauty of craftsmanship is connected with daily life without being stuck in things. It rises from life to "life itself" and obtains the liberation of the soul [12-14].

The handicraft of Miao paintings shows their function from two aspects. Daily necessities, gifts, and collectibles are "obvious" categories, which reflect the "hidden" category of the Miao culture. Function may be a metaphysical thing, but it reflects the essence of the relationship between people and things. It reflects the most primitive form of convenience to people and the most advanced reflection of their lifestyle. Pure aesthetic consciousness cannot replace the following issues [15,16]. The first issue is the daily function of Miao paintings. They were originally drawn as items for daily use, and their function is to serve embroidery. Over time, their parasitic relationship with Miao embroidery has brought additional functions, such as distinguishing clans and branches and determining marriage groups. In the marriage customs of the Miao nationality, the principle of "not marrying in different attires" is followed. The compatriots of the Miao nationality can identify their own branches in accordance with the patterns, colors, and customary embroidery methods on the clothing and then determine their respective marriage groups in accordance with the branches. The embroidery attached to the clothes has become an important basis for them to identify marriage groups and open marriage. The aesthetic functions, gift functions, and collection functions are also explored. The aesthetic functions include factors that are external to daily use functions, such as whether the shape is beautiful, whether the pattern is delicate, and whether the color matching is harmonious and elegant. With the passage of time, the daily functions of Miao paintings in Xiangxi have been marginalized, and the additional functions have become increasingly prominent. As mentioned earlier, the current Miao paintings are often used as gifts and exhibitions for the Miao people in Xiangxi. Malinowski argued that "all cultural elements, if our views are correct, must be active, functioning, and effective" [17, 18]. Liu Zongyue also pointed out that "the beauty of craftsmanship that is most closely integrated with the use of appliances is the most complete. If the beauty overcomes the practicality, it means giving up the people". The daily function of Miao paintings is the highest morality of objects. It cannot be separated from human practice activities. As a unique handicraft of the Miao people, its use value is in a "frozen" state. It is a kind of handicraft that condenses the ancient wisdom and the spiritual connotation of the nation. Thus, it has become a museum collection

or a personal collection. In the repeated sales, the higher the value of Miao paintings, the farther away they are from the symbolic value endowed by their history and the contexts of daily life and aesthetics.

4. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the image, symbol, and function of the symbols of Miao paintings in Xiangxi, we obtain an understanding of the aesthetic and emotional connotations implicit in this culture. First, under the dominance of the concept of “all things have animism,” the ancient Miao people have always had an impulse to go beyond the cycle of life and death and then reflect their spiritual world and express their thoughts and emotions through their all-encompassing images. Second, the images, colors, craftsmanship, and other symbols of Miao paintings solidify and condense the connotation of the Miao culture. We can explore the philosophical and aesthetic thoughts contained in it from its symbolic meaning and function. Third, the drawing process of Miao paintings and their modeling principles surpass the narrow sense of technology. They vividly show the worldview of the Miao people and transcend the inherent spirit and thought of traditional handicrafts. As typical Chinese symbols, Xiangxi Miao paintings have become a Chinese specimen that needs to be further analyzed.

Abbreviation

Not applicable

Declarations

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Authors' contributions

The author Yifeng Liu is the sole author of the manuscript.

Competing interests

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Figures

Figure 1

The schematic diagram of research ideas

Figure 2

The process of maple metaplasia