

Exploring the Aesthetic Connotation of She Ethnic Group Based on the Craftsmanship of Phoenix Dress*

Yun Gao

Fuzhou University of International Studies and Trade
Fuzhou, China 350202

Abstract—The typical Phoenix Dress of women in Fujian She ethnic group is composed of five pieces (Phoenix topknot, coat, bib, leggings, and embroidered shoes). There are subtle differences in the dress of She people in different regions. Phoenix dress is the physical crystallization of the wisdom and culture of She people. Its production process has the characteristics of cumbersome process and complicated crafts. Its materials, colors, shapes, patterns, craftsmanship and other aspects all condense the inner aesthetic character of She people's worship of the Phoenix totem. This paper comprehensively reveals the original ecological aesthetic core of the traditional costume of She ethnic group, by combing the internal aesthetics of She ethnic group and the production contents and craftsmanship of the Phoenix dress.

Keywords—Phoenix dress; She ethnic group; craftsmanship; aesthetics

I. INTRODUCTION

Dress culture is closely related to the development of anthropology and sociology. Different ethnic group is wrapped in different humanities and geographical environments, forming a respectively special way of life and survival and forming different aesthetic stereotypes, national psychology, thinking perceptions, cultural customs, and belief worship for thousands of years. She people's Phoenix dress culture has practical, decorative, documentary and ideographic functions, and the heavy artistic value. Besides, the symbolic information conveyed by the costume reveals the special internal social order and rules of the ethnic group, and expresses the spirit and thought of the ethnic people being given the materialized representation, and reflects the totem worship belief and aesthetic psychology it contains, as well as the historical heritage that can be followed by future generations.

II. SOURCE OF THE ETHNIC GROUP'S AESTHETIC CULTURE GENE

She ethnic group is an ethnic minority having no words but only discourse. Their culture is preserved only by means of passing down from mouth to mouth by generations of the ethnic group. According to legend, Panhu, a mysterious dog,

had performed meritorious service in the Pingfan battle and thus was allowed to marry with the third princess of the emperor; the third princess's dowry included a Phoenix coronet and clothing which is a noble and auspicious symbol and the princess was worshiped as the incarnation Phoenix. Therefore, the colorful dragon dog and the Phoenix became the totem worship belief passed down by the ancestors of the She people. Panhu is described as "the body has five colors". The later generations used bark to weave and dye the textile with grass seeds and finally producing a colorful cloth, called "multi-colored" "grass cloth". The cloth has a tail to simulate praising Panhu's great achievements. When the princess got married, the queen told her that the Phoenix coronet and jewel-encrusted Phoenix cloth would represent that their people were always the noble ethnic group ever titled by Emperor Gao Xindi. Therefore, the image of Phoenix is engraved in the culture of the ethnic group having strong and indelible spirit of feminine or maternal worship.

As the core culture of spiritual culture of an ethnic group, totem culture is the most iconic, stable and difficult-to-change cultural factor. It not only carries the imagination and recollection of the ancestors, but also is an important carrier that collects the cultural elements [1]. The love and worship of the mysterious dog and the Phoenix formed the aesthetic core and connotation character of She people. In addition, the reverence of nature gives She people the inexhaustible source of beautiful and happy life and beauty, which is also an important internal factor for the formation of the aesthetic character of the ethnic group. Flora and fauna, characters, and utensils often appear on She women's traditional costumes, which is the external manifestation that She people think that nature is beautiful.

III. CRAFTSMANSHIP AND CULTURAL CONNOTATION OF THE PRODUCTION OF PHOENIX DRESS

The clothing and accessories of traditional Phoenix dress of She people include coronet, slanting-collar coat, belts, bibs, five-cent trousers or tied skirt, leggings, embroidered shoes, silver plate shackle fittings. There are many kinds of clothing and accessories in different sizes, different materials, different patterns and colors, conveying different ethnic cultural sentiments. The types and patterns of She people's clothes vary from region to region, but the pursuit of the Phoenix Totem is unchanged. Different age group of women wear different types of Phoenix dress; for example, older women wear "old Phoenix dress"; married brides wear "big

*Fund: The Ministry of Education's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Youth Project 2019 "Research on the Dynamic Protection of the Workmanship of She People's Costumes in Fujian Province" (Project No.: 19YJC760023);

CLC number: TS941 Document code: A

Phoenix dress"; minors or unmarried young women wear "small Phoenix dress". Phoenix dress represents the most fundamental aesthetic intention of She ethnic group. The dress is divided into three parts: head, body and tail. The decoration and accessories clearly reflect the demonstration of the Phoenix incarnation, and convey She people's reverence and pursuit of the "Phoenix goddess".

A. Coronet and Phoenix Topknot

Coronet of She women should be matched with a complex weaved cone chignon which is divided into three types respectively for unmarried, wedding and married stage of woman. The wedding headwear is also called the Phoenix coronet. After the initial acculturation of the Han people's custom culture, the headwear worn by women in wedding in early days changed to be called "Phoenix coronet". The Phoenix Totem is derived from the moving legend of the "Third Princess" worshipped by She people. She people regard themselves as the incarnation of Phoenix, and hence they created the high-raised Phoenix coronet. Due to the different regional characteristics, the shape of the Phoenix coronet is different from combing skill of Phoenix topknot. For She people living in West Xiapu Road, they often comb Phoenix topknot based on the dynamics of Phoenix flying, called Xiapu-style Phoenix topknot. The whole shape is like a cone, the upper hair bundle is high-raised, the middle part is rounded in front of the forehead, the lower part is loosely hanging behind the head, and the pink wool thread wraps around the hair bundle for fixation. The Phoenix coronet is worn on the well-groomed topknot, associated with a small piece of silver mirror, blue beaded and butterfly-shaped silver medal, and silver piece hanged in front of the forehead, and so on. The shape of the pattern mostly has auspicious meaning. As for the craftsmanship of the Phoenix coronet, it is complex and exquisite; the silver parts are mostly carved, showing a stacked three-dimensional visual effect. The Luoyuan-style topknot also symbolizes the high-raised head of Phoenix to sing. The towering headdress wrapped with red plush line symbolizes the Phoenix's crown. The headwear extends from the top of the head to the tail of the back of head. The curve shape is naturally associated to the neck of Phoenix. Therefore, it can be found that Phoenix coronet plays a key role in She people's wedding customs. Phoenix symbolizes the good fortune, wealth and well-being, which is precisely in line with the good hopes of the She people for their marriage and love life.

B. Coat and Embroidery Process

The craftsmanship of slanting-collar coat of Phoenix dress involves diverse contents, different patterns; the process flow system is huge and very complicated and is generally divided into measurement, producing bast thread and five-color thread wire, tailoring, embroidery, binding, weaving, and forging silverware and so on; wherein, embroidery is main craftsmanship and is the most complicated and exquisite and most outstanding process, and is a traditional process that can reflect the sentiments of She people's folk customs the most. Ningde-style clothing has slightly less embroideries; embroidery of Luoyuan-style clothing is mostly placed in the front chest of collar, the opening of the neckline, the section from cuff to the forearm,

almost all red; the Xiapu-style clothing's embroidery part is mostly concentrated in the clothing plaque, and the flower pool is distributed in "儿" shape.

The process of embroidery is mainly made by the shirt tailor who needs to firstly form the conception and draw the textile and pattern, then cut paper into the pattern and paste it on the embroidery sheet for positioning, and then embroider with colored cotton thread to cover the paper pattern and form a beautiful pattern ("Fig.1"). The tailor's cognition, design and even production of the pattern fully depends on his understanding of life and labor work and memory on surrounding matters and things, in addition to the techniques passed down from his teacher; so the embroidery of the pattern is inevitably subject to the tailor's personal experience, emotional factor, aesthetic ability and skill level. The embroidery skills of She people are "along with them wherever they go", so they do not need stretched cloth, but directly wrap silk thread on the paper to do embroidery sewing (as shown in the left part of "Fig. 2"), so that the embroidered pattern is more clear, three-dimensional, full, flat, lively and vivid, fully demonstrating the smart beauty of the craftsmanship. In contrast, the pattern of machined embroidery (pictured right in "Fig. 2") looks rigid, inflexible and has obvious geometrical shape, without any interest. The connection between lines is forced, with over large gap, which affects the beauty in details.



Fig. 1. The pattern is cut and pasted on the embroidered piece (taken by the author).



Fig. 2. Comparison between manual embroidery and machined embroidery (taken by the author).

The content of patterns embroidered in the front collar of the coat is different because of the living habits of She people in their ethnic villages in different areas of Fujian Province. For example, Fuding and Fu'an Mountain area

develop tea industry; thus tea production behavior may appear in the content of embroidery patterns. Xiapu is located in coastal area, people in She Village nearby the sea live on the sea such as fishing shrimps and crabs; thus the content of such labor behavior in the sea may appear in the clothing's embroidery pattern. Xiapu-style Phoenix dress often has cod fish, shrimp and crab, golden toad and the like patterns to ode the hard work of people in coastal area. In Fujian, local operas are spread in many places; the figure, artifacts, storylines and historical legends appearing in folk operas can all be used the creation themes of the clothing pattern. The forms of embroidery patterns vary extremely. Most of them are horny patterns, two-dimension series patterns, suitable patterns, etc. Most of them are based on the rare birds and auspicious beasts, plants and flowers, utensils and geometric patterns, text symbols, religious beliefs, and so on as seen or heard in life and labor scenes. The coat is the essence of the whole set of Phoenix dress. From the perspective of the patterns presented by the embroidery technique, the dress expresses the life and production experience accumulated by the working people of She ethnic group day and night, and the cultural and spiritual connotation of She people that are not afraid of suffering and love work, and positively expect for good life.

C. Belt and Weaving Process and Bibs

Belt is one of the important accessories in the traditional costumes of She people. It is tied to woman's waist, with long tassels hanging behind the waist, intended to restore the "Phoenix tail feathers". In different regions of She ethnic group, the belt has different production techniques and use methods, and the cultural connotations are not the same. In Lianjiang Luoyuan region, the belt is called "embroidered belt", the body is a blue-dyed weaving ornament, and the tail still has a large area of colored embroidery pattern ("Fig. 3"). In Fu'an, Fuding and Xiapu region, the belt is called "colored belt"; it is weaved craft work. She women only use three slim and small bamboo poles and one long smooth bamboo piece to weave the expected pattern by using self-made weaving yarn over three weaving steps such as beaming, preparing for raising heald and weaving the belt. It is a token of love for young She women and men to get married with each other. It is an important carrier of the folk marriage culture of She ethnic group and has a positive and beautiful emotional value of human life. In addition to being very ornamental and playing the role of disseminating human emotions, the belt can also be used as backpack belt, trouser belt, cross straps and so on in the long-term living and working process; it is both practical and artistic. The letter symbols, geometric figures and the like ideogram totem weaved on colored belt become an important means of cultural information communication instead of words and are even more durable than words. It can stably preserve the culture of She ethnic group, and meanwhile has very high value of research on aesthetics, sociology and folk customs and arts.



Fig. 3. Luoyuan-style belt (taken by the author).

Another important accessory that is tied to the woman's waist together with the belt is bib. In the eastern part of Fujian, it is called the "apron"; in Zhejiang, it is called the "hand towel". The bibs used in costumes are colorful and beautiful and are given the meaning of beautiful Phoenix belly. During the Republic of China, women in the eastern part of Fujian might tie a ramie-woven blue apron on waist during working to prevent the upper body from getting dirt and also give people a tight-fitting beautiful appearance. The Luoyuan-style bib is square in shape and hard in texture. There are three or four layers of lace from the outside to the inside and a smaller square further inside the lace. The four right-angled parts are embroidered with horn-like patterns ("Fig. 4"). During the Republic of China, the Xiapu East Road styled bib has the most beautiful embroidery and can be called the first of bib for Phoenix dresses of many regions. The rolled blue lace has multiple colors to complement each other, showing a complicated decoration and rainbow colors. Most of the embroidered patterns are horizontally symmetrical or adopt balanced composition, and the surrounding pattern may also be centered on a certain part. For example, a Phoenix-peony figure may be shown in the central place. The Fuding East Road styled bib skirt is wide and black or dark blue and the middle part is decorated with a piece of light green silk. Around the silk, there are Phoenix and flower and plant patterns. The belt of the skirt is braided with lace. The bib combines the handicrafts of embroidery, dyeing and weaving, showing the ingenious and unique traditional crafts of the labor costumes for the ethnic group, and conveying the rich and beautiful life concept of She people.



Fig. 4. Luoyuan-style apron (taken by the author).

D. Short Skirt and Leggings

She women's bottoms are mostly knee-length bandage dress and trouser, or short skirt and legging to isolate women from being scratched on the legs and bite by mosquitos when working in the mountainous and forestry area. The symbolic positioning of the leggings in the image of Phoenix is the tough and straight leg of the Phoenix. The leggings are only provided in Xiapu-style and Luoyuan-style Phoenix dress fittings. The style is basically the same as the binding method, namely using a piece of white or black right-angled trapezoid shaped cloth strip to wrap female's calf. The bonding strip is red, with tassels at the tail; after the binding, the tassels are placed outside the ankles, which have the effect of decorative beautification. The short skirt corresponding to the image of the Phoenix waist is usually black and knee-length or shorter, wrapped and tied on the back of waist. The hem is a lace embroidered with colored cotton threads, and the lace patterns are loosely and densely distributed. The upper edge of the lace is embroidered with five sets of triangular pointed colorful "dog-toothed patterns". Because the shape is similar to that of tiger teeth, She people once called it "Tiger-tooth skirt." Along the hem, three red stripes (the middle one is high and the ones on two sides are low) are embroidered between the two groups of tiger teeth ("Fig. 5"). The overall visible style is simple and elegant. The embroidered pattern resembling the shape of tiger's teeth is also a testament that the ancestors' worship of the heroic dragon dog Panhu.



Fig. 5. Short skirt and its dog-teeth pattern (taken by the author).

E. Embroidered Shoes

According to historical records, in Ming dynasty, She people's clothing was characterized as "updo and barefoot"; in Wanli period of Ming dynasty, the "Yongchun county annals" recorded "they all do not wear shoes". It can be seen that the ancestors of She people did not wear shoes when walking in the mountainous area, so why did the embroidered shoes appear in the Phoenix dress that is passed down to the present? This is due to the unique production and migration mode of the "slash-and-burn cultivation" people. As described by Gu Yanwu, She people "often set mountain on fire, pick fruits and hunt animals to the exhausted extent and then move to other place". The shifting cultivation lifestyle made She people often migrate to economically developed areas, accept and absorb the Han culture. Followed after, She people performed the original bartering commodity trading mode, which directly led to the diversification and alienation of the original clothing style, and the change in aesthetic concept from the closed original mountainous area to the open and rich world. Embroidered shoe is one of the most striking features of She people's Chinesization and change in their aesthetic connotation.

Embroidered fine shoes symbolize the Phoenix's powerful feet. Xiapu-style embroidered shoes are commonly called "single-nose shoes". On the black overall upper, the middle ridge of the red wrap is prominent, and there are symmetrical flowers or Phoenix patterns on both sides of the middle ridge. Luoyuan-style embroidered shoes are basically the same as the Xiapu-style in the shoe body. But the red cloth strips at the welt are rolled, and embroidered with a circle of colorful dog-teeth pattern, which is corresponding to the short skirt. The middle ridge tip is inwardly hooked back, with scattered tassels at the tip ("Fig. 6"). The hand-made craftsmanship of the sole fully reflects the living and production experience of the working people. She people would brew starchy taro and sweet potato into thick slurry and brush it between the cloth strip layers of the sole, air it to dry, and then adhere the next layer of cloth strips on the dried one in the same method to form a firm and thick sole. Its function is to isolate the wet and cold air immersed in foot when working in mountainous and forestry area. Although the embroidered shoe is the characteristics of Chinesized costumes, its craftsmanship is gradually evolved into a materialized embodiment with a strong ethnic wisdom brand of She people after the accumulation and summarization of the rich historical life experience of She people.



Fig. 6. Embroidered shoes (taken by the author).

IV. CONCLUSION

Phoenix dress is the most striking costume of She women with rich ethnic characteristics and is the concentrated expression of She ethnic group's aesthetic consciousness, ethnic belief and the integration of ethnic groups in historical development [2]. Phoenix dress condenses the DNA of She ethnic group's culture, and presents the ethnic group's core culture such as the Gaohuangge, the legend of Panhu, and the worship of the Phoenix represented by the third princess. In the tempering of time and the change of history, the original ecological culture of Phoenix dress mutually coordinated with and adapted to the geography, society, humanities, ethnic groups and other content and changed a lot. The acculturation of "seek consensus on major issues while reserving differences on minor issues" appears between different regions' She ethnic culture due to historical politics, economic production, regional differences and the like reasons so that Phoenix dress is changed more or less in many aspects such as the shape, material, craftsmanship, decorative patterns and areas. In the face of the inheritance of the diversified costumes of the ethnic group, She people strives to pursue the unique external manifestation of the ethnic self-consciousness in the spirit of the unity of the "community of ethnic groups" to pass down the cultural genes of the Phoenix worship. For scholars, only after having a comprehensive and profound understanding of the costume culture and ethnic aesthetic connotation of the Phoenix dress of She people in Fujian Province, knowing about their inner production techniques and contents and their accurate external performance characteristics can they truly protect, inherit, develop and create new traditional costume culture of She ethnic group, so that it can develop healthily in the direction of sustainable inheritance.

REFERENCES

- [1] Fang Zeming. Inheritance and Acculturation — Research on the Costumes of She Ethnic Group in Fujian, Zhejiang, Guangdong and Jiangxi Regions in the Modern Times [D]. Fujian Normal University, 2016. (in Chinese)
- [2] Yu Min, Cui Rongrong. Investigation into the "Phoenix-style" of She ethnic group [J]. *Journal of Silk*, 2011(04):49. (in Chinese)
- [3] Zhang Juan, Yuan Yan. Costume culture and craft of Ethnic Group in Xiapu, Fujian [M]. Beijing: China Textile & Apparel Press, 2017. (in Chinese)
- [4] Yan Jing, Chen Liangyu. The Change and Inheritance of She People's Costume Culture [M]. Beijing: China Textile & Apparel Press, 2017. (in Chinese)
- [5] Lan Jiongxi. Family culture of She people [M]. Fuzhou: Fujian People's Publishing House, 2002. (in Chinese)
- [6] Fang Zeming. The Explanation for Origin and the Influence of Phoenix Dress of She Ethnic Group [J]. *Art & Design*, 2018 (04): 116-119. (in Chinese)