

# Study on the Protection of Birch Bark Art of the Oroqen Nationality From the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage\*

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**Abstract**—The practical utensils made from birch bark and their folk background belong to long-established cultural phenomenon created by hunting peoples living in the forest areas of northern China. In order to adapt to unique regional resources, lifestyles and climatic conditions, they have taken a large number of locally grown birch groves to create a large number of uniquely shaped, portable and functional birch bark appliances, including birch bark boats, sewing kit and matchboxes, which cover almost all the life of the hunting nation. The beautiful shape and decoration of birch bark products explain the old-growth forest hunting people's understanding of life and the demand for beauty, and are an important part of the unique regional culture of the Oroqen people. For the Oroqen people without written records, birch bark culture carries more important cultural information.

**Keywords:** *Oroqen, birch bark art, research on protection*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Most of the primitive tribes in northern China had pottery making history and pottery culture era. For example, pottery ware has been unearthed in the original site of Baijinbao in Zhaoyuan County, Heilongjiang Province, about 3000 years ago. It has also excavated pottery ware with original characteristics in Xianbei ancient tomb group unearthed in Hulunbeir League, Inner Mongolia, about 2000 years ago. The Oroqen people, who also rise in this land, retain a large number of birch bark utensils with original characteristics in their history and culture, showing people the unique and colorful birch bark culture and its historical origins and characteristics of the northern hunting nation.

According to the ethnological survey, the Oroqen people still live in the forest area of northern China.

In the historical development process of the Oroqen people who are engaged in hunting, production and living, there is no sign of pottery making technology, which is a special phenomenon in the research field of ethnology in China. What utensils did they use to cook food and eat it in

the primitive hunting era? According to the investigation, before the iron pot was introduced into the hunter's life in the early stage, the hunter's method of eating cooked food had both the common method in the primitive period and his own unique creation.

## II. TYPES OF BIRCH BARK ARTIFACTS

### A. *Types of birch bark artifacts*

The artifacts made of birch bark can be roughly divided into five categories.

1) *Birch bark felt covering "Cuoluozi" (the conical house, summer)*

In the old-growth forest in the hinterland of Xing'an Mountains, the Oroqen people engaged in hunting and production used the architectural form "cuoluozi" invented and created by their ancestors for quite a long period of history. The "tuoluozi" is also known as "Xierenzhu", which means "the house that covers the sun". The interior layout and furnishings of "cuoluozi" are the same as those of yurts, with a lot of attention and rich religious color. There are three bunks in "cuoluozi": the one facing the door is the "God of Maru", which only allows men to step in and forbids women to approach; the left and right sides are the "Aolu", where the son and daughter-in-law live on the left side and the parents live on the right side. There is a horizontal wooden pole on the ceiling of "Aolu" on the left, which is used to hang the cradle. A wooden frame is arranged on the inner side of each berth to place clothes, food, guns, etc. A wooden frame is also set on the left side of the entrance door to put some food utensils, and the fire position is in the middle.

2) *Water vehicle: birch bark boat*

Birch bark shipbuilding is an important invention and creation of the hunting nation. When did birch bark ship start? There is no accurate data. Birch bark boat is not only a hunting tool but also a means of transportation for hunters. The birch bark boat is characterized by lightness, durability and great buoyancy. The shape of the hull is like a cloth shuttle, which is streamlined (without bow and stern), and the speed of rowing along the water can reach more than 20

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kilometers per hour. The birch bark boat is extremely light, which can be carried by one person. According to ancient books, "the birch bark is the best choice, which is lighter than the" *Weihu* (canoe). It can carry two or three people. The horse is used on the land, and the birch bark boat is used on the water. As far as its modeling features are concerned, the birch hull is rectangular, flat bottomed, pointed at both ends, curved at the bottom, and looks down like a cloth shuttle. The birch bark boats are mainly made by men. The side of the boat is usually made of willow sticks (and camphor pine). The outside is inlaid with birch bark, a total of 3 pieces, each with a width of 1 meter and a length of 2 meters, sewed with horsetail thread. [1]

Birch bark boat is not only an important means of transportation and hunting, but also sports equipment for the Oroqen people. They have learned to row boats since childhood. Young and middle-aged hunters often have rowing competitions in summer to exercise rowing skills. Now birch bark boat is only used for people's leisure and tourism, and has lost its original function.

### *B. Daily necessities*

Due to the birch bark's own characteristics and the limitation of hunting development, the shape of birch bark appliances is not as variable as that of bamboo, ceramic, glass and other utensils. The body of the vessel is in a straight-line cylinder shape, which is not as open, closed and streamlined as ceramic instruments. There are few changes such as bulging and closing the abdomen on the vessel. Therefore, birch bark utensils mostly have straight wall cylinder and square body, and occasionally inclined wall cylinder. The difference of hunter's life style makes birch bark utensils have their own characteristics on the basis of commonness. For example, the Oroqen people, who are engaged in hunting and production all the year round, live a life of uncertain migration, and their birch bark artifacts are small in shape and various in variety.

The birch bark utensils of the Oroqen people mainly include birch bark bowl, box (divided into general box, hat box, sewing box, etc.), basket, bucket, cradle, box, fruit scraper, birch bark chessboard, etc.

Several birch bark products are introduced as follows:

#### *1) Birch bark carrier*

For the convenience of pack, the Oroqen people made birch bark carrier, two for each reindeer, which were fixed on the left and right sides of reindeer. The shape of birch bark carrier is inverted trapezoid, the inner tube is birch bark, and the outer part is inlaid with deer or moose leg skin. The skin on the deer leg is generally hard, shiny and wear-resistant, which is a good material for carrier. The front and back sides of the carrier are mostly decorated with red and blue cloth for mending. The shape is inverted triangle, which is in sharp contrast with the gray white deer leg hair, which looks elegant.

#### *2) Fire box*

Oroqen people highly respect and believe in fire and the God of fire. Fire is especially precious for people in the era of primitive hunting production, which is a very important condition for the survival and development of primitive hunting nation. It is not only a dependence on cooking and heating, but also a weapon against wild animals. It is difficult for people who live and hunt in the old-growth forest along with the footprints of wild animals. Oroqen people found that there is a kind of fungus growing on the birch trunk, which is white, powder like after drying, and the shape is like mushrooms. The fiber structure is very dense and hard, the volume is small, and the rainwater is easy to carry. It is an ideal fire material, and the Oroqen people call it "baohaote". When migrating or hunting, people pick out a piece of charcoal from the fire pit or light "baohaote", tie it with leather rope and insert it on a wooden stick and take it to the back waist. When arriving at the new camp, setting up the "cuoluozhi", Oroqen people first bury the kindling in the fire pit. After a simple fire sacrifice ceremony, they can cook with firewood.

#### *3) Cradle*

Cradle, whether made of birch bark or wooden, has been common among northern peoples. It can hang the ends of the cradle with leather strips to make the baby fall asleep while shaking. As the saying goes, "I gave birth to a child and hung up." Viewing from the side, the cradle is approximately "L" shaped (the radian varies depending on the nationality, and the left and right sides are about 30 cm high and 35-40 cm wide). The cradle is divided into two parts, the two ends are arc-shaped, the part that is raised upwards is the head, and the straight part is the rear part, which is the body part of the baby. The top edge is reinforced with willow wood. The swinging bow-shaped willow strips are added to the front half. When the baby falls asleep, the bow-shaped willow strips are erected, and the veil covers the baby's face to prevent mosquito bites in summer and keep out the cold in winter. There are chicken bones, shells, fish bones, etc. hanging around the back of the cradle. When the child is crying, it will make a "qua la, qua la" sound when gently shaking. When this rhythmic sound is heard, the child will not cry. The birch bark cradle is not only a baby appliance, but also one of the necessary dowries for hunting ethnic girls. The mother wants to make a delicate and beautiful cradle of birch bark as the dowry for her daughter's marriage, expressing her best wishes to her daughter and her grandchildren.

#### *4) Fruit scraper*

It is also called a "fruit picker". A tongue-shaped birch bark is left at the mouth of the birch bark. It cuts the tongue birch bark into a zigzag shape (there is also a row of thin sticks inserted into the double birch bark wall at the edge of the barrel). When collecting fruits of the grass family, the scraped fruit will fall into the birch bark barrel, which can greatly improve the collection efficiency.

#### *5) Birch bark basket*

Birch bark utensils are a must-have for safari life. General birch bark utensils have leather strips with lids

attached to them, especially the larger birch bark baskets. It contains heavy items. The leather strips set on it are generally thick, long and sturdy, which is very convenient for lashing and transportation. The decorative patterns on the birch bark basket are mostly linear patterns such as "back pattern" and "water ripples". Most of the patterns are painted only in black. The "dense pattern" part of the entire birch basket only occupies a certain proportion of the body. In contrast to the plain part without a pattern below, it gives the overall feeling that it is dense, ancient and clumsy. Over time, it has formed a unique decorative style of the Oroqen people, which also contains strong national culture information. [2]

#### 6) Sewing kit

Birch bark sewing kit is small in volume, usually about 20cm long (the largest is not more than 25cm), and 12-15cm wide. It is in the shape of oblate long pocket, most of which are equipped with covers. The production methods are as follows. It should cut out the processed birch bark according to the needs, roll up the cut birch bark from the middle, in the form of flat cylinder, and seal the two ends of the cylinder birch bark with animal skins, sew the birch bark cover made in advance with animal skins and the cylinder birch bark on one side. So, the birch bark sewing kit is ready. In order to prevent damage to the edge, the animal skin or red and blue cloth strips are often inlaid. There is also a birch bark pocket (6cm × 4cm) sewed on the outside of the pocket under the cover of the sewing kit, and the edge should also be wrapped. It can be used as a decoration as well as putting a needle.

### III. DECORATIVE ART OF BIRCH BARK ARTIFACTS

Birch bark utensils are the products of hunting ancestors to meet the uncertain migration of hunting survival. It is based on the premise of practicality. With the gradual recognition of nature, the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure and beauty, they began to decorate it, gradually forming an art, and recording the historical changes of the nation.

#### A. The decorative parts of birch bark utensils

The birch bark bowls, basins, buckets and other utensils used for daily diet have no decoration, and the birch bark utensils of the Oroqen people have more or less decoration.

There are three main decorative parts of cylindrical birch bark utensils. One is to make various patterns on the cover of birch bark utensils; the other is to use two continuous patterns on the outer wall of birch bark utensils for decoration; the third is to use various forms of zigzag patterns at the junction of both ends of birch bark utensils to form a variety of decorative stripes of longitudinal geometric shapes.

The decorative parts of rectangle and ellipse birch trunk are mainly on the cover and the wall, while the sewing kit is decorated on both sides of the outer cover and the inner pocket. Other birch bark wares have different decorative parts according to different shapes and uses.

#### B. Decorative techniques and tools of birch bark artifacts

Most of the decorative patterns on birch bark utensils are finished before the utensils are shaped. No matter what kind of decorative technique is used, the birch bark that has been cut in advance should be placed on a flat board, and the manuscript should be drawn on it with the tip of a knife, and then the patterns (except the description method) should be made. There are six ways to make it: carving, engraving, scalding, smoking, painting, inlaying, scraping and patching.

#### C. Decorative patterns of birch bark artifacts

The appearance of plant patterns is the result of their early worship of nature. The formation of Shamanism culture is the ideological reflection of the hunters' dependence on nature in their hunting production. It is speculated that before the formation of Shamanism culture, there might be a primitive cultural form dominated by nature worship, namely "Aobao culture". Aobao culture is a cultural phenomenon with the worship of rocks and trees as its main body. The formation of these peoples' consciousness of plant worship is earlier than that of animal worship. In the early days of Shamanism, tree worship was very common. [3]

After the formation of Shamanism culture, the worship of plants still exists. For example, the Oroqen people think that God should be in the place where flowers and plants are in full bloom. They put the puppet into the birch bark utensils with colorful decoration. At this time, the hunter's aesthetic consciousness has also developed greatly, and the understanding of plants has changed greatly, forming a new aesthetic consciousness. For example, in the birch bark artifacts of the Oroqen people, there has been a pattern of "Nan chuoluo flower" (wild Rhododendron) to symbolize love.

#### D. Color aesthetics of birch bark artifact decoration

Since ancient times, due to the differences of geographical environment, national habits, religious beliefs, aesthetic characteristics and other conditions, all nationalities and tribes in the world have their own color choices. They have their own favorite and praising colors, but also some taboo colors. They call the country and city by their favorite colors, draw the national flag and emblem, hold ceremonies, celebrate national festivals, make medals, national currency, sew national costumes, decorate buildings, etc. For the hunting people who live relatively simple, they will do their best to decorate and beautify birch bark products in their own way.

There are three main forms of color application. The first is to paint the exterior of the decorative pattern to highlight the effect of the central decorative pattern. The second is to color the decorative patterns and highlight the modeling characteristics of the decorative patterns, so as to highlight the decorative patterns, and make patterns like lotus. Third, the pattern and the bottom are painted to highlight the main pattern, so that the contrast between the picture and the bottom is obvious.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The protection of birch bark culture can't only be limited to the recognition, excavation, arrangement and display of birch bark culture and traditional birch bark artifacts. It is required to explore the possibility of birch bark culture moving forward in modern society, realize the "transformation" and "regeneration" of birch bark culture in modern society. It is necessary to make the design drive and promote inheritance, and try to explore a new way out. As an excellent historical and cultural heritage, birch bark culture has the most obvious and outstanding economic effect in heritage sightseeing and traditional handicraft technology driving local economy. Therefore, how to make good use of this precious cultural heritage is a problem people should think about.

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