

# The Visual Communication and Cultural Reconstruction of Chinese Traditional Skills

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## ABSTRACT

Chinese traditional skills refer to technical methods and cultural connotations, such as the harmony of materials and environment, the harmony between people and materials, the simultaneous development of practicality and aesthetics, and the distinction between grades and etiquette. However, contemporary visual communication reconstructs the cultural orientation of traditional skills: Heaven's virtue is replaced by human virtue, and the focus is changed from object to non-free person, highlighting the practical value, and etiquette is also replaced by the politeness of daily communications, highlighting an ordinary aspect of traditional inheritors. Some reasons give rise to the phenomenon, including rooting in the national construction on the intangible cultural heritage protection and spirit of the craftsman, but closely related to the curiosity hunting psychology of market consumption, and also related to the intention and feelings of creators.

**Keywords:** *Chinese traditional skills, Visual communication, Culture.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In China, the development of traditional skills was once frustrated, but since the new century, they began to show a renaissance atmosphere, and the TV documentary with its theme also appeared frequently, such as *Retaining the Handicraft* (2012), *Inheritance* (2015), *Masters in the Forbidden City* (2016). The academic circles either focus on elucidating the Craftsman's spirit or pay attention to the inheritance of traditional skills, often ignoring the cultural connotation of traditional skills. Therefore, this paper attempts to clarify the cultural connotation of traditional skills in the past, to contrast the traditional skills in contemporary images, and then explore the reasons for its cultural reconstruction, and try to further think about the crux of traditional skills communication behind this reconstruction.

## 2. CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS OF TRADITIONAL SKILLS

There are many Chinese classics that record traditional skills, including *Kao Gong Ji: A Book of Diverse Crafts*(the Warring States Period), *Yin Zao Fa Shi: A Chinese Treatise on Architecture*(1103 A.D), *Ge Gu Yao Lun: A book on the Appraisal of Cultural*

*Relics*(1388 A.D), *Zhuang Huang Zhi: A book on Decoration*(the Ming Dynasty), *Xiu Shi Lu: A book on Lacquerware*(1567-1572 A.D), *Zhang Wu Zhi: A book on Garden Construction*(1621 A.D), *Yuan Ye: A book on Garden Construction*(1631 A.D), *T'ien-kung k'ai-wu: Chinese Technology in the Seventeenth Century*(1637 A.D), *Tao Shuo: A book on Ceramic firing*(1774 A.D), *Pottery records of Jingdezhen*(1815 A.D), *Xiu Pu: A book on Embroidery*(1821 A.D), *A Study of Ancient Jade*(1889 A.D), *Xue Huan Xiu Pu: A book on Embroidery*(1919 A.D), etc. These ancient books not only record the methods of various traditional skills, but also carry many cultural connotations.

T'ien-kung k'ai-wu means people develop products by virtue of Heaven or people develop products by virtue of the craftsmanship and laws of the natural world. It means that traditional skills involve the dual relationship between materials (products) and the natural environment (natural world), and between people and materials. In *Xiu Shi Lu*, craftsman's creation is also equal to the universe's creation (Volume Qian). *Yuan Ye* points out that there is no established law to follow in the construction of a garden. The reason lies in that there are differences among people, places and times; the builders should be good at adapting to people, places and times (Volume 1). Only when the materials and the

environment are consistent and appropriate can we calculate the time and the atmosphere of the earth and Create exquisite things. This kind of thought embodies the traditional harmony culture. In *Yi Jing: Book of Changes* (Volume 1), it is pointed out that people with strong ability and high moral conduct are those who are in harmony with all things in heaven and earth. In *T'ien-kung k'ai-wu*, when people create things, they should not only recognize and explore the energy of nature with selfless spirit, but also be grateful for the generous gifts from heaven and earth, and present the concept of ecological ethics with the most perfect technology. They should cherish the use of raw materials and strive for create the most enjoyable works with limited resources.[1]

As for the relationship between people and materials, the ancients emphasized the refinement of skills. In *Kao Gong Ji*, it is believed that the time and the place are suitable, and the craftsman's delicate heart is also needed. Zhang Jian also emphasizes the sensitive mind in *Xue Huan Xiu Pu*. The refinement of skills is mainly rooted in the artist's mind. *Zhuang Huang Zhi* points out that an excellent mounting artist must be smart, peaceful and meticulous. *Tao Shuo* discusses the reasons why Rao Zhou kiln (Jing De-zhen kiln) reached a grand occasion during the reign of Kang Xi in the Qing Dynasty is that people's well-off and people's leisure. Their commonness lies in the promotion of a free and flexible spiritual realm, which is the precondition of the refinement of skills.

Another important cultural meaning of traditional skills is to develop both practical and aesthetic values. The main types of work and the contents of production reflected in *Kao Gong Ji* are mostly military products, production and living appliances or court supplies, which are all necessary and practical objects in the society at that time. This fully shows that the main purpose of handicraft production at that time was practicality, but it also involves a lot of conscious beautification of things.[2] According to the chronicles of *Zhang Wu Zhi*, the vegetables and fruits that should be planted in the garden should also be regarded as an integral part of the garden on the principle of not damaging the beauty. In *T'ien-kung k'ai-wu*, the author adheres to the concept of practical application, but at the same time, he does not neglect the aesthetic requirements of the artifacts. As the arguer points out, although ancient Chinese craft aesthetics thought is scattered in the vast sea of books and lacks systematicness, its core thought is utility and aesthetics complement each other and promote each other.[3]

In the traditional society with strict patriarchal system, monarchy and theocracy have the supreme authority, and there are obvious differences in social levels. In this regard, there are cultural connotations of distinguishing grades and paying attention to etiquette in traditional skills. According to Guo Mo-ruo's research, *Kao Gong Ji*

is the official book of Qi State in the period in Spring and Autumn and Warring States. It has the characteristics of strict specification and custom-made etiquette. Among them, the very typical phenomenon is that the specifications of implements used in different levels have different parameter requirements. For example, in Volume the jade man, it points out that people of different social levels hold different sizes of jade. In the beginning of *Ying Zao Fa Shi*, Li Jie advocated that the construction should conform to the norms of *Zhou Li*. In the author's view, engineering architecture is actually a kind of template and symbol of the national ruling order. This kind of feudal hierarchy etiquette thought also appears in other ancient books, such as *T'ien-kung k'ai-wu*, *Tao Shuo*.

### **3. RECONSTRUCTION OF TRADITIONAL SKILLS IN CONTEMPORARY VISUAL COMMUNICATION**

The traditional skills in the contemporary images are shrouded in a thick brilliance of virtue, which is not the great virtue of heaven and earth, but the interpersonal morality and its moral belief. In the Retaining the Handicraft-Miao silver ornaments, Yang guang-bin insists on making pure silver jewelry and opposes the replacement of silver with white copper. He believes that keeping tradition is inheriting national culture, which shows the noble quality of sticking to tradition and resisting material temptation. Masters in the Forbidden City mainly shows the relationship between colleagues and teachers and apprentices. On the one hand, it shows the quality of modesty and cooperation between colleagues. On the other hand, it shows the master's love for the apprentice and the apprentice's respect for the master. The transfer from heaven's virtue to human's virtue means that the image presentation of traditional skills is no longer centered on the skill itself, but on the skill maker and bearer, that is, from the object to the person, just like the subjectivity of Masters in the Forbidden City.

However, this man is not called free man in the ordinary sense. Although the image also focuses on the ingenuity of craftsman, such as Yang guang-bin's carving with a picture in his heart and a few in his hands, Wang You-liang's Bronze replica is the same as the original, but these are just like dazzling techniques, with brilliant surface, but they do not reveal the craftsmen internal freedom. As office workers, the cultural relics restoration experts in the Palace Museum are responsible for repairing and remedying the historical damage to cultural relics. They try their best to restore the original appearance of cultural relics. Most of the intangible cultural national inheritors in the Retaining the Handicraft are inheriting the skills of their parents or masters, and a few innovations are only partial transformation, that is, adding some modern

contents, such as Weixian paper cutting and Wuqiang New Year pictures. This means that the contemporary image basically abandons the free and easy spiritual realm in the traditional skill, and the skill becomes the media for craftsmen to realize themselves.

The practical and aesthetic value of traditional skills in contemporary images has also changed. People see more display value and participation value of traditional skills. The so-called display value refers to that traditional skills have been implemented in the framework of national intangible cultural heritage, or given to foreign guests as designated gifts by the government, or displayed in cultural center and museums, or participated in cultural exchange exhibitions at home and abroad. The so-called participation value refers to that traditional skills have broken through the shackles of ancient private learning and family inheritance, and more and more people are learning and inheriting it, and the master of skills is willing to spread it. Because of the value of display and participation of traditional skills in contemporary times, for craftsmen, it often has the value of making a living. Whether it's display value, participation value or making a living value, the traditional skills in the image show more practicality. This is very obvious in *Masters in the Forbidden City*: the restoration of cultural relics is for cultural relics protection, and is for the upcoming exhibition of the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Forbidden City.

In fact, the interpersonal morality in the image can also be regarded as replacing the traditional etiquette with politeness. The traditional etiquette is a symbol of political power, with the characteristics of mandatory norms. Politeness is the quality and behavior that people show respect and friendship in daily communication. It is an individual's internal and external moral cultivation, including filial piety and respect of the younger generation to the older generation, as well as equality and cooperation within the generation. In the contemporary images, the hierarchy of traditional skills has been completely banned. For example, inkstone was awarded to ministers by the emperor in ancient times, and in modern times, it is not only selected by the government as a gift for foreign guests, but also used as a souvenir for ordinary tourists to watch and buy. And in contrast to hierarchy, contemporary images also try to depict the ordinary and daily side of traditional craftsmen. *Masters in the Forbidden City* tells a lot of very daily plots, such as Wang You-liang riding an electric car to smoke outside the Forbidden City after the intense restoration work, or people feeding cats, beating apricots, planting flowers and trees in the Forbidden City yard.

#### 4. THE CAUSES OF THE RECONSTRUCTION OF TRADITIONAL SKILLS' CULTURE

Image is the creator's creation, which is rooted in the corresponding social environment. At the same time, as a market behavior, it is subject to certain market consumption psychology. Therefore, it is necessary to consider comprehensively from the individual, society, market and other dimensions to analyze why the traditional skills are deviated in the contemporary image. First of all, we need to think about the background of the revival of traditional skills in the contemporary era, that is, intangible cultural heritage protection and craftsman spirit. As a national project, intangible cultural heritage protection is not only a symbol of national cultural self-confidence and cultural revitalization, but also a function of maintaining national cultural identity, and the national culture it condenses must be beneficial to the construction of the current socialist advanced culture. At the same time, filial piety and firm belief in moral ideal emerged in the image are also the counteraction and criticism of some bad habits in the current society, including children's refusal to support their parents, the battle for family property, the autism of the empty nest elderly, as well as vulgar ideas such as money worship thought and erotic culture permeate the daily life of the public. From this point of view, these images can be regarded as a moral stream. They also wash away the little love in the Romance Drama, the vigorous violence and justice in the action drama, and the empty morality in the immortal Xia drama.

On the other hand, as the theorists point out, the ultimate subject of intangible cultural heritage is human. In a fundamental sense, the protection of intangible cultural heritage should first be the protection of the people who create, enjoy and inherit the culture; meanwhile, the effective protection of the heritage also depends on the groups who create, enjoy and inherit the heritage.[4] To some extent, it is also a way for the public to pay attention to and protect the intangible cultural heritage through the image performance of traditional skills. Thus highlighting the subjectivity of human beings. And intangible cultural heritage are attached to a certain form of life, traditional skills are an important representation of folk wisdom, often from the folk, skills inheritors are some mortals.

At present, the government has put forward the strategic plan of Made in China 2025, hoping to comprehensively improve the quality and level of China's manufacturing development and realize the transformation from a big industrial country to an industrial power. The dual background of craftsman spirit and the aforementioned intangible cultural heritage protection means that the revival of traditional skills in the contemporary era is not a spontaneous act, but a

top-down, external and internal construction act. Under such a premise, it is difficult for the subject of skill to hold a free state of mind. Moreover, just like the analysis of the theorists, craftsman spirit is not only related to the made in China and its product quality, but also the concentrated embodiment of people's general professional and work ethic ... It is also the requirement of dedication in the socialist core values.[5]The craftsmanship of inheritors of traditional skills in the above-mentioned images is actually a reflection of dedication, which, as an internal behavior regulation, inevitably checks and balances people's freedom. In addition, this dual background also gives practical color to traditional skills, that is, traditional skills are important cultural heritage, a tool to maintain national identity, a concentrated embodiment of craftsman spirit and a hope to revitalize national industry.

Making documentaries is a market-oriented behavior. Traditional skills, like the goods in the window, will first attract people with exquisite appearance, but people mainly judge whether to buy them through their use value. So in the image, the audience knows more about the practical value of traditional skills. In addition, market consumption pursues individuation and difference. When watching the movie, the audience often has a curiosity hunting mentality and is full of strong interest in new, unique and unusual things. Once secret but not handed down skills are displayed to a great extent in today's images, which satisfies the audience's curiosity, which is one of the reasons why these images can have a wide range of influence. In this respect, *Masters in the Forbidden City* is a typical example. It gives ordinary audiences a glimpse of precious Royal treasures and their complicated repair process, and also witnesses the mysterious work of cultural relics restoration division.

Finally, the theme expression of the film is also related to the intention of the creator. Retaining the Handicraft is produced by CCTV Chinese international channel. The program team hopes to let the audience understand the traditional crafts and their inheritors, and at the same time further think about these traditional crafts that once profoundly influenced our national spiritual world and daily life, how to find the proper living space in the contemporary society. [6] *Masters in the Forbidden City* is also a documentary produced by CCTV. As a tribute documentary for the 90th anniversary of the Forbidden City, it was shot with the full support of the Palace Museum. Shan Qi-xiang, the president of the Palace Museum, stressed that it is the ingenuity of generations of craftsmen condensed in the artifacts, that is, the spirit of craftsman. [7] The official color of these two documentaries, as well as the intention of cultural inheritance and craftsman spirit, also determine that they may have some deviation to the performance of traditional skills.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Through the visual communication of traditional skills in the present, three paradoxical relationships are found behind this complex phenomenon at least. Firstly, technology and culture are the inseparable meanings of traditional skills, and how to avoid the difference? Technology people inherit easily is a visible practice process, but how to inherit invisible culture and see the complexity of cultural connotation? Secondly, products are the result or presentation of traditional skills, people is the main body of traditional skills. Which one should we prefer to protect traditional skills? The former is a dead and unchanging process, but it is difficult to recover the skill; the latter can be realized about traditional skills, but the process is changing, because every generation of craftsman will inevitably change. Thirdly, the craftsman is ingenious and common. As common people, the craftsmen become often another magical person at work. How to reveal these two seemingly contradictory qualities? Or is this also the common demand of human beings? As a modern technology, in terms of expression form, the visual image is quite different from the traditional skills in forms of expression and value function, etc. The former can not restore the true state of the latter. Even if there is no visual production and display, the traditional skills will still survive between masters and apprentices in the folk. Therefore, does it also mean that traditional skills can be inherited continuously?

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