

Viewing the Development of Zhejiang Bamboo Carvings from the Perspectives of Category, Subject and Technique

Chunyan Yang^{1,*} Yilin Xia¹

¹ Jiaying University, Jiaying, Zhejiang, China

*Corresponding author. Email: ownycy@qq.com

ABSTRACT

Bamboo carving is a very distinctive art with strong artistic charm. Through bamboo carving works, people can not only understand the folk culture and history of the time, but also understand the ancient intellectuals' thoughts and national integrity. This article analyzes the rise, development and decline of Zhejiang bamboo carvings from the perspectives of the category, subject and technique, and summarizes the process of Zhejiang bamboo carvings from three-dimension to planarization, from folk to literati, and from artistry to commercialization.

Keywords: Bamboo carving, Theme, Category, Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The art of bamboo carving has a long history and began to rise as early as the Western Han Dynasty. Bamboo carving flourished during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, with the appearance of two carving styles, Jiading in Shanghai and Jinling in Jiangsu. These two different styles had their own characteristics. Zhejiang is located in the Yangtze River plain, adjacent to Jiangsu and Shanghai, with absolute geographical advantages and rich material reserves. Bamboo carving in Zhejiang reached its peak in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. Zhejiang bamboo carvings' characteristics were similar to those of Jiading and Jinling, all undergoing a change from complex to simple craftsmanship. The type of bamboo carving changed from practicality to artistry, and the subject matter of bamboo carving changed from being close to life to literary painting and calligraphy works.

2. ZHEJIANG BAMBOO CARVING APPEARED AT THE END OF THE MING DYNASTY

"Bamboo carving formed as a specialized art in about the mid-Ming Dynasty... and interacted with much other craftsmanship." [1] The development and prosperity of bamboo carving art is closely related to the politics, literati thought and art form at that time. The Jiading bamboo carving represented by "Three Zhus" is well-known in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. Pu Zhongqian, who used the intertwined bamboo roots as naturally as possible, treated less carving as wonderful." [2] In Zhejiang, Anhui and other areas, there were also bamboo carving artists. One of the representatives is Yan Wangyun. [3] "Five Stone Hu?" records: Yan Wangyun was a well-known craftsman in Zhejiang Province, and a famous collector and connoisseur Xiang Yuanbian (1524-1590) praised him heavily [4]. His existing bamboo carving works are quite few, but the techniques of bamboo and wood carvings are similar. From the perspective of Yan Wangyun's agarwood "Songxi Cowherd Picture", the main use of carving techniques such as round sculpture, relief sculpture, and high relief sculpture are similar to the "Three Zhus" in Jiading. He once made a bamboo root cup

*Project: This article belongs to "Achievements of Zhejiang Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences' Research Projects", Project Number 2018B39.

for Xiang Yuanbian, on which there is Xiang's inscription "Cut a green-blue bamboo, and make it into a lotus cup. Crabs in the frost season are fat and tasty, and families brew new glutinous rice wine. Based on the original materials, the bottom was cleverly designed into a shape of a lotus flower, with a crab hidden between the petals, showing a climbing tendency. The overall work is vivid and interesting. It can be known that Yan's carving skills were profound. Zhejiang was bordering with Jiading and Jinling, while their cultures exchanged frequently, and bamboo artists in these areas had similarities in thought and techniques. Based on this, it is speculated that Zhejiang bamboo carvings first appeared at the end of the Ming Dynasty, though there were relatively fewer successors recorded until the Qing Dynasty. In the mid-term, the amount of Zhejiang bamboo artists began to increase.

3. THE DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ZHEJIANG BAMBOO CARVINGS IN THE QING DYNASTY

Jin Xiya summarized the developmental characteristics of bamboo carvings in the Qing Dynasty as "extensive and colorful" in the early Qing Dynasty, and transformed into "flat, shallow and simple" in the late Qing Dynasty. Zhejiang bamboo carvings were similar to those of Jiading and Jinling, all undergoing a change from complex to simple craftsmanship. However, Zhejiang bamboo carvings showed different characteristics in different periods. Combined with those characteristics, the development of Zhejiang bamboo carvings could be roughly divided into three periods: the early Qing Dynasty to the Qianlong period was the early and mid-term. In this term, Zhejiang bamboo carvings gradually rose under the influence of Jiading and Jinling bamboo carvings. Literati participated in bamboo carving activities. Because of that, bamboo carvings were infused with literati cultural nutrients. Famous representatives of bamboo carvings included Wang Ge, Pan Xifeng, Zhang Yanchang, etc. In the mid-Qing period, which means from Qianlong to Jiaqing, Zhejiang bamboo carving, influenced by epigraphy, entered its heyday. The characteristic was to reproduce the fun of painting and calligraphy with the carving knives. Representatives included Xi Gang, Chen Hongshou, Zhao Zhichen, Han Chao, etc. In the period from the end of Qing Dynasty to the beginning of the Republic of China, influenced by

the Genre of Shanghai Painting, politic and economy, Zhejiang bamboo carvings moved towards commercialization and gradually declined. Representatives included Cai Zhao, Zhang Xin, Hu Qiu, Yuan Xin, Xu Sangeng, Chen Chunxi, Chen Danru, etc. Due to the different lengths of dynasties and the survival time of the representative artists may span several dynasties, the above is only a general division.

3.1 The Development of Bamboo Carving from the Evolution of Categories

Bamboo products are easy to obtain and make utensils, which have been recorded as early as the Western Zhou Dynasty. The "On Propriety · Yu Zao" records that scholar-officials decorated bamboos as tablets. The tablet in Chinese Taoism was a kind of ritual tool used by Taoists. It was also a board used by ancient ministers to record events, similar to modern notebooks, and bamboo slips had been used to record important events as early as the Warring States period. On the handles of the dragon-carved lacquered bamboo spoons unearthed at Mawangdui in the Western Han Dynasty in Changsha of Hunan Province, there are relieved and through-carved dragon patterns and braided patterns. It can be known that people have liked to carve exquisite bamboo materials into beautiful utensils since more than two thousand years ago. [5] Bamboo carvings were not limited to living utensils, but also artworks. According to the "Book of Southern Qi · Biography of Ming Sengshao", the emperor Qi Gao once gave Ming Sengshao a wishful cane carved using bamboo roots. [6] In addition, there is a musical instrument called "Ladies, Flowers and Birds Shakuhachi Using Green-remained Techniques" from the Tang Dynasty collected in Shōkurain, Japan, which is also a representative of bamboo carving art. At the same time, some bamboo utensils are also as beautiful as artworks. For example, the book of "Records of Dropout of Farming" by Tao Zongyi in Yuan Dynasty records that Zhan Cheng carved bamboo bird cages in the Song Dynasty. "Zhan Cheng was a craftsman in the Gaozong period. The carvings were incomparably exquisite. He once made the bird cages with flowers on all the four sides. Palaces, figures, landscapes, poultries and birds were on all the bamboo slices. They were delicate and well equipped." [7] It can be known that bamboo carving has a long history and has developed at the same time with the art of wood, tooth and horn carving, mainly used on utensils as certain practical functions, such as daily utensils.

In the middle and late Ming Dynasty, after bamboo carving became a specialized art, the most popular products among literati were stationery products, such as pen holders, arm rests, seals, fan bones, followed by daily utensils and artworks such as cups, boxes, pots, incense tubes, etc. In addition, you can also see antique bamboo carvings such as Ding, Qi, Zun, Xiao, etc. Since most of the bamboo carving artists in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties were craftsmen specializing in carving work, the sculptures were mainly ornamental bamboo-rooted ornaments, deep-carved pen holders, and practical daily utensils such as cups, Bowl, wash, box, incense tube, etc. In the middle of the Qing Dynasty, with the increase of literati's participation in bamboo carvings, especially from the time that Zhou Hao used the ink carving method to express the landscape, bamboo and stone in the literati paintings, arm rests and fan bones which had a certain practicality and artistry gradually moved towards commercialization. In the middle and late Qing Dynasty, there were fewer and fewer bamboo artists who painted and carved by themselves. They needed to cooperate with calligraphers and painters. Some seal carvers and calligraphers would occasionally carve bamboos, too. Their remaining works are mostly small lightly carved pieces such as fan bones and seals. There are not many preserved works of bamboo carvings in Zhejiang. In the early and mid-Qing Dynasty, most of them were pen holders and ornaments, such as Pan Xifeng's bamboo-rooted pen holders and the ornament named "Treading upon snow and Looking for plum blossoms". In the middle and late Qing Dynasty, most were arm rests and fan bones, such as Han Chao's arm rests Imitating ancient artifacts with inscription and Fang Jie's arm rests about ladies drawing, etc. In the late Qing Dynasty, fan bones were most common, such as Cai Zhao's fan bones Imitating ancient artifacts with inscription, Hu Qiu's fan bones about painting and calligraphy, and Chen Yuan's fan bones about figure painting and calligraphy. At the same time, in the end of Qing Dynasty the turning yellow bamboo carvings of Huangyan, in Taizhou of Zhejiang Province were also a notable representative of the commercialization of bamboo carvings and a concentrated production center.

3.2 The Development of Bamboo Carving from the Evolution of Themes and Techniques

The art of bamboo carving was the carrier of bamboo artists' cultural thoughts, and the subject

was often a natural expression of the perfect combination of the artist's personal thought and aesthetic conception. From the analysis of recorded and preserved bamboo carvings, bamboo carvings had a wide range of subjects, including flowers, birds, animals and plants, folk living conditions, mythical stories, historical figures, poetry and songs. While pen holders and arm rests were essential items in ancient stationery supplies, literati and elegant scholars preferred to use those made of bamboos. There were two main reasons. One was that it was easy to use this material for production, and the other was that the bamboo utensils embodied the connotation of "bamboo" and the high style and temperament of the literati, and were more in line with the status of the literati as a symbol. Taking pen holders, arm rests, and fan bones as examples, the themes can be roughly summarized into the following four categories:

3.2.1 Historical and Mythological Subjects

In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, bamboo carved pen holders were more common to show characters in historical myths and stories. For example, Zhu Zhizheng's pen holder about lady drawing (collected by the Palace Museum) used hollowed-out carving, relief, and Yin-carving to express the beauty of the lady. In the early Qing Dynasty, Wu Zhifan's bamboo carved pen holder about a drawing of Liu Hai Plays with a Toad (Shanghai Museum Collection), used the techniques combining bas-relief and through-carving to portray the Taoist folk story about Liu Hai playing with a toad in combination with reality and fiction. It had a strong contrast and painting effect.

3.2.2 Totems Expressing the Meanings of Folk Customs

Totems that reflect folk life, having a certain auspicious meaning and embodying loyalty, filial piety, righteousness and shame have always been very popular. For example, Zhu He's profound pen holder about "Pine and Crane" during the Zhengde period of the Ming Dynasty (in the collection of Nanjing Museum). Pines and cranes are always auspicious totems admired in folk life since ancient times. The pine is a symbol of immortality in Taoist mythology. The crane is regarded as a symbol of nobleness and elegance, which is out of earthliness. Therefore, "Pine and Crane" has a meaning of longevity and is regarded as a prosper and auspicious totem. These themes were numerously

expressed in the bamboo carving works in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. In the early Qing Dynasty, Shen Quanlin used the sinking carving method to sculpt a pen holder about a drawing of grasses, insects and cabbages (collected in the Palace Museum). The cabbage not only homonyms "hundred fortune", but also has a meaning of gathering wealth and implies the pursuit of innocence and incorruptibility. Therefore, it can not only meet the needs of ordinary people, but also meet the spiritual pursuit of literati. In the fourth year of the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty, the carved chrysanthemum on a pen holder using green-remained techniques by Pan Xifeng (collected in Shanghai Museum) is a symbol of nobleness which has always been favored by literati.

In the sixth year of Jiaqing period in the Qing Dynasty, Han Chao cooperated with Xi Gang to engrave a pen holder about a painting of New Year's grasses, flowers, vegetables and fruits on table (collected in the Shanghai Museum). The totem used was called "New Year's Elegant Offering", which was created by the painters at the end of the year to pray for blessings. This theme is mostly related to New Year's blessings, longevity and well-being, and worry-free food and clothing, adding a peaceful and festive atmosphere to the festival. In this bamboo carved pen holder, the technique of Yin-carving was used to describe the main objects in the literati study room at that time, such as tin bottles, sand pots, plum bottles, Ganoderma lucidum, and potted calamus, which made the "New Year's Elegant Offering" theme a more combination of elegance and popular blessing meanings.

In the 59th year of Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty, an arm rest carved by Xi Gang's (a seal engraver, calligrapher and painter in the Qing Dynasty, whose engraving style was from the Qin and Han dynasties, regarded with Ding Jing, Huang Yi and Jiang Ren as the four masters of the Xiling Seal Society, and together with Chen Yuzhong, Chen Hongshou, Zhao Zhichen, and Qian Songhe as the eight masters of the Xiling Seal Society) has an quite interesting picture on it. This work was Yin-carved and the picture was a painting by Gu Luo about a child and an old man watching a crane. It caught the right moment that they got surprised by a flying crane while walking. When the old man stopped abruptly and looked up, he held the child tightly with his hands. This picture conveys to the readers the ancient Chinese etiquette of filial piety

respecting the old and loving the young, and the crane also has the meaning of longevity.

3.2.3 *Literati Thought*

In the 43rd year of Wanli in the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Zhizheng created a pen holder with a picture about a noble literati using relief, hollow-out, and Yin-carving techniques. Noble Literati means to advanced scholars who have noble morals and transcendence from the world which was the spiritual embodiment of the literati's pursuit of perfection. In the Qing Dynasty Wu Zhifan created a pen holder using bas-relief and through carving techniques with a picture about Han Shan and Shi De. These two immortals means harmony and happiness, and they had been monks before they became immortals. So this carved work mainly expressed the themes of harmony and a wish to live in the mountain and forests to avoid the secular life. In the Qing Dynasty Wu Zhifan created another pen holder with a picture called The Shadow of Pines Greet Wild Geese using shallow exposed Yang-carving technique. It showed the literati's mood of admiring nature and cultivating one's own body and mind alone. In addition to the above, the theme of elegant gatherings of the ancients was usually used to reflect the gathering of literati in reality, and the bamboo carving artists would have given new expressions to the traditional theme. The "Seven Sages in the Bamboo Forests" have been widely used. In the Qing Dynasty the pictures on an incense tube and a pen holder about this theme described the scene that the seven ancient sages gathering, three or two in a group, playing Qing, painting and writing calligraphy, making dialogues, leaning on a bamboo, or holding a whisk in the hand. Similar themes included elegant gathering in the western park and night old sages on the Fragrant Hills, etc.

Fang Jie (1800-1839), In the Qing Dynasty, born in Huangyan, Zhejiang Province, was good at poetry and painting, and made many landscapes. In the book named "Talking about Today's Famous Painter and Calligraphers" compiled by Jiang Baoling and his son Jiang Chen in 1871, Fang Jie was commented that "Whether it was landscape or figures, he all painted by himself, and then on the fan bones, arm rests and pen holders, he was skilled, good at Yin and Yang carving techniques, with skills of outline and wipe, using a burin as practiced as a pen." In the tenth year of the Daoguang period, Fang Jie used sinking carving and bas-relief techniques to sculpt an arm rest with

a picture about "Su Wu Insisted on Holding the Token" (Collected in Shanghai Museum). The theme of "Su Wu Insisted on Holding the Token" was taken from an ancient Chinese story which had expressed Su Wu's tenacious perseverance and loyalty to the country. Fang Jie's family had been poor, and he had repeatedly failed in getting official positions. Later He travelled between Wu and Yue with his skills. Presumably, this work also reflected his mood at that time.

3.2.4 Contents of Poetry, Calligraphy and Painting

Among the bamboo carving techniques, the most suitable for expressing the themes of poetry, calligraphy and painting should be green-remained and Yin carving techniques. The green-remained technique has been recorded as early as the Tang Dynasty, and the one that developed to maturity should be represented by Zhang Xihuang in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. At the same time, the painter and poet Zhang Feng in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties used the painting method to Yin-carve an arm rest about a picture of Wang Youjun Writing Calligraphy, and it was also one of the earlier bamboo carving works to express the contents of the calligraphy and painting. In the middle of the Qing Dynasty, this new method was used by Zhou Hao up to the peak, being an extremely popular style at that time. Zhejiang bamboo carving artists such as Pan Xifeng, Chen Hongshou, Zhao Zhichen, Xi Gang, and Gao Kai all had works using similar method, for example, Chen Hongshou's fan bones about painting and calligraphy, Zhao Zhichen's armrest about bamboo's integrity (collected in Shanghai Museum), rubbings from Xu Xi's (living in the middle and late Qing Dynasty, and a native of Shaoxing, Zhejiang[8]) pen holder (collected in Ningbo Museum) with reduced copy painting of Writing on Fans on the Ji Hill originally by Fei Danxu. In the middle of the Qing Dynasty, Emperor Qianlong admired antiques and ordered to collect and organize the bronze wares such as Ding, Yi, and Zun in the palace, and to compile them into the book of "Antique Appreciation in the Western Qing Dynasty". Since then, the study of epigraphy had become fashionable, literati preferred ancient inscriptions and there were also inscriptions appeared in bamboo products at that time.[9] The remaining Zhejiang bamboo carvings include Han Chao's arm rest with copy of the ancient inscriptions (in the collection of Shanghai Museum), and his fan bones with ancient brick text.

In the late Qing Dynasty, Zhejiang bamboo carving was influenced by the Genre of Shanghai Painting, politics and economy. Although there were many bamboo carving artists recorded, the category of bamboo carving was mostly limited to fan bones, and the most popular subjects were epigraphy, calligraphy and painting. For example, Cai Zhao Yin-carved fan bones with copy of ancient inscriptions (collected in Shanghai Museum). Ding Wenwei combined flat Yang-carving and Yin-carving techniques to create fan bones with copy of brick inscriptions in the Jin Dynasty. There were also Zhu Fu's Yang-carved fan bones with copy of brick inscriptions, Yuan Xin's Yin-carved fan bones of epigraphy, calligraphy and painting, Hu Jue's Yin-carved arm rest of calligraphy between regular and cursive handwriting, and Chen Chunxi's fan bones of calligraphy and painting (Collected in Shanghai Museum), etc.

4. CONCLUSION

From the period of late Ming and early Qing to the period of late Qing and the beginning of the Republic of China, the category of bamboo carvings evolved from daily-used practicality to literati artistry. The techniques continuously simplified from deep relief and hollow-out carving to bas-relief and Yin-carving, and three-dimensional effect tended towards flatness. The themes gradually evolved from historical myths and totems with auspicious meanings to literati thought, poetry, calligraphy and painting, reflecting the gradual evolution from civilian to Literati. The works help to understand the folk customs, the respect of loyalty, filial piety, righteousness and shame by the ancient literati, as well as their perception and willingness to nature and life, and to comprehend literati's humanistic thought, national integrity and unique aesthetic taste.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Chunyan Yang is in charge of thesis writing, and Yilin Xia is responsible for the organization of data and the translation of thesis.

REFERENCES

- [1] Jin Xiya: "Little Words of Bamboo Carving" [M], Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2003, p.15(in Chinese)
- [2] (Ming) Zhang Dai, edited by Ma Xingrong: "Dreamlike Memories at Tao An " [M],

- Volume 1, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2007, p. 9(in Chinese)
- [3] Zhang Rong, Liu Yue: "Picture Dictionary of The Forbidden City's sculptures made of Bamboos, Woods, Teeth and Horns" [M], Beijing: Forbidden City Press, 2010, p. 6(in Chinese)
- [4] (Qing) Liu Luan: "The Five Shi Gourd ", quoted from Deng Zhicheng and edited by Deng Ke: "The Complete Collection of Trivial Records about Antiques" [M], Beijing Publishing House, 1996, p. 205(in Chinese)
- [5] Huang Youhua: "Talking about Bamboo Carving Art and Famous Masters in Past Dynasties" [J], "Southern Cultural Relics" 2003, Issue 1, p. 67-69(in Chinese)
- [6] Yu Dehua: "Elegant Bamboo and Fine Wood" [M], Beijing: Forbidden City Press, 2015, p. 83(in Chinese)
- [7] Xie Yumei: "Appreciation of Bamboo Sculptures Collected in Tianjin Museum"[A], "Proceedings of the International Symposium on Bamboo Carvings" edited by Shanghai Museum [C], Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2014, p. 337(in Chinese)
- [8] Chen Jun: "Bamboo Carvings in Ming and Qing Dynasties" [M], Ningbo: Ningbo Publishing House, 2005, p.258(in Chinese)
- [9] Yu Dehua: "Elegant Bamboo and Fine Wood" [M], Beijing: Forbidden City Press, 2015, p. 109(in Chinese)