

Research on the Development Dilemma and “Activation” Redesign of Traditional Folk Handicraft

A Case of Juancheng Lu Brocade *

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Abstract—With a long development history and profound cultural deposits, Chinese traditional folk handicraft has high artistic value and commercial value, but with the acceleration of the process of modernization, traditional folk handicraft has been gradually replaced by high-efficiency mechanized production and now it is facing a dilemma in both heritage and development. This paper, with traditional folk handicrafts as the research subject, first explains the concept and development dilemma of traditional folk handicraft, and in the case of Juancheng Lu brocade analyzes its artistic characteristics so as to put forward the methods and approaches for its “activation” design, aiming to offer help for sustainable development of the traditional folk handicraft to make it integrated in modern life.

Keywords—traditional folk handicraft; handicraft; Juancheng Lu brocade; modern design

I. INTRODUCTION

Chinese traditional folk handicrafts bearing the diligence and wisdom of the ancestors in the historical development have become the precious wealth of Chinese traditional culture. With the advent of the era of industrialized mass production, people’s life and consumption structure are undergoing great change. As a result, the low efficiency traditional handicraft industry is gradually losing its dominant position in the development of nowadays society, and its functionality has been detached from the modern life, so it is bound to be eliminated gradually. Modern design, belonging to cultural creative industry and as the soft power of national culture, plays a significant role in promoting the development of national economy. However, with the development of economic “globalization”, the invasion of foreign culture also has a great impact on Chinese traditional culture. Therefore, it has always been a concern for many eastern and western countries and regions about how to combine the traditional folk handicrafts with modern design, make innovation and develop new types and functions so as to make them closer to modern life.

II. THE CONCEPT AND DEVELOPMENT DILEMMA OF TRADITIONAL FOLK HANDICRAFT

“Traditional handicraft” is a general term of the arts and crafts based on hand finishing formed in the course of history.¹ Chinese traditional handicrafts, with a long history of development, have a wide range of categories, and are very common in unearthed historical relics, so we can say that the splendid material civilization of China is composed of traditional handicrafts, whose development in physical form is also promoting the progress of the material civilization of China.

“Traditional folk handicrafts” refer to craft creation and its products that are created by people, reflect their life, thoughts and feelings and present their aesthetic idea and artistic sentiment.² In the early days, traditional folk handicrafts are from spontaneous and original craft production of folk people. Later, with the social development, class differentiation and division of labour in society gradually appear, and traditional folk handicrafts also went through many times of differentiation. Especially in Ming and Qing dynasties, newly-developing citizen stratum and development of commercial economy have led to the formation of two major handicraft systems--folk handicraft and official handicraft. There are obvious differences between the two handicraft systems in production purpose, aesthetic style, material selection and production. Folk handicraft, originated from the life experience and needs of people, has more casual production; while official handicraft is rooted in but higher than folk handicraft in the development process, as it is good at seek out advantages from the folk handicraft, then use and sublimate them.

III. CURRENT DEVELOPMENT DILEMMA OF TRADITIONAL FOLK HANDICRAFT

In ancient times, China created the history of silkworm breeding and silk weaving. As wrote in Huainanzi Sericulture, “Luo zu persuaded Yellow Emperor to promote silkworm

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¹ Zhang Daoyi. Dictionary of Chinese Folk Arts [M], Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, January 2001: 6.

² Tian Xiaohang. Collection of Traditional Chinese Arts and Crafts--Folk Handicraft, Elephant Press, February 2007: 3.

breeding and was married to Yellow Emperor, and then she bred silkworm personally; Huang Tu Yao Lan wrote, “Fu Xi become silkworm and Luo Zu bred silkworm”.³ The handicraft was developed always centering on people’s life, and it was originated from life, changed the mode of life at that time and created many daily living equipment full of emotions and excellent craftsmanship, reflecting the unification of beauty of technology and beauty of art.

At present, there is a radical change in people's production and life styles. The traditional folk handicraft, as the intangible cultural heritage, is facing unprecedented impact, and its space of inheritance, development and existence is also seriously challenged, leaving it in an awkward position. On the one hand, impacted by mechanized mass production and change of high-tech technology, for traditional folk handicrafts, the production mode mainly based on manual finishing characterized by low efficiency and low output has gradually been replaced by the high efficiency mechanized production based on mass production which reduces production cycle and improve production efficiency but also leads to a more obvious trend of product homogeneity; on the other hand, in modern society, the traditional handicrafts have more remarkable decorative function and not longer adapt to modern life, so people buy those handicrafts mostly because of nostalgic feelings or for the purpose of decoration of the living space, and their form, color, manufacturing technology cannot any longer meet the aesthetics standards of modern people; moreover, it is worth mentioning that due to poor sales and low earnings of this industry, the young are unwilling to learn, and the elderly are unable to learn, resulting in a sharp decline in the number of employees of this industry. At present, employees of this industry are mostly the elderly and women who are left behind in rural areas, so there is an aging problem and a lack of new generation of employees. Through the above status analysis, it is worth thinking about how to explore the cultural value and artistic value of traditional folk handicrafts, and how to develop the traditional folk handicrafts on the premise of protecting them, so as to make them compatible with modern society and acceptable to the public.

IV. CULTURAL BACKGROUND AND ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF JUANCHENG LU BROCADE

A. Cultural Background of Juancheng Lu Brocade

Belonging to Heze City, Shandong province, Juancheng County is located in the southwest of Shandong, and gets the name due to Juanyi and Juancheng. With a long history, Juancheng is one of the birthplace of the Chinese nation and rich in material culture resources, among which Lu Brocade, Tile Carving and Shangyang Dance were included into the list of national intangible cultural heritage.

“The fine silk fabrics of the State of Qi and plain white silk of the State of Lu lead the trend of apparel and accessories” means that brocade produced by Shandong was well known throughout the country in the Spring and Autumn. “Lu

Brocade” is a shortened form of hand-made pure cotton fabrics owned by the folk in southwest of Shandong, especially the pure cotton fabrics produced in Juancheng and Jiaxiang, Heze City, Shandong. Lu Brocade, with full local flavor and distinct regional features, has a long history of development and profound cultural deposit and encapsulates the collective wisdom of local people. As intangible cultural heritage, Juancheng Lu Brocade carries the ancient textile technology, folk art and songs and is the “living fossil” of the culture of Qi and Lu.

B. Artistic Characteristics of Juancheng Lu Brocade

1) *Complicated manufacturing process*: The original manufacturing process of Lu Brocade is very complicated, including 72 procedures. Lu Brocade is knitted by 22 kinds of basic color threads which, according to information, can create nearly two thousand colorful patterns, as the veritable the myriads of changes and wonderful workmanship excelling nature. Among the 72 procedures for production of Lu Brocade, 19 procedures are main procedures including cotton picking up, cotton ginning, cotton fluffing, thread doubling, thread bonding, thread washing, thread coloring, Jiang Xian, Dun Xian, Luo Xian, warping thread, casting shuttle, Shua Xian, Zuo Zeng, Tao Zeng, Diao Ji Zi, Shuan Bu, Weaving and Liao Ji. (See Fig. 1, Fig. 2, Fig. 3 and Fig. 4) These procedures can be summarized into three stages: treatment of raw materials, fabrication of color threads and weaving of cloth.



Fig. 1. Thread doubling.



Fig. 2. Warping thread.

³ Xia Yanjing. Chinese Art and Design History, Nanjing Normal University Press, February 2016:2.



Fig. 3. Casting shuttle.



Fig. 4. Weaving.

2) *Bright and beautiful colors*: Lu Brocade contains bright colors with strong contrast, which is the typical application of colors in folk arts. The common colors include red, blue, green, purple, black, yellow, brown, white, etc. which are often used in combination of contrast colors, such as red- green, purple- yellow, blue-green, etc. combination. Different decorative patterns matching with different color combinations, and interweaving change of different color threads make Lu Brocade present different artistic effects. In the meantime, influenced by folk art and traditional culture, color selection of Lu Brocade is not determined randomly, but with implied meaning and symbolic meaning. For example, “red near yellow to show an effect of resplendence; adding blue color to show spiritedness; red matching with green, a piece of jade; purple is bone and green is tendon, and matching with red and yellow will show an effect of brightness; a yellow horse shall be equipped with a purple saddle, and a red horse shall be equipped with a green saddle”. In a word, color design of Lu Brocade express the characteristics of personality of hospitality and straightforwardness of people in southwest Shandong, as well as representing the vision of local people for pursuit of good life.

3) *Patterns with abundant implied meanings*: Pattern design of Lu Brocade is the most important characteristic of Lu Brocade process. The pattern adopts abstract geometric figures in the form of succession, repetition, comparison, intermission, etc. so that the patterns are concise but not simple, and the style is abstract and creative.

Lu Brocade has a great variety of patterns which in the beginning mainly are simple geometric patterns such as

diagonal stripe, strip and chequered pattern, which are simple and single. Later, these patterns were gradually developed into more complex patterns such as Zaohua pattern, Shuibo pattern, Hedou pattern, Eyan pattern, Maoti pattern and Zhima pattern, which are the summery of real things. For example, Zaohua pattern is the geometric pattern extracted from jujube flower, and is the combination of repeated rhombuses; some patterns are produced based on lucky implied meanings among the folk, such as Zhima pattern composed of cross grains and vertical grains representing sesame stalk, and dots representing sesame seeds, and this pattern means “rise joint by joint like sesame flowers on the stem”, which is popular with local people. In a word, Patterns of Lu Brocade are not confined to the reality of objective things, but are a subjective and voluntary creation which accords with the inner requirements and aesthetic feelings of people, and is in the aesthetic realm of meaning grasped and imagery forgotten.

4) *Plain and humble material*: Different with gorgeous silk and coarse linen, material of Juancheng Lu Brocade adopts plain and humble cotton, and this is related to the geographical location and the suitable climate. Southwest of Shandong province, as the center of textile industry, is located in the plain with fertile land and moderate climate, thus is suitable for growing cotton. Natural cotton, as the raw material of Lu Brocade, has strict planting requirements including fixed output, no fertilizer, no pesticide, so it is very environment-friendly, and the cotton cloth also reflects the characteristics of refinement among roughness, nature and natural health care, which coincides with the concept of “environment-friendly, green and natural” advocated by modern people.

V. “ACTIVATION” REDESIGN OF LU BROCADE

Through the survey, the author found that the current development situation of Juancheng Lu Brocade is not very satisfactory. In the academic world, most researchers only focus on the inheritance and protection of Lu Brocade, and although some scholars proposed that Lu Brocade should combine with modern life to create high-value-added products with higher cultural value and artistic value which are more aligned with the aesthetic standards of modern people, there are few practical research about Lu Brocade combining with modern life. Therefore, aiming at the problem, the author proposes two design methods from the perspective of a designer.

There are many creative approaches of transforming Lu Brocade, and the author thinks that it is feasible to make improvement from the two aspects: visual sense (pattern and color) and tactile sense (carrier and material). At present, Lu Brocade pattern design is mainly based on traditional abstract patterns with rich implications, and there are many patterns but relatively single in the category; in addition, the colors adopted mostly are folk art colors with high lightness, and the combination of auspicious patterns and folk colors looks flattering plebeian, and is not accepted by the public any longer.

A. Transformation of Visual Effect

We can combine Lu Brocade with western design elements and international design style, but retain its original manufacturing process and method to make abstract extraction of its visual design elements and add new design language to it according to the aesthetic needs of modern people, so as to create novel, fashionable and creative patterns and colors. For example, *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* (Fig. 5), the work of Mondrian, the famous Dutch artist of de Stijl, adopts geometrical elements of red, yellow and blue, with strong color contrast, and this figure has been widely used in various fields of design. For another example, *Cishuo* (Fig. 6), the work of the famous rising handbag designer CICI CHEUNG, in the design, the designer extracted the form of porcelain, but in design skill, she adopted the optical illusion of Dutch master Escher to present a dimensional result in planar space, so the pattern design is very artful.

B. Transformation of Touch Sense

At present, Lu brocades in the market are mostly used for home decoration or as living articles such as bedding. Such kind of products has wide audience but with low added value. If we change our mind and expand the carrier of Lu Brocade, especially, using it in high value-added carriers such as fashion products, cultural and creative products, it will create higher economic value. For the concrete methods, on the one hand, we can combine the exquisite traditional workmanship of Lu Brocade with modern aesthetics inspiration, and apply it in the design and production of household goods, clothes, shoes, belts, bags, scarves, watches and other accessories to produce luxurious fashion items suitable for small mass; on the other hand, we can, via high-tech technology, combine Lu Brocade with new materials, such as bamboo weaving, leather, metal and porcelain, and let the designer help determine its style to create interesting and original multi-type handicrafts with both practicability and orientalism charm. For example, CICI CHEUNG's *Huang* series work (Fig. 7), based on the Chinese traditional image "deep and quiet bamboo grove", integrates embroidery with modern fashion accessories. The work not only reflects the modern aesthetics of orientalism but also perfectly integrate into modern life. For another example, one of CITIZEN watch *Ambiluna Collection-L* series products (Fig. 8), this product adopts metal watch face combining with watchband made of traditional textile, and the lustre of modern metal coexists with traditional natural textile, harmonious and unified, showing perfect creativity.

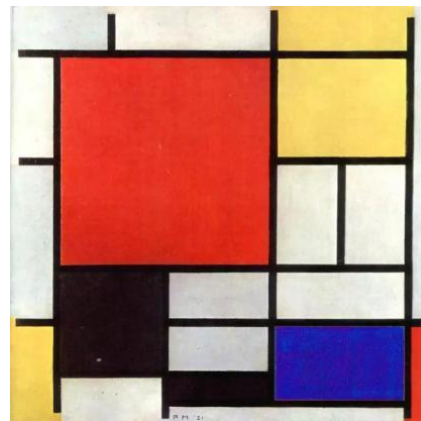


Fig. 5. Mondrian's *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue*.



Fig. 6. CICI CHEUNG's *Cishuo*.



Fig. 7. CICI CHEUNG *Huang* series work.



Fig. 8. CITIZEN watch *Ambiluna Collection-L* series product.

In addition, apart from transformation of Lu Brocade in style design and texture, the author also thinks we can start from the cultural to endow Lu Brocade products with a certain

context of theme. For example, we can take the profound Confucian culture of Shandong province as the starting point to extract the design theme from Confucius-Mencius Culture and use aesthetic taste of literati to arouse the memory of the public so as to strike a chord with them. In modern society, only design work bearing culture can earn popular support and go farther.

VI. CONCLUSION

Traditional folk handicraft, as our precious cultural resources, bears profound historic culture and wisdom of our ancestors, which are valuable intangible wealth, so it is our responsibility and obligation to protect, inherit and develop it. Nowadays, with the change and development of the society, the traditional folk handicraft is seriously detached from modern life, so making designers involve the development of traditional folk handicraft to inject new ideas and blood not only can make the traditional folk handicraft integrate into modern life to help the craftsman to obtain higher economic value added, but also can give local designers a chance to expand their world influence to help China design go to the world and enter the international original design ranks-- in this way, you're killing two birds with one stone.

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