

Research on Birch Bark Art of Oroqen Ethnic Group in Heilongjiang River Valley*

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Abstract—Exploring the artistic value of the research on the birch bark products of the Oroqen ethnic group in the Heilongjiang river valley and fully understanding the forest cultural characteristics of this artistic inheritance will be of far-reaching significance for exploring the artistic culture of the peoples dwelling in the Heilongjiang river valley for many generations. Through the analysis of the cultural connotation, making techniques, decorative patterns and colors of the birch bark art of the Oroqen ethnic group in Heilongjiang valley, this paper finds that research on the birch bark art of the Oroqen ethnic group in Heilongjiang river valley has prominent regional cultural characteristics and artistic characteristics of basin civilization. In particular, it is of special significance and value to promote the birch-bark art of cross-border ethnic groups between China and Russia, and to spread and communicate the hunting and fishing civilization in the Heilongjiang river valley.

Keywords—Heilongjiang river valley; the Oroqen ethnic group; birch bark art

I. INTRODUCTION

As a traditional art and culture form in the border area between China and Russia, the birch bark art of the Oroqen ethnic group in the Heilongjiang river valley plays an irreplaceable and positive role in the current regional ethnic culture and art of China and Russia. It is of great significance to protect and inherit Oroqen's birch-bark skills for improving the country's cultural soft power, innovating, developing and carrying forward minority cultures, respecting cultural diversity, absorbing the essence of national traditional culture and inheriting Oroqen's national

art.

II. BIRCH BARK CULTURE OF THE OROQEN PEOPLE IN THE HEILONGJIANG RIVER VALLEY

Heilongjiang river valley¹ is an important birthplace of Chinese civilization, and Heilongjiang is also a multi-ethnic province. Its unique northern charm reflects its unique regional characteristics, giving birth to a variety of tribes and nationalities on this land. According to "A brief history of the development of Heilongjiang", up to 2002, the province had 51 ethnic groups and 50 ethnic minorities distributed throughout the province, including the Mongolian, Manchu, Korean, Daur, Hui, Hezhe, Oroqen, Kirgiz and other ethnic groups. In the process of historical development, the ethnic minorities have created their own unique national cultures, and the cultures of the ethnic minorities and other ethnic groups blend with each other, creating a very rich and precious cultural heritage.² The Heilongjiang river valley is now shared by China, Russia and Mongolia. The Heilongjiang river valley in China borders Russia bounded by the Heilongjiang and Wusuli rivers in its east and north; borders Mongolia and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China in the west; and its southern part borders Jilin province, which is the core area of the Heilongjiang river valley in China.

The Oroqen ethnic group is one of the ethnic minorities in northern China. Their life is based on collective hunting, gathering and fishing. Since the Oroqen people live in the freezing cold in the north, the harsh climate bred their tenacious and heroic spirit and fearless courage. The Oroqen ethnic group is like an enchanting and colorful flower. It is also like a slim and graceful girl standing there, charming and beautiful. She is a tribe forever attached to the forest, as well as an ancient ethnic group full of infinite vitality. She is the Xing'an creature that has created the northern nomadic hunting culture. People of this ethnic group live a safari life in the forest that provides them all kinds of wild animals and plants for their food and clothes.

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¹ Gao Huimin. A study on the art history of ethnic minorities in the Heilongjiang river valley [M]. Heilongjiang People's Publishing House. 2004.10. (in Chinese)

² Chen Zhaofu History of Chinese minority art [M]. China Minzu University Press. 2001. 2. (in Chinese)

Under the influence of early animism, the Oroqen people created a typical hunting culture³. With the rapid loss of national culture, people need to pay more attention to the unique charm of Oroqen folk art in Heilongjiang basin. As a common culture of the fishing and hunting nationalities in the north, the birch bark culture is widely distributed in the regions. Every ethnic group living in the Heilongjiang river valley shares the birch bark culture. This culture exists not only in China, but also in Siberia, the arctic and northern Japan.⁴ Birch bark culture has a long history. From the excavation of the pottery cups that imitating birch bark in the Bai Jinbao site dating from 3000 years ago, it can be found that the birch bark culture is much older than this. The birch bark culture belt also covers a large area. It ranges widely, from Heilongjiang river valley, Nenjiang river basin, and Songhua river basin. The birch-bark culture appeared in the three ancient clan families in northeast China.⁵ It is recorded in some historical materials that the Jurchens of the Jin dynasty covered their houses with birch bark, and "built their houses with birch wood". After the Qing dynasty, the records of the birch bark culture of the northern nationalities began to be detailed in historical materials, such as the Heilongjiang Chorography, Longsha Chorography, Notes on Liubian and Jilin Chorography. Birch bark products are a kind of folk practical articles, which are closely related to people's production and life. However, in Qing dynasty, birch bark products also became tributes. Birch bark farms and birch bark factories in Jilin and other places were set up then, and soldiers were ordered to peel the birch bark as tribute to the Imperial Household Department. In Qing dynasty, birch bark was also used in bows and stirrups and thus became military supplies. Therefore the uses of birch bark became more widespread.

The production mode of Oroqen ethnic group determines the status of birch bark culture⁶. Traditional birch bark craft is in ceaseless development, in the long years of which, some of the use of its skills, techniques, and tools have been lost, some inherited, some improved and some innovated. The overall development of society promotes the progress of productive forces and changes in culture and various art forms at all levels of society. For example, the Oroqen people use birch bark to make conical houses with vents at the top, which is convenient for lighting and ventilation. And there is another kind of house used as warehouse, in which food, meat, dried vegetables and other sundries can be stored.

III. TRADITIONAL PRODUCTION TECHNOLOGY OF BIRCH BARK PRODUCTS

Birch bark plays an important role in people's production and life. Even today, people can still see Oroqen women making birch bark products, but the number of them is not large any more. The technique that every Oroqen woman was required to master in the past is gradually disappearing and has become of the craft of a few of them. And those who master this craft are usually given the name of craftsman or folk artisan.

A. Birch Bark Stripping and Primary Processing

The stripping of birch bark begins every may. At this time, the birch bark with full moisture is easy to peel off. It will be difficult to get a whole birch bark to peel it after this season. Every year at this time, women flocked to the luxuriant birch forest and select the birch with straight trunk and less section scars to peel. They usually gash the bark on both ends with a hunting knife, and rip it open through the two sides. Then unclench it from the trunk with the point of the knife and the bark will fall off.

B. Three Kinds of Process Flow of Finished Products

1) *Folding method*: To make bowls and basins from birch bark, one need to select bark of different sizes according to needs; cut the four corners off and fold them with a width of 5-6cm; seam the four gaps with horsetail thread; cut the upper end and cover the edges with veneer. Small barks can be used to make bowls and large ones basins. To make a basket from birch bark, one needs to select a large piece of bark. The four corners should be cut deeply with the bottom smaller than opening. When folding the corners, one should fold deeper at the upper end and seam them; finally, cut the upper end and cover the edges with veneer. Make the cap according the size of the opening. Make a thin wooden rim 2 cm wide on the side of the basket. The cover is double-layer and the embossed layer is sewn on top.

2) *Interlocking method*: When making birch bark products, it is possible to use the interpenetration between joints for natural interlocking without suture. In making flat and oval vessels, one can cut out tenons and mortises with a knife in the place where they are joined together. Then put a whole layer of birch skin on the inside, and make a bottom and a cover. Drill a hole in the cover and tie a rope to open it. Oroqen people often use this method to make small and exquisite cigarette boxes, salt boxes and so on.

3) *Stitching method*:⁷Stitch the main body of the birch bark vessel to the joint, which is a method of making barrels and boxes from birch bark. Make a long strip of birch bark and sew the ends together with horsetail thread. The birch bark barrels are made by stitching together the sides of the materials. Some birch-bark barrels are also printed with

³ Zhao Fuxing. Hunting culture of Oroqen ethnic minority [M]. Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House.1991.6. (in Chinese)

⁴ Sun Yunlai The plastic arts of the nationalities in the Heilongjiang valley[M]. Tianjin Classics Publishing House. 1990. 10. (in Chinese)

⁵ Zhao Fuxing. Hunting culture of Oroqen ethnic minority [M]. Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House.1991.6. (in Chinese)

⁶ Ha Nasi. The treasure of primitive culture — birch bark culture [J]. Journal of Inner Mongolia Normal University (Education Science Edition) 2002 (4). (in Chinese)

⁷ Wang Zijia. Research on birch bark products of Oroqen ethnic group [D] Master's thesis of Minzu University of China, 2016.6.

patterns on the bottom of the barrel. They are very delicately made and thus are used to hold fruit, salt and other items. The birch bark box has oval shapes and rectangle shapes. The bottom of the box is sewn together with the box body by thread.

Birch bark products of Oroqen ethnic group are often used in production and life. So the functionality is in the first place while aesthetics is secondary. That is to say, in the long-term production and living needs of Oroqen people, the birch bark making technology has been handed down and become an intangible cultural heritage. The practical beauty of birch bark products in Oroqen is well reflected in their production and life. In some backward Oroqen areas, most people pay attention to the practical functions when they use birch bark products. When making all kinds of birch bark products, the Oroqen people use the light, durable and moisture-resistant features of birch bark to make commonly used implements in daily life. Among these daily utensils, rarely appear exaggerated design or gorgeous color; on the contrary, they are mostly simple and unadorned, representing the practical beauty of the birch bark.

IV. THE BEAUTY OF THE DECORATIVE PATTERNS OF BIRCH BARK PRODUCTS

Different ethnic groups have different aesthetic pursuit, which means different aesthetic consciousness⁸. The aesthetic pursuit of an ethnic group decides its aesthetic consciousness. For example, an ethnic group always prefers the same pattern or ornamentation, or a certain color. Different adornment design made by a repeated adornment design appears in different birch bark product to beautify the products. In this way both practical and aesthetic functions are represented, especially in the beautification of the decorative patterns. These reflect not only the love of life and the pursuit of beauty of Oroqen people, but also their aesthetic consciousness of the birch bark products.

The Oroqen ethnic group is a clever and deft people, which may be closely related to their inborn hunting life. When they are in contact with nature, they are able to make extraction, deformation and processing of the things they discover in nature, and make use of the animals and plants that are seen reasonably to make them animal patterns and plant patterns. The Oroqen people use their unique way of understanding to record the beautiful things in nature. This process of recording becomes the birch bark making skill after artistic processing.

When using and teaching the birch bark technique, the Oroqen people, with grasp of the whole rule of the birch bark technique, present the vivid patterns on the birch bark products with the combination of their own deep understanding of the beauty of nature⁹. The whole process can be the image taking of the aesthetic process, that is, the

⁸ Lu Yushun. A brief history of the development of Heilongjiang fine arts [M]. Heilongjiang People's Publishing House. 2004.10. (in Chinese)

⁹ Wang Zijia. Research on birch bark products of Oroqen ethnic group [D] Master's thesis of Minzu University of China, 2016,6

extraction, understanding and yearning for beautiful things. Oroqen people place their beautiful memories and wishes on the patterns of these animals and plants, forming a form of beauty, which is unique and pure. For example, many patterns about nature like cloud pattern, water wave pattern and other ornamentations of animals and plants from the nature.

In Oroqen ethnic group, there is such a custom that if there is a girl to be married in the family, the family will make birch-bark boxes as dowry objects, and the boxes will be engraved with auspicious patterns¹⁰. At the edge of the box a special pattern is carved, called a "kuiregeyin," which represents the wish for the girl to be faithful to her future husband. The match of these two kinds of patterns makes the whole design more vivid with smooth lines and simple mellowness.

The Oroqen people make good use of the plants and animals from nature in their birch bark making, to embody the harmonious beauty through combining the abstract elements with the aesthetic elements. As a general rule, the match of different sizes of patterns should be in proportion, but Oroqen people boldly abandon this rule. Instead, they arrange the abstract aesthetic patterns in an orderly manner in their own unique way, and make artistic processing by combining exaggeration, deformation and extraction, representing that the Oroqen people have the aesthetic judgment to extract the images.

The Oroqen people not only make use of and summarize everything endowed by nature to form the unique beauty of the Oroqen ethnic group, but they can also make the patterns vivid by use of repetition, gradual change and the geometric figures in mathematics in the production of birch bark products, giving the products the birch bark product a sense of rhythm and vitality. For example, the pattern of clouds appearing arranged in an orderly way on the birch bark products give people a sense of order. Or in the making of patterns in the process of repeated circular patterns, continuous changes in the ornamentation and the orderly composition contribute to the constant development of birch bark products in art.

V. THE BEAUTY OF SHAPE AND COLOR OF BIRCH BARK PRODUCTS

In the traditional art culture of the Chinese nation, this ethnic group has distinctive characteristics in ethnic plastic arts. Plastic arts general refer to the recreation of the modeling of shape, light, dot, line, surface, body and other forms by use of a certain material. Since the Oroqen people have been leading a life of hunting for a long time, their plastic arts are relatively primitive. Because of the limited economic conditions, it is impossible for them to produce works with colorful and expensive materials. Therefore, they make full use of the surrounding natural environment to find the most convenient materials for processing objects. These

¹⁰ Liu Yuliang. Decorative design and plastic arts of hunting ethnic groups in northern China: Oroqen Volume [M]. Heilongjiang Education Publishing House. 2008. 3. (in Chinese)

materials have low cost and rough texture, and they use the original texture and characteristics of the materials to create.

The plastic art of the Oroqen ethnic group is a primitive type which highlights the interaction of the practical function and the aesthetic consciousness. In the plastic arts of Oroqen people, practical function and aesthetic consciousness are interwoven and mixed. Most of them are out of practical purposes, on the basis of which, the aesthetic consciousness is improved. Oroqen people have to improve their technique constantly to make their plastic arts both practical and beautiful.

The birch is a hardy deciduous tree living in cold temperate and cold zones. The Oroqen people is a reserved ethnic group that is not good at expression. They have their own unique pursuit and their own way of pursuing beauty. When making birch bark products, Oroqen people make birch bark products with their own characteristics by matching different models.

Modeling of birch bark products in Oroqen is the most common method of aesthetic expression. Plastic art is an important factor for the Oroqen ethnic group in the creation of beautiful things and this factor has been used in the making of birch bark products¹¹. Common birch bark baskets, for example, come in two shapes: covered and uncovered. The basic shape is a rectangular wide at the bottom, narrow at the top seen from the front side, and a cylindrical seen from above. The difference in size at different part forms a contrast in models, which is used to the models of birch bark baskets.

In terms of usage, there is a difference between a covered birch bark basket and a lidless birch bark basket. A covered birch bark basket can be used to hold daily necessities like rice, oil and salt, and a bare birch bark basket can be used to hold water. The contrast in models of the two kinds of birch bark baskets shows the change in the shape of birch bark products. A strap will be added to these baskets to secure the lid. People will paint their straps in a variety of colors. The match of the colorful strap and a simple birch bark basket create a visual sensation. The Oroqen people often stride these birch-bark baskets on horseback for hunting trips. A string of colored beads is often sewn to the strap of each birch bark basket so when the horse is running or the wind is blowing, the beads will ring like bells, which is very interesting.

Different birch bark products of the Oroqen ethnic group have different models¹². These different forms of birch bark products show the yearning for a better life of the Oroqen people. The Oroqen people often use colors to reflect their emotions. They use different colors and models to reflect the beauty of nature, making the beauty of models and art more harmonious. The Oroqen people can change the dull model of birch bark products into plastic arts in multi forms, which

reflects their love for nature and creativity. They apply the beauty of colors and models to the plastic arts of the birch bark products.

The Oroqen people are good at using the primary and secondary relation of colors in the making of birch bark products, of which birch bark painting is a representative. To make a birch bark painting one needs to paint the who picture black first, and then carve out figures, plants, or paint with different colors. In this way the match of black as the primary and other colors are the secondary can be produced, which shows the harmonious beauty of the whole echoing parts. Oroqen people are good at using color combination to highlight the main body of birch bark painting. Through this distinction of primary and secondary, the primary and secondary are contrasted. Especially in the birch bark painting, the main characters are contrasted with the secondary background, forming a harmonious aesthetic feeling in the picture.

VI. CONCLUSION

The birch bark art¹³ of the Oroqen ethnic group in Heilongjiang valley is an important part of Chinese national culture. Therefore, the way to inherit and protect Chinese culture should be integrated with the social and economic environment to enrich the connotation of Chinese culture. Inheritance and protection should be combined with ethnic development and the framework of ethnic art and culture should be built. With the focus on the inheritance and development of the art and culture of ethnic minorities, the transformation of concepts should be promoted and the understanding, identification and unity among ethnic groups should be enhanced. In the current wave of social development, the cultural integration and exchanges between ethnic minorities are constantly expanding and deepening while the artistic culture of some ethnic minorities with a small population is increasingly deteriorating. The promotion of the protecting the traditional culture of the Oroqen ethnic group contributes to the enhancement of the construction and development level of local culture.¹⁴The birch bark product craft of the Oroqen ethnic group is an example of its traditional culture. It's necessary to start from the artistic roots of this nationality and protect its cultural heritage from multiple perspectives. Therefore, the research on birch bark product craft culture also plays a connecting role in Oroqen culture and art, which can not only protect but also better inherit the art and culture. Viewing from the perspective of modern art is conducive to the better development of the artistic characteristics of this ethnic group.

¹¹ Li Hongfu. Plastic art of birch bark implements of northern Chinese ethnic groups [J]. Journal of Minzu University of China (Philosophy and Social Science Edition) 2003 (5). (in Chinese)

¹² Wang Zijia. Research on birch bark products of Oroqen ethnic group [D] Master's thesis of Minzu University of China, 2016,6

¹³ Zhang Xiaoli. Research on protection and inheritance of birch bark crafts of Oroqen nationality in Heilongjiang province [J]. Journal of Heihe University, 2017, 8(08): 5-6+29.

¹⁴ Zhang Xiaoli. On the value, characteristics and inheritance strategy of Oroqen birch bark art [J]. Art Panorama, 2015, (11): 79.

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