

On the Craft of “Mianrenlang”

Linxue Lv

The Department of art and design, Teachers' College
Beijing Union University
Beijing, China
sftlinxue@buu.edu.cn

Wei Zhang

The Department of art and design, Teachers' College
Beijing Union University
Beijing, China
sftzhangwei@buu.edu.cn

Abstract— “Mianrenlang” as a form of colored sculpturing is a very popular folk art, and it features refined techniques and vivid characterization. Among the multiplicity of schools in this line of art, it is unique and has been known at home and abroad before the liberation of China. This paper analyzes the techniques of “Mianrenlang” in terms of its technical ingenuity and the beauty of its raw material so that its special value in modern society can be reestablished.

Keywords—“Mianrenlang”; Technical ingenuity; Beauty of Material

I. INTRODUCTION

Mianrenlang as a wonder in folk fine arts has been shining brilliantly over the entire country and showing a strong artistic tenacity. It is a school of the art of dough-kneading, and it was created by Lang Shaoan (Fig. 1) over one century ago. In June 2008, “Mianrenlang” was listed as one of the second group of national non-material cultural heritages.

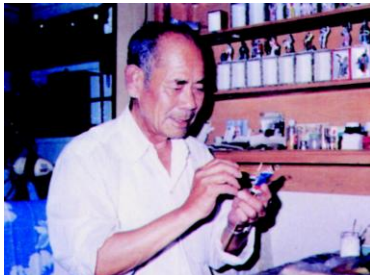


Figure 1. Mr. lang shaoan, the “mianrenlang”.

Mr. Lang Shaoan was a famous masterly dough-kneader in neoteric China, and he was known as “Mianrenlang”.

Craft is a kind of tradition, and the craft of “Mianrenlang” has been passed on for over 100 years and has become an important part of Chinese folk art. Its existence makes a link in the socio-biological system and bears extraordinary significance and irreplaceable cultural value.

II. TECHNICAL INGENUITY AND MATERIAL BEAUTY OF “MIANRENLANG”

“Technical ingenuity and material beauty” are principles of design in ancient China and they represent the unity between the subjective and the objective. Making of things

depends on certain materials and techniques that are applicable to the material; the two are mutually dependent, and material makes the base and technique realizes the idea. This can be seen adequately in *Kao Gong Ji*, which is a book that documents all relevant techniques. “Technical ingenuity and material beauty is the condensed expression of such experiences: “The heaven has its time, the earth has its ebb and flow; likewise the material has its beauty and the technique has its ingenuity. If these four elements are combined, good things will result. With material beauty and technical ingenuity, the result won’t be good unless the timing and the source of the material are good.” “Material beauty” and “technical ingenuity” as necessary elements to the production of quality products involves natural materials and human craft [1].



Figure 2. Material and tools for dough kneading

Works of “Mianrenlang” are spectacular, and their technical finesse is simply state-of-art, and the crucial element in making such a wonder is the material—(Fig. 2). Material is the base on which the artist applies his creative techniques, and this is a fact repeatedly stated in many ancient works, such as *Xiu Shi Lu – Qian Ji* (Methods of Painting), which opens by pointing out: “A craftsman making a ware is like the God creating the universe. There are the holy and the divine makers, who apply their techniques and follow the rules of creation. A good craftsman must first sharpen his tool. However, good tools are like the four seasons, and good materials are the five essential elements (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth). With proper timing and necessary elements, good works can be created the heaven creates all things on the earth, but good artistic creation comes from the ingenuity of the craftsman.”

Basically the book believes that proper use of tools and materials depends on the ingenuity of the craftsman, and this is the foundation of all artistic creation [2]. The beauty of “Mianrenlang” partly comes from the beauty of the material used. In the process of creation, however, accurate command of materials is of essential importance, in addition to the understanding and utilization of materials that are from particular areas. People who understand dough kneading would concern themselves with what is in the material, what is the quality of the dough, and how good is the characterization of dough kneading. First, as far as dough is concerned, different schools of dough kneading differ in their recipes and techniques of making dough, and the difference would still manifest itself even if within the same school due to seasonal changes and differences of works. Dough used by “Mianrenlang” is a mixture of ordinary flour and Jiangmi flour, which is kneaded with water and steamed up. To enhance the moisture of the dough for the sake of preventing cracking, honey is needed along with other specially-made colors. Dough works made in this way can retain the brightness of its colors after decades. Many works by Lang Shaoan are over 50 years old, but their colors remain bright and well-saturated, and the shape does not change at all.

“Gong” means craftsmanship, which is the activity and process of artistic creation. To complete a quality work, “material of beauty” alone is not good enough, excellent craftsmanship is required. And one principle of craftsmanship is “ingenuity”, which, according to *Interpretation of Words*, is “technique”. Application of technique on the material makes good ware. Seeing from the relation between the material and the craftsmanship, the latter is the technique to treat the former. Material is the base, and craftsmanship, based on the natural property of the material, forms its own procedures and methods. Artistic features of dough kneading include “first, seal, second, kneading, third, embedding, fourth, rolling”. Some parts of the characterization require special attention, such as “the chest of the intellectual, belly of the martial, back of the old and waist of the beautiful”. “Mianrenlang” features fine making techniques and fully employs such skills as rubbing, kneading, pinching, picking, pressing, scrubbing, rolling, grinding, chopping, pressuring and cutting. Meticulous use of these skills and assiduous making are indispensable, from the decorative patterns on the helmet of a martial general and the colors of the folds in the clothes, to the writings and pictures on the flag and the sculptured and painted architecture in the scene, and to the eyelashes, double eyelids, head ornaments, chignon, and so on: each and every detail is made with the greatest care possible. Works of “Mianrenlang” take, if one takes the time to list, hundreds of steps. In the entire creative process, each step, from the making of the dough to the tuning of colors and then to the matching of character images, clothes and ornaments, is meticulous. However, this does not mean “making a fuss out of everything” all the time. Brevity and complexity come when they are needed. Only their proper combination can show true ingenuity. (Fig. 3)



Figure 3. Dough-kneading characters

There is also another sentence of wisdom in *Kao Gong Ji*: “Acquisition of the three elements takes perfect timing. With the three elements, the ingenious craftsman can make great art.” Ancient people thought good material and bad craftsmanship mean “nothing worthy”. Craftsmanship takes ingenuity. After “time, conditions and materials” are ready, work of real excellence cannot be produced without the “ingenuity of the craftsman”. The importance of an ingenious craftsman to a work of art thus can be seen. [3] Take mascot children made by “Mianrenlang” for example, Lang Zhili has already had in her mind the completed work before she even gets started. With focus and peace of mind, she kneads, rubs, pressures, rolls and pinches, and soon enough an innocent and vivid child was born from her hands. These tiny yet delicate works, with bright coloring, simple and harmonious environment, are filled with a strong sense of life and a prevailing atmosphere of joy and happiness. (Fig. 4) Without good material, even a masterly craftsman cannot create anything impressive to the world, though truly amazing technique does revive the decayed into the miraculous: a piece of dough is changed into a classic work. Quality material makes the objective premise; ingenuity makes technical experiences, which are guarantee to good creation; “the ingenious” is, on the other hand, crucial to turning the decayed into the miraculous, this is also a confirmation of human creativity. Lang Zhili breaks through previous techniques by discarding the dent on the nose of kneaded figures and replacing it with fillings. One more example, for the treatment of the eyebrow, she bevels the eyebrow, solving previous problem that both eyebrows are of the same thicket. Quality and appropriate new material make the base for the making of excellent artworks, and it is the same with folk art. In dough-kneading, Lang Zhili makes full use of modern scientific advancements and keeps exploring new materials and new techniques. When creating the work that represents “Pando” mounting the Everest and when representing the glaciers on the snow-clad mountains, Lang Zhili uses transparent materials and other techniques to imitate icicles, and the effect is excellent. Then she imitated coral, ivory and other works that are extremely popular.



Figure 4. Mascot children

The beauty of dough-kneading lies in its natural material, techniques and simple state of mind. Images it creates fit the cultural psychology of folk art and are favored by the mass. Folk tradition gives mystery and joy to life, and dough-kneading, as an art of strong tenacity, takes its roots in the life of the people and becomes an expression of folk customs (Fig. 5). It is simply omnipresent. In the meantime, dough-kneading is not just an object of appreciation, but also a major player in social education. With its images, touching stories are passed on to the enlightenment of the people in subtle manners.



Figure 5. Gourd's journey to the west

III. INGENUITY OF "MIANRENLANG"

"Mianrenlang" is an artistic creation done by hands, and therefore is known as "handcraft". The great feature of handcraft is that it is done with "hand", which is its soul. In 1956, Lang Shaoan was invited to attend "International Exhibition of Handcrafts" in London, UK, along with Chinese industrial fine arts representative group. In the exhibition, over 10 thousand pair of eyes every day would focus on the hands of Lang Shaoan with surprise in them as they see pieces of colored dough turn, in one blink of the eyes, into a girl wearing flowers in her hair. During the thirteen days in London, Lang Shaoan had to receive thousands of visitors every day, and London's newspapers, broadcasts and TV channels made extensive reports, and the media called the nifty hands of the Chinese artist "hands of the God". Liu Zongyue, famous Japanese critic of folk art and aesthetician wrote in *Japanese Handcrafts* that: "the

basic difference between human hands and a machine is that the hands are connected to the heart, which no machine has. This is why miracles happen in handicrafts: because it is not just hands that are working, but also the heart, which makes the hands producing things, gives joy to labor and keeps man moral; this is the element that assigns beauty to objects. Therefore, the work of handicrafts can be said to be the work of the heart. Is there a machine more mysterious than human hands?"

Hands, unlike other sensors such as eyes and ears, can integrate information of other sensors and make use of the subjective initiative; hands are both sensors and extension of human brain. Unlike other inorganic tools outside of human body, hands do not follow mechanic orders. Instead, they create through the interaction between human psyche and hands. Therefore, subjective emotion and aesthetic experience of man are objectified or projected onto the object of hands' operation. [4] Lang Shaoan was good at making figures of Beijing Opera, this has something to do with his likings of opera. According to Lang Zhili, her father would spend half of the night after seeing a show reflecting on the frowning and smiles and all other actions of characters in the opera, and on the clothing and ornaments' styles and colors so that he could replicate them in his mind. In this way, you will find figures in the opera were kneaded into dough characters the second day and stood on the table of the family. Plots such as "Su Wu Herding" and "Qu Yuan Scolding King Huai of Chu in Anger" were all kneaded in half a walnut shell. Figures he kneaded were very much alive: Zhang Sheng being proud, Yingying being piqued, Hai Rui and Bao Zheng in just anger, Yue Fei and Guang Yu in great dignity.....a thousand figures would have as many manners and looks. Dough-kneading is not like any other art of sculpture in that the key to making dough figures lies in the use of strength at fingertips. Dough figures are tiny, and to carry out minute depiction of figures within such limited space, without additional or supplementary attempts and to realize seamless connection of the limbs, it depends on a pair of ingenious hands. Addition or deduction at the tiniest measurement relies not on tools and accurate measuring instruments but on the intuition. The acquisition of this "hand sense" and the intuition comes more from, in addition to instructions of the teacher, the craftsman's long-term exposure to, study of and reflection on the art of dough-kneading as well as the experience.



Figure 6. Miss lang zhili made a chinese dragon for readers of beijing evening newspaper.

“Mianrenlang” stresses on fusion and communication between man and things. In kneading a figure, the craftsman’s hands and the dough enhance each other in their contact, feeling, adjustment and shaping before they become one eventually. Lang Shangan loved to say: “A kneader must focus his/her mind the way a kungfu master practices *Qigong*.” All works of “Mianrenlang” are done in one attempt. Before making, all details have been thought out in mind and the final work will be produced in one attempt (Fig. 6). Lang Zhili who succeeded her father’s trade is always focused when kneading. The gourd dough-kneading work, entitled *108 Rebels*, was thought out, all details of 108 figures, before she gets started. Once she gets started, she wouldn’t even stop for lunch or dinner. She said that the kneading must be done in one single attempt. The original feeling would be spoilt if the work is resumed. Also she said that the art takes peace of mind, only with the peace of mind can vivid works be produced. When kneading dough figures, Lang Zhili always has an air of knowing-it-all. A dough, after several steps of kneading, rubbing, pressing, rolling and pinching, would change into an innocent and lively child. In dough-kneading, the shaping of figures is the most difficult. One slight mistake may result in a retarded look of the figure, and the spirit of the figure is very hard to represent. Lang Shaoan used to say that “what is kneaded should not be the dough, but real person, person of flesh and spirit”, “it must smile; with the corner of lips curved upward; the smile is to be found in eyes, but the frown is in eyebrows”. These words speak of the essence of characterization. (Fig.7). “Mianrenlang” focuses on beauty and charm, giving not only static beauty, but also dynamic beauty, to the figures. The beauty is alive and registers aesthetic features that do not resemble the natural, viz. artistic beauty. Just as Mr. Zhang Daoyi put it: “These creative acts are mostly artistic.”



Figure 7. Mu guiying dubbed as commander

Works born out of unique hands are unique because different pairs of hands are unique, too (Fig. 8, Fig. 9). Chinese dough-kneading has many different styles. Beijing dough-kneading alone subsumes “Mianrenlang” and “Mianrentang”. Different schools differ greatly in style. It was once commented that “Mianrentang” is like landscape painting done with ink splashes, stressing on freehand expression; but “Mianrenlang” features fineness, resembling fine brush flower-bird painting. Behind each handcraft work there is a unique personality. The birth of a handcraft work has everything to do with the unique growing experience the

craftsman. An artifact purely made of handcraft, not to mention differences between schools, would show differences in terms of the disposition of details even if the daughter learnt everything from her father. For example, Chang’e Ascending to the Moon: the one made by the father is elegant and privileged, and great attention has been paid to the minutest details; the clouds beneath the feet of Chang’e were also kneaded with dough, and they look just like clouds, and also with a sense of weight. The one made by the daughter uses torn cotton to represent the lightness of clouds, highlighting an elegance of ascending. As far as artistic effect is concerned, each has their respective advantages.



Figure 8. Cricket and corn created by lang shaoan



Figure 9. Cricket and corn created by lang zhili

Hands as an organ of creation are not just physiological existence, but also cultural. Through hands and handcrafts, human strength, human psyche, both rational and sentimental, human social and cultural experiences reach the surface and depth of the created work in a natural and fluent manner and make the “cultural” products that embody the integrity of human composition. [5] “Mianrenlang”, on the basis of “handcraft”, fuses a lot of emotional elements of the dough-kneading artist and represents the harmony between human hands and brain, guides people to knead doughs into works of humanistic charm and manifests relatively high technical level and high-standards of artistic taste as well as aesthetic value. “Mianrenlang” fuses the ingenuity of several generations, making dough-kneading a form of “art” and completing “artworks” by working with Nature. It becomes the most active, the richest and the most natural aspect of human culture, it constitutes an important part of the cultural

life of the mass and contemporary folk art, and its social and cultural value should receive further and enhanced stress.

IV. CONCLUSION

In history, “Mianrenlang”, “Mianrentang”, “Mianrenzhao”, “Mianrencao” and others had created a form of diversified, splendid and wonderful folk fine arts. With the power of style, it keeps developing and forming various relatively stabilized tradition of folk art, and its cultural and aesthetic value is still on the rise in today. These art forms created by hands assume the significance of life and existence due to the fusion of human strength, emotion and intellect. They have relatively high technical standards, higher level of artistic taste and aesthetic value, and a cultural spirit and tenacity. All in all, they are the most active, the richest and the most natural aspect of human culture, and they are also a form of vitality that can exist and develop independently in any conditions and environments. With increasing attention to, and stress on, traditional culture of

handcraft and handworks, they will grow fuller, more popular and to be of greater aesthetic and cultural charm.

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