

Research on Aesthetic Expression of Tujia Costume in Enshi from the Perspective of Semiotics

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Abstract: Tujia costume pattern features the soul of minority Tujia culture and the symbol of its national history and culture. From the perspective of semiotics, this paper makes an aesthetic interpretation of the historical significance and cultural connotation of Tujia traditional costume patterns and analyses the signifier, signified and signification relationship of its symbols with the clues of relevant material information. The research shows that Tujia costume pattern signifier is abstract, the signified is narrative and signification relationship is unstable. And Tujia traditional national culture has been further exploited and inherited in the process of interpreting its costume patterns.

1. Introduction

The distinction of different nationalities, periods and regional cultures reflect their different connotations and denotations in their emotions, language, culture and national costumes, but all embody the centralized unity of practical and aesthetic culture as well as the cultural choice of their national symbols.[1] Deeply influenced by Han culture, Tujia costume still features its own characteristics, the style and color of which are permeated with Tujia affections with unique cultural connotation.[2] Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture is an ethnic minority autonomous prefecture where people from Tujia and Miao minorities are mainly inhabited in the region, among which the number of Tujia is the largest.[3] Possessed with long history and culture, Tujia nationality glows with unique splendor after years of precipitation and baptism. Their ideology, national customs and worship of nature can be reflected in all aspects of their lives, especially in their clothes.[4] The essence of Tujia culture is mainly demonstrated in the traditional clothing pattern. We can trace back to its origin and discover the national culture and essence contained in the traditional Tujia costume patterns.

2. The origin of Tujia traditional costume

According to historical records, the Five Dynasties saw the existence of Tujia nationality, but from some myths and legends handed down by Tujia people, it should have originated from earlier primitive society. [5] We can trace the origin of Tujia costume from a primitive dance “Maogusi”, an ancient Tujia dance. The dancers were all dressed in straw, leaves and grass. The *Waving Song*, handed down from generation to generation by Tujia people, also sings “Banana leaves are tied to the body and banana grass is worn on the head.” We can infer that the life style of Tujia ancestors was very backward, and there was no cloth clothing but only animal skins and thatch to resist the cold. Therefore, animal skins and thatch were the embryonic form of Tujia clothing.

3. The related concept of semiotics

Semiotics is the theory of studying symbols and meaning. Saussure, the founder of modern semiotics, put forward the signifier and signified of symbols; Pierce attached importance to the meaning interpretation of symbols, becoming the basis of contemporary semiotics; Roland Barthes put forward the concept of signification and studied the relationship between semiotics and clothing.

In recent years, a large number of scholars have studied Chinese ancient costume art on the basis of semiotics, such as the “*Analysis of Symbolic Characteristics of Chinese National Costumes*” and “*Semiotics of Chinese Costume Patterns*”. The former explores costume symbols from totems, patterns and colors, and the latter analyses the symbol attributes and characteristics of Chinese costume patterns from the perspectives of symbolization process, indicative behavior and systematization of Chinese costume patterns. While all studies concentrate little on the relationship among Tujia costume pattern, cultural connotation and symbol attributes. One of the paper “*Preliminary Study on Tujia Brocade Cultural Symbols and Their Decorative Art Characteristics*” considers Tujia Brocade Patterns as abstract cultural symbols and discusses the characteristics of Tujia Brocade Decorative Art; “*On the Emotional Communication of Visual Information Symbols of Tujia Clothing*” mainly discusses the symbolic visual language of Tujia clothing, which reflects the life customs, aesthetic concepts and ideological feelings of Tujia nationality. Based on the material objects of Tujia costume patterns, this paper analyses its symbolic attribute relationship and the aesthetic expression of national history and culture in the process of symbolic interpretation, hoping to provide some theoretical reference for the study of Tujia history and culture.

4. Tujia costume pattern is the symbol of Tujia culture and history

Tujia nationality mainly distributes in the border area of Hunan, Hubei, Guizhou Province and Chongqing municipality and successively integrated ancient Ba people, indigenous ancestors in Northwest Hunan province, Wuman in Guizhou and other minorities and Han nationalities in the course of its formation. After a long period of development and change, Tujia costumes developed from straw and animal skins before the Five Dynasties to embroidered lace of dresses and skirts with no distinction between man and woman before Ming and Qing Dynasties. Later, after the “bureaucratization of native officers”, the costumes became Chinesization and separated from man and woman, which gradually disappear from daily wear today. Although Tujia costumes are constantly changing in terms of material and shape, its traditional costume patterns are still preserved. Clothing pattern refers to the structure, scheme, color, texture and decorative pattern design of clothing and accessories (including shoes, hats, headscarves, aprons, caps, shoes, insoles, purses and handkerchiefs, etc.). Tujia costume pattern is not only the visual decoration of costume, but also the record of national culture and history. Since the Tujia nationality does not have its own written language, its historical and cultural inheritance depends not only on language, dance and other forms but also on the tangible carrier of costume patterns. According to semiotics, “symbols are perceived as carrying meaning: meaning must be expressed in symbols, and the purpose of symbols is to express meaning.” Traditional tujia costume design, such as tiger pattern (table flower, tiger footstep, etc.), the snake pattern (the serpent flowers, etc.), bird pattern (cuckoo flowers, etc.), reflects the myths, legends, folk beliefs, ancestor worship and folk customs of Tujia nationality, which rather than simply simulate object shape but represents a visual reflection of the national culture and a visual symbol carrying a lot of information and meaning. As the symbolic features of the Tujia nationality, these visual symbols are the external manifestation of the Tujia spirit, existing in the form of graphics. The unity of their signifiers, signified and significations constitutes the visual subject of Tujia culture.

5. Symbolic characteristics of Tujia costume patterns

5.1 Abstraction of “signifier”

According to Saussure, the signifier is the medium of communication and the symbolic form presented by things. Tujia costume patterns has its own unique ethnic expression, but also uses other ethnic graphics for reference. After the “bureaucratization of native officers”, due to the Chinesization of Tujia costumes, a large number of patterns with Chinese cultural themes appeared in the Tujia clothing patterns, such as “phoenix wear peony” and “Fukurokuju” flowers. But at the same time, the “chair flower” pattern also remains its traditional national pattern symbols, such as

big snake flower, forty-eight hook flower, table flower, chair flower, white plum, cat's footprint and other patterns. These traditional national patterns are the characteristics of abstract images in life, which are presented again in the form of abstract deformation. Most of them are square, diamond and other geometric figures with strong local characteristics and are the representatives of typical Tujia clothing patterns. For example, the deformation of "chair flower" is to change the three-dimensional chair into a flat shape, transform the foot of the chair into a broken line and combine geometric patterns in the back of the chair. Tujia people express their inner feelings with specific symbols characterized by abstract representations. Besides, these symbols have a wide range of patterns and themes, most of which are seen in their daily life, such as animals, plants, life scenes, production tools and daily articles. All these abstract expressions can be regarded as the embryonic form of primitive writing, recording Tujia people's understanding and feeling of life. The abstraction of "signifier" of Tujia costume pattern is not only based on Tujia people's abstract thinking, and also for better recording the history and culture of Tujia nationality.

5.2 Narrativity of "signified"

Tujia people record and transmit their national thinking and information by means of costume pattern as a graphic symbol because Tujia nationality is a nation without formal written language. Some of the Tujia costume patterns feature more picture elements and their "signified" has stronger narrativity, so they can record a story or a period of history more completely, which can be disseminated and preserved both in time and space eventually. Besides, the degree of correlation among the elements in the pattern determines the narrative strength while the relationship among those elements determines the narrative theme. For example, the most distinctive "cuckoo flower" of Tujia people on women's flower aprons together with the bird-shaped pattern and the diamond-shaped flower-fruit pattern signify a touching story. That is, according to the legend, the Xilan girl of Tujia nationality invented Xilan karp craftsmanship and a large number of brocade patterns. However, she was killed by her father under the ginkgo tree when she tried to create the pattern of "ginkgo flower" and turned into a "cuckoo" after her death. The signified of "cuckoo flower" pattern refers to Xilan girl and her legend, which represents the historical record of the emergence and development of folk Xilan karp. The narrativity of Tujia costume pattern is based on the interpretation of symbols. Pierce holds that symbol interpretation is the information and meaning of the symbol object conveyed by the symbol form. Symbolic meaning is a kind of communicative relationship since interpretation is not just individual behavior. Once pursuing meaning, people will inevitably be involved in interpersonal and social relations. The narrativity of Tujia costume pattern relies on people's interpretation of its symbols. In this sense, "interpretation" is derived from interpersonal communication through oral transmission from generation to generation instead of being hereditary. Therefore, Tujia people utilize multi-element symbols to describe their national history and culture so that history can be spread in the process of symbolic interpretation. Information feedback is also accompanied by the re-symbolization activities based on the interpretation of graphic symbols.

5.3 The unstableness of "signification"

After thousands of years, the meaning of Tujia costume symbol is developing along the history. Hence, the signification relationship of Tujia costume symbol remains unstable. From this aspect, the meaning of Tujia costume pattern is preserved in some moments of history but partly removed during the course of history changes. Roland Barthes believes that the meaning of image has never been fixed, but language has abandoned this freedom and uncertainty. The stability of the signification relationship of Tujia costume patterns depends on the Tujia language passing down orally. Since Tujia has no written language and along with its long-term development, the oral language has changed constantly, the signification relationship of symbols presents various interpretations, some even lost in certain areas. Consequently, there are only patterns but can not be explained. The most representative traditional decorative pattern of Tujia nationality is "forty-eight hooks", which is based on eight hooks. Geometric figures (hexagons) are scattered in layers, forming "twelve hooks", "twenty-four hooks" and "forty-eight hooks". There is a proverb handed down among Tujia people

of Western Hunan: “forty-eight hooks” are magnificent, which represents the diversity of signification relationship of the “forty-eight hooks” pattern.

6. Aesthetic expression of Tujia costume in Enshi from the perspective of semiotics

The modeling communication of Tujia costume is a multi-level complex structure, which can be summarized into two categories: internal essence and external representation. According to the appropriate artistic composition and modeling elements (like silhouette, color, decoration and material) based on the national traditional ideas, customs and images, external representation is considered as concrete existence and the specific image embodied by the carrier to reveal the theme and essence of the national costume. While the expression of internal essence takes effect through external representation. In another word, the intrinsic character, spirit and essence, to a great extent, is reflected by external modeling forms such as color and pattern, which conveys thoughts and emotions, spiritual pursuit, aesthetic concept and cultural tradition of people, and integrates the form and meaning of the modeling language. It can express people’s emotions and realize the harmony and unity between function and aesthetic idea, meeting people’s higher needs of material and spiritual life.

Tujia people have a saying that “Fine feathers make fine birds”, which confirms that Tujia people always pay great attention to dressings and their practicality. For instance, a dress, called “beiguazi” (waistcoat), is favored by men and women, young and old in Tujia nationality for it can prevent rough baskets from wearing clothes. People usually wear “jiabeigua” in spring and autumn, “cotton beigua” in winter, and “leather beigua” for wealthy families. Tujia men also have the habit of wearing aprons, generally wearing three aprons, a kind of special aprons made of three layers of overlapping blue cloth or white cloth, which can keep warm and keep clothes clean. It can also be used as shoulder pads when lifting heavy objects or as seat cushions when working and resting in the ground. In this sense, not only possessing the strong practicability, Tujia costume also has an inseparable internal relationship with the folk culture, psychological structure of national culture, national aesthetics, national style, life customs and even the national economic, historical and geographical environment of the whole Tujia nationality. All these qualities can be presented through certain costume shape and pattern design. People can appreciate its beauty, traditional cultural implication and national aesthetic habits as well as its decorative beauty and pure artistic character through certain national costume language and form characteristics.

7. Conclusion

Tujia nationality is an ancient ethnic group living in the border of Chongqing municipality, Hunan, Hubei, and Guizhou province. Its costume pattern represents not only a decoration of visual form, but also a record of the long history and cultural connotation of Tujia nationality. As the soul subject of Tujia culture, the signified and signifier of Tujia costume pattern can only be connected with each other, and the signification can be established under the context of Tujia social and cultural background. The interpretation of Tujia costume patterns by means of semiotics is a process of aesthetic interpretation. Tujia culture has possessed a certain material form through costume patterns, which are carried by symbols while inherited, spread and developed in the process of symbol interpretation.

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