

An Analysis of the Pattern and Cultural Connotations of Animal Mask Vatan in the Northern Wei Dynasty

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Abstract: The mysterious and frightening animal mask vatan in the Northern Wei Dynasty had the function of keeping away evil spirits and holding the ability of the deterrence, which was the embodiment of the power and status of the ruling class. This paper studies and analyzes the artistic features of the animal mask vatan in the Northern Wei Dynasty from the perspective of the historical origin and modeling grain, so as to reveal the deeper cultural connotations behind.

1. Introduction

The Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534) was the first ethnic minority (Tuoba Xianbei) to enter and govern the central plains for establishing a regime in history. It was also the first ethnic minority to learn the Han culture of the central plains in an all-round way. Viewing from the history, the Tuoba Xianbei's government in the Central Plains brings fresh blood to the Han civilization, its culture combined the northern grassland culture, the western culture and the Han culture in the Central Plains, and finally created the Northern Wei culture which integrated all ethnic cultures. In other words, its culture is a blending of Han culture in central plains, the northern grassland culture and western culture[1]. As one of the small architectural components bearing the national spirit and culture, animal mask vatan is generated and developed under its historical and cultural background.

2. Overview of Animal Mask Vatan

Animal mask grain is the product of human being's confrontation with nature, which originated from the totem worship of primitive human beings. The animal mask grain is the most wonderful part of the animal pattern. Only the animal's head is taken as the main performance object, adding personal subjective consciousness to carry on the pictorial description, which is also the most important point to show the animal characteristics. Animal mask grain as decorative art which has a long history and wisely used in ancient China. It was first found on jade ritual vessels in the Neolithic age. It has experienced Taotie grain of the pottery and bronze of Shang and Zhou Dynasty, animal mask grain in the capital of Yan state of Spring and Autumn period, the logo of the shops and portrait of the animal mask in coffins in Han Dynasty. Until the period of Wei, Jin, southern and Northern Dynasties, animal mask modeling had distinct style of the times and obvious regional difference in the collision and fusion of multi-ethnic cultures. In the Ming and Qing Dynasty, the animal mask grain changed from the court to the folk, and became a part of the folk culture. Nowadays, as a decorative art, the animal mask grain still appears in our cultural life, enriching people's spiritual life (Fig. 1).

Vatan, commonly known as "tile head", is one of the components of ancient Chinese architecture, which is located at the front end of the eaves. It protects the eaves from wind and rain erosion and beautifies the building. It is the product of the combination of beauty and practicality. The animal mask vatan is an ancient architectural art which is composed of the animal mask image after the artistic processing and conforms to the shape and specification of the tile. It is located on the eaves of the building and plays the role of decoration and beautification. The earliest use of animal mask vatan appeared in the state of Yan in the spring and Autumn period. Most of them were semicircular,

and their patterns were Taotie patterns on bronzes in the Shang and Zhou dynasties. Until the Wei, Jin, southern and Northern Dynasties, the animal mask vatan gradually rose. Besides, the Northern Wei Dynasty's animal mask vatan is the most characteristic of the times. The surface of the animal mask vatan is the high relief style, with smooth fine line carving performance. After polishing, the surface is covered with black pottery clothes. The texture is solid and the production is very regular, which represents the highest level of the culture development of animal mask vatan at that time (Fig. 2).



Fig.1 : Pan Tiger Packaging Design Studio (Download from Internet)



Fig.2 : the Animal Mask Vatan Unearthed in Yongning Temple (Download from Internet)

3. Tracing Back to the Source of Pictorialization of the Northern Wei Dynasty

3.1 Ethnic Belief of Early Tuoba Xianbei

Tuoba Xianbei is a hunting and nomadic nationality of Eastern Hu in northern China in ancient time, which originated from the dense forest of Daxinganling in Heilongjiang Province. In the long history of attaching themselves to nature and fighting against it, capturing wild animals and slaughtering livestock were the material basis for the survival of Tuoba Xianbei people. On the basis of absolute dependence on animal resources, primitive animal worship had emerged. Under the control of the concept of animism, the early religion gradually formed, that is, Shamanism, which was widely believed by the northern minorities in ancient China[2].

After several migrations and the struggle between blood and fire, Tuoba Xianbei people had to change their original way of life and learn excellent Han culture. They gradually simplified and abandoned many objects of belief to adapt to the new living environment. However, the animal mask grain is the product of the inheritance and evolution of animal totem worship in the early Shamanism of Tuoba Xianbei. Meanwhile, as well as a reflection of the national complex of Tuoba Xianbei, which is endowed with its new cultural connotation of the era, serving the political culture of the ruling class at that time.

3.2 Prosperity and Development of Buddhist Culture

Tuoba Xianbei unified the northern grassland and established the Northern Wei Dynasty, putting an end of the unrest of the “five nomadic tribes and three Han generals who founded 16 states”. Confronted with the situation that there were numerous nationalities, continuous wars and the prosperity and development of various cultures. After absorbing different excellent cultures, the ruling class took Buddhism as the cultural and spiritual link of the Northern Wei Dynasty, bringing people from different ethnic cultural backgrounds into the same religious belief, and formed an ideological and cultural foundation of multi-ethnic unity gradually. Tuoba vigorously developing Buddhist culture and consolidating its dominant position simultaneously. Guangxing Buddhist temples, digging grottoes and the lotus grain vatan that is one of the architectural constructions

carrying Buddhist culture are flourishing gradually. At the same time, mysterious animal mask grain is born quietly, which likes the rising sun, hanging on the eaves of imperial palaces and large temples for guarding sacred and inviolable holy land of the royal family.

For the interpretation of animal mask grain in Buddhist culture, we can get a reasonable explanation from the image of the Dharma protecting god beast (lion) in Buddhism. Judging from the animal mask vatan unearthed from Pingcheng and Luoyang ancient city sites in the Northern Wei Dynasty, the animal mask grain is similar to the image characteristics of the Buddhist god beast lion, and their cultural connotation and social function are also very similar. Therefore, it is very likely that the animal mask vatan adopted the image of lion in Buddhist culture and was treated with the aesthetic taste of Xianbei, which endowed it with the social function of patron saint and served the ruling class of the Northern Wei Dynasty at that time. The inference of this theory can also be proved by the fact that the statues in the five caves of Tanyao in Yungang Grottoes are style of monarch and the Bodhisattva and Arhats are like the monarchs and his subjects.

3.3 The Development and Influence of Ancient Chinese Local Animal Faced Culture

The decorative art of animal mask grain in ancient China has a long history, which can be traced back to the jade wares of Liangzhu Culture in the Neolithic age. At that time, the animal mask were generally characterized by round eyes, horizontal nose, wide mouth, and exposed tusks. The symmetrical expression was adopted in the composition, which was the initial understanding of the animal head shape by the primitive ancestors. In the Shang and Zhou dynasties, most of the patterns on bronzes were stylized and decorative Taotie patterns, and the body structure was also roughly the same. The gluttonous patterns on bronze wares, which are offered as the ruler's sacrificial vessel, have the auspicious and religious significance of affirming themselves in "Lubricating the ruling class and the common people" and "inheritance of celestial bodies" for protecting the society[3].

In the Qin and Han Dynasties, animal faces were mainly tiger faces and lion faces. The decoration of animal faces became an important decorative theme of the tomb building components in Han Dynasty. During the period of Wei, Jin, southern and Northern Dynasties, the prolonged wars and disputes not only brought great suffering to the people, but also brought religious (Buddhist) consolation. Therefore, many Buddhist cultural elements were integrated into the original schema structure of animal face pattern, which became the main form of expression at that time. At this time, the features of the animal face still inherited the basic form of the animal face: angry eyes, fangs exposed, fierce and dignified manner.

3.4 The Summary of This Chapter

Through the analysis of the origin of the animal mask grain in the Northern Wei Dynasty, we can draw a conclusion: in the process of the localization of Buddhist culture, the animal mask grain inherited and developed the basic modeling elements of the Chinese native animal mask grain to replace the status of the Buddhist god beast lion, as the unique patron saint of Tuoba Xianbei nationality, which is served the political and cultural needs of the ruling class.

4. Overview of Animal Mask Vatan

The animal mask vatan in northern Wei dynasty has a wide variety which with a concise finger and a realistic figure, and it took the animal's eyes as the main part, inclined to use the semi-abstract artistic means and highlighted the depiction of images[4]. One animal mask vatan which unearthed in Yongning temple site of northern Wei dynasty has a compact composition and with 17.5cm diameter and narrow cincture. There was a high relief animal mask sculpture located in the center of the vatan which looked like a tiger's face, it has a huge eyebrow and eyes and its eyeball was out of the Figs as well as its eyes tail was upwarping. Furthermore, there was five sculpture wave lines lay on the forehead of the animal mask and joined with two short lines from the animals' nose which both of those two lines and the diamond pattern gave the vatan more stereoscopic and decorative impression. The shape of animals' mouth looked like sycee and its teeth was little short and its tongue was exposed a little as well as some curl horsehair existed in the junction of its ears and jaw.

The entire body of this animal mask vatan was black and it has a concise figure which looked mystical and ferocious(Fig. 3~5).

The vatan unearthed in the Mingtang Piyong site of northern Wei dynasty in the southern of Datong was quite different from the high-relief sculpture animal mask vatan. Compared with the last one, this vatan has 18.5cm diameter and wide cincture, and with an obvious loin facial appearance as well as a V sculpture line in the forehead as ornament, but it without huge animal eyebrow, its eyes was protruded and its naris was upwards. Its mouth was opened as an inverted trapezoid and teeth was exposed, we could see the tip of tongue through the neat teeth and some horsehair in the around of its mouth. This vatan was an exquisite manufacture with the smooth and solid materials and the polished black luster coating(Fig. 6~8).



Fig.3 : the Animal Mask Vatan in Northern Wei Dynasty. (Download from Internet)



Fig.4 : the Sketch of Animal Mask Vatan. (Draw by Author)



Fig.5 : the Photo of Tiger. (Download from Internet)



Fig.6 : the Animal Mask Vatan in Northern Wei Dynasty. (Download from Internet)



Fig.7 : the Sketch of Animal Mask Vatan. (Draw by Author)



Fig.8 : the Photo of Lion. (Download from Internet)

5. The Cultural Connotation of the Designs in Animal Mask Vatan

5.1 The Symbol of the Spirit in Tuoba Xianbei

During the long-term migration and warfare, Tuoba Xianbei overcame the difficulties and dangerous, unified the northern grassland, built its capital city the Pingcheng, studied the outstanding culture from other nations constantly to improve their living habits. In this time, the nation of Tuoba Xianbei had cultivated a national spirit including Strive for progress and self-improvement, keep pace with the times and keep forge ahead. With the help of this national spirit[5].Tuoba Xianbei could always defeat the enemy and overcome difficulties and unify the northern land and built a new dynasty. From that point, a brave and battlewise minority nation with eastern Hu nation's blood, which originated from the thick forest of Northeast and living in the giant grassland began to written the progress history of China.

The designs features of animal mask vatan unearthed in the cities site of northern Wei dynasty was plain and heavy, which could demonstrate the beauty of original and briefness. And it has the valiant feeling of the northern nomadism nation. The designs displayed the affirmation and manifestation of the wildness and it was the spirit totem of Xianbei nation. Their footprint was spread all around the northern grassland and they also conquered a lots territory of central plains and they also move their capital city to Luoyang, which looked like they will conquer the south of China too. Therefore, the majestic animal mask designs reflected the Tuoba Xianbei's tradition of respect for force and the aesthetic awareness of the praise of nature, which is the visual carrier of Tuoba Xianbei's national spirit.

5.2 The Heritage of the National Integration Culture

The animal mask vatan of northern Wei was came along with the nomadic nation's culture and Buddhism culture and eventually put into the Han culture, the animal designs absorbed the function of dharma protector in the Buddhism culture, therefore it has the function of protection and exorcise evil force, and it also inherited and innovated the base element of Chinese local animal mask vatan, so it was the material carrier of the national integrate culture in northern Wei.

Through the existing animal mask vatan of northern Wei dynasty we can know it has a kind of mysterious and ferocious beauty with a distinct Xianbei characteristic. The development of its pattern clearly showed the cultural background in national integration. The animal mask vatan unearthed in Yongning temple site was different from the others animal mask vatan. One of the vatan looked like dragon mask and decorated with the Buddhism beads string designs in the cincture. It was obvious evidence about the animal vatan was the carrier and transmitter of culture integration. It also was a visual representation of the international culture integration.

5.3 The Reflection of Power and Status

Under the broadcasting of Buddhism culture, many ruler of northern Wei dynasty vigorously supported the development of Buddhism culture. Although there was an action about Buddhism forbidden, but the development and expansion of the Buddhism in northern Wei dynasty wasn't influenced. Buddhism has a special manner to service political. And it was the combination of religious authority and monarchical power which aimed to govern all of world. The typically combination was the Tanyao Wuku which built by a famous north Wei monk named Tanyao. The main Buddha of the Taanyao Wuku was looked like the emperors of north Wei. The conception that "the emperor is the Buddha" gave the Buddha portrait meaning in that time. Making the Buddha as

emperor and making the Bodhisattva and Luohan as Emperor and subjects will make the Buddhism become secularization and it will making the Buddhism adapted to Chinese condition. The animal mask vatan born under the prosperous development of the Buddhism definitely will become the symbol of royal power and status.

The animal mask vatan in northern Wei dynasty has distinctive features of times. And it was an exquisite fictile production with the smooth and solid materials and the polished black luster coating. The image of animal mask looks mysterious and majestic, and it was built to give people a feeling of frightening. It's the material reflection of the mind in ruling class. In *A Study of the Animal Mask Vatan in Luoyang Palace of Northern Wei Dynasty and Others*, the author Qian Guoxiang did some research about the comparison between the vatan unearthed in Luoyang palace and other place, he found only the palace and some high-class royal building has the animal mask vatan, therefore he made a conclusion that the animal mask vatan was only be used in the royal buildings, in some degree it was the symbol of royal building's size, we can't find it in ordinary family[6].

5.4 The Protective Eudemon of Exorcise the Evils

The animal mask vatan was the mixture production of animal mask designs and architecture, putting it in the lip of the eaves to making people admiration, and it not only can prolong the lifespan of buildings but also can produced a function of protection and exorcise the evils. The animal mask vatan in northern Wei dynasty is the production of Buddhism-friendly policy, so it has the function of what protective animal has in Buddhism such as exorcise the evils. It was the unique animal protector god in Tuoba Xianbei with the image of braveness and ferocity and the functions of making people fear and exorcise the evils.

6. Conclusion

The animal mask vatan in northern Wei dynasty was the production of Buddhism-friendly policy and the visual production of the multi-ethnic integration. Animal mask vatan as the heritage production, it was under the condition of the development of Han culture and Buddhism culture, and absorbed the majestic elements of northern nomadism nations and reflected as a nature aesthetics manner of Tuoba Xianbei's rough and unaffected characteristic. Making further study of the animal mask vatan's image history and culture connotation and having a deeper understanding about animal mask designs will help people have a better understanding of the historical culture information about animal mask vatan and make some contemporary applied foundation for northern Wei animal mask designs.

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