

Introduction

In the early 1970s, I left the College of Fine Arts where I had been a teacher for many years and went to live in Yan'an, Shaanxi, on the Loess Plateau on the middle-upper reaches of the Yellow River. This was the base for my research on Chinese folk art. Rich with glorious historical culture, this place had kept its unique traditions thanks to generations of self-enclosed culture and years of isolation. As a result, the native Chinese culture was well maintained. In my thirteen years working in the Yan'an Mass Art Museum and the Commission of Antiques Management, I had the chance to undertake on-site research in folk art, customs and culture, and an overall archaeological exploration of the area. The first-hand study of folk culture and customs, as well as its intersection with archaeological culture and historical/legendary documents, helped me gain insights into the origins of Chinese culture and philosophy. From there, I went on to the Yangtze River valley, the Liaohe River basin, and the Pearl River valley, then covered the entire country from Xinjiang to Shandong to Taiwan, from Heilongjiang to Hainan Island. Since the 1990s, I have traveled further, to India, Pakistan, West Asia, Turkey, Egypt and Greece, Italy, and other parts of the European and American continent, continuing my research on folk culture and archaeological and historical cultures. Placing Chinese folk culture and its cultural and philosophical origins against the larger cultural background of all humankind, I shifted my study to common cultural consciousness, and the original features of individual national cultures and philosophies.

When I reached the villages on the Loess Plateau, I found Chinese folk arts in the forms of paper-cutting, embroidery and



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The author at the site of a Chinese New Year's fair in rural Shaanxi.

dough-modelling everywhere. Some were representations of animals, such as the turtle, the snake, the fish and the frog; and some were half-human, half-animal: a human face on a turtle's body, or on the body of a snake, frog or fish. There were also wholly humanized deities. These art works embraced the development and transformation of totem culture through three phases, from matriarchal society to patriarchal society. I felt as if I were in a world of totem culture, visiting the cultural center of a tribe of ancient times. The design of a pair of fish with human faces found on painted pottery and the "fish net" pattern from the 6,000-year-old Yangshao Culture unearthed in Banpo of Xi'an, Shaanxi, are still quite popular in the rural area here. The designs remain among the people as symbols with supernatural power.

Likewise, the color painting "Dancing dolls," with five babies hand-in-hand on painted pottery from the 5,000-year-old Majiayao Culture unearthed in Qinghai Province, is also a popular paper-cut in today's



Yangshao Culture

Yangshao Culture was a Neolithic culture dated to 5,000 to 7,000 years ago. It was first discovered in Yangshao Village of Mianchi County, Henan Province in 1921. Yangshao Culture was distributed in the midstream and downstream of the Yellow River with the western part of Henan Province, the basin of Weihe River in Shaanxi Province and the strake in the southwestern part of Shanxi Province as its center and reaching the middle of Hebei Province in the east, midstream and upstream of Han River in the south, the basin of Taohe River in Gansu Province in the west, and the Hetao area of Inner Mongolia in the north. Hundreds of cultural remains have been exhumed and the cultural relics unearthed reflect particular cultural characteristics. The Yangshao period was the most glorious period of painted pottery during the Neolithic Age in China.

Majiyao Culture

Majiyao Culture is the culture of the late Neolithic Age found in the upper reaches of Yellow River. It is named after the site of its discovery in Majiyao Village, Lintao, Gansu Province in 1923. Majiyao Culture existed around 5,000–4,000 years ago. Majiyao people made a large quantity of refined pottery in their daily life, and their painted pottery was especially skilled. Of the burial pottery unearthed at the Majiyao Site, 80% is painted.

folk art and customs. The five dancing babies (representing the five directions—east, west, north, south and the center) are regarded as gods of life who can call upon the souls of people and cast out evil spirits. The excavated antiques could not speak, but an old grandmother still living in the caves on the Loess Plateau gave a detailed explanation: in today's customs, people still follow the same cultural codes from 5,000–6,000 years ago.

After the Yellow River basin, I went on to the Yangtze River valley. When my journey reached the countryside of Pingxiang, Jiangxi, between the Dongting Lake and Poyang Lake, mid-stream in the Yangtze River, the culture of exorcism was ubiquitous and overwhelming. There was a Nuo God (ancient temple for exorcism) every five *li* (2.5 kilometers); and a General (god for exorcism) every 10 *li* (5 kilometers). Face masks, rituals, dance and theatrical play were related to exorcism and dispelling evil, as well as to a humanized, all-powerful god wearing ox horns who was believed to have opened up the mountain at the beginning of the world. Once again, I felt lost in an ancient world of totem culture.

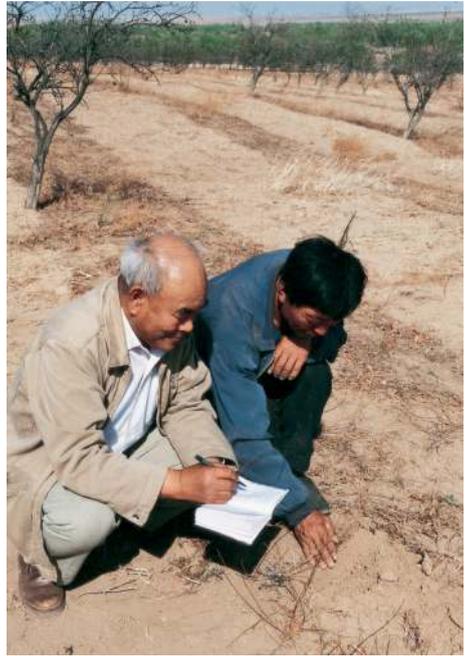
According to historical records, this area used to be the center of the Miao-Li tribal group headed by Chiyou, a legendary figure. Members of the tribal group were known to wear bronze ox horn totem masks to appear as ox heads on human bodies. This was confirmed by the excavation of ox-horn bronze masks and the mold for making them in the area. Later, when I was in Miao villages in the mountain area of Guizhou Province, upstream in the Yangtze River, I found the same culture of exorcism. The Miao people who worshiped the ox totem believed that Chiyou, the god wearing an ox-head on a human body, was their ancestor. His



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home was originally in the Hunan and Jiangxi area. In the wake of a defeat against the Yan-Huang tribal group, the Miao tribe migrated through a number of different regions to arrive in Guizhou. The fact that there was no temple for exorcism in Guizhou, nor unearthed bronze ox-horn masks, suggests that there is some truth in this historical legend.

Existing customs, such as folk arts, could be regarded as a living fossil of primitive Chinese culture. Archaeologists conduct their studies based on excavated antiques and cultural relics; historians refer to written records and historical documents. However, antiques are silent and opinions on historical records and legends vary. It is often hard to differentiate falsity from truth. As one of the world's most ancient civilizations, China has followed a long, uninterrupted course of culture and tradition. With its multi-ethnic population, vast territory and other unique historical and geographical conditions, China's ancient culture is still preserved in today's folk art and customs. This is especially true in the areas where major tribes of primitive society lived and tribal culture first began. These tribes are the ancestors of ancient Chinese civilization. At the peak of tribal culture, both natural disasters and man-made catastrophes had dealt major damage to the ecology of the region. The area then became culturally enclosed with limited transportation to and from the outside world. As a result, Chinese culture and philosophy in



The author at the site of “Yu Zhu Long” (Jade Dragon with a Pig Head) excavated from the Liaohe River basin.



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Hongshan Culture “Yu Zhu Long” (Jade Dragon with a Pig Head).

their original tribal forms, represented in folk art, can still be found in today.

As the fountain of the ideologies of a “Hundred Schools of Thought” during the period of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770–221 BC), the original Chinese philosophical system continues to be at the heart of today’s folk art. It remains intact, embedded in

a variety of art works, and pervades all aspects of people’s social life.

The creators of Chinese folk art come from China’s rural areas. They are mostly female laborers. A communal art, folk art would engender all of Chinese literature and all later art. Its presence is evident in everyday food, clothing, shelter and transportation; in traditional festivals, ceremonies and rituals; and in beliefs and taboos. As a living example of cultural heritage, it shows the continuity of Chinese culture from primitive society to present, a culture that bears distinct national and geographical characteristics. With this heritage, Chinese culture boasts a history of 7,000 to 8,000 years and rich historical sources. Its value extends far beyond the art itself; it embodies values deeply rooted in philosophy, aesthetics, archaeology, history, and the study of the social sciences and humanities. Chinese folk art also exhibits the nation’s philosophical viewpoint, cultural ideology, emotional and psychological foundations.

Life and propagation are the basic instincts of all living things in the universe. Human consciousness of life and propagation is at the heart of the ideology of *yin-yang*. Put simply, *yin-yang* revolves around the belief that the composition of *yin-yang* creates life, which,



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through propagation, never ends. This is the view of the universe found in ancient Chinese philosophy. Like the passing of human heritage by biological genes, the passing of national culture from one age to another also depends on cultural genes preserved from a nation's cultural and philosophical origins. Chinese folk art is an example of such cultural inheritance. This book aims to introduce and interpret folk art from this perspective.



Six Characteristics of Chinese Folk Art

Chinese folk art is a visual art created by ordinary people to meet ordinary social needs.

The definition of folk art is relative to the definition of the art of the imperial palace, the art of the aristocracy, the art of scholars and of the literati, or professional artists. First, it is a communal art created by millions, not the work of a few career artists. It is the art of the laborers, not the professionals; it is amateur, not specialized. Second, its social function makes it an art of necessity, used in everyday life, production, rites and ceremonies, beliefs and taboos. It was not intended as a commercial commodity, nor to serve political needs.



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Looking back to the age of primitive society, communal art was created by the Chinese people alongside the creation of tools, shelter and other basic appliances necessary in daily life. The emergence of social classes in society separated the art of the private career artist from folk art, thus forming two major art systems and two cultural heritages in China. The former was the communal art of the people and first came into being in prehistoric time; the latter was the art created by individual career artists and professionals. The parallel growth and mutual influences of these two types of art have been crucial in driving forward Chinese national art.

In terms of the conservation of national culture, the life of folk art is relatively stable. It represents the ideology of the community; the emotional and psychological characteristics of a nation throughout major periods in history. It is coexistent with national culture; it will not disappear as long as the community exists. Traditional folk art will, however, continue to grow and expand with the passage of time. Cross-cultural exchange and development will continually inject new life into folk art by bringing fresh materials and ideas. Its core, however—its cultural and philosophical origin, its Chinese cultural genes—will remain unchanged.

Chinese folk art has six basic features:

1. It is the art of the people and by the people. The creators are the vast majority of ordinary people as a group.
2. It is art for the people. It is intended to meet the needs of their daily work, food, clothing, shelter and transportation; as well as their social life of festivals and ceremonies, of beliefs and rituals.
3. Its cultural implications and art forms represent the world view of the community, their aesthetics, their emotional and psychological characteristics and national spirit. Some popular categories include paper-cutting; dough-modelling; dress and ornaments; embroidery; dye and knitting; exorcism-related masks and customs; painting; New Year pictures; leather silhouettes; puppets; toys; kites; paper-folding and lanterns; folk theatrical masks; chess; puzzles; pottery;



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engraving; residential buildings; vehicle decorations and household appliances.

4. It is a sector of Chinese parent art. Chinese folk art has inherited the cultural traditions of national literature and art throughout each and every period over several thousand years.

5. It has distinctive ethnic and regional characteristics.

6. It is created with commonplace tools and indigent raw materials, characterized by the natural economy of the region.

In sum, folk art is a unique sector among Chinese national art, enjoying the most popularity and with the richest resources of historical culture. From the worship of nature, totems and ancestors; to the urban culture of the modern capitalist economy; the cultural identity of each historical period can be recognized in a single piece of art work. It is truly a living fossil and a museum of national culture.

However, it is also necessary to address some misinterpretations in defining the concept of Chinese folk art:

First, I disagree with characterizing Chinese folk art as “willful creations.” Willfulness can be found in Chinese paintings, the work and styles of career artists or professionals. It is not a definition of folk art. On the other hand, there is a variety of categories and diverse art styles in folk art. They are not all willful creations.

Second, I disagree with the notion that “decorative deformation” is the basic feature of Chinese folk art. This is not an exclusive technique employed in Chinese folk art. It is used by career artists too. In modern art, the style of decorative deformation attempts to lead the trend of its time. The issue is not the appearance, or the change; it is to show what and how to change. The change of appearance in Chinese folk art is determined by original Chinese philosophical concepts and its aesthetic view, intrinsically different from the trend in modern western art.

Third, some professional artists have created art in the folk art style. They tend to characterize this work as folk art and label



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themselves as folk artists. This is a misconception that overlooks the fact that folk art is created by groups of laborers to serve the needs of their own social life. Even those art works that bear the artistic effect of folk art should still be understood as modern art by professional artists.

Fourth, folk art is different from folk arts and crafts. Arts and crafts are a sector of folk art involving intensive craftsmanship, some are even consummate products. Folk art may not have the same value or display the craftsmanship of arts and crafts. They are two parts of the same category.

Finally, folk custom is the carrier of folk art. We speak of folk art from the angle of art; whereas folk customs are understood from the view of the custom.

