

Unveiling the Elegance: The Aesthetics of Bamboo Weaving Art by the Sanjiang Dong Ethnic Group in Guangxi, China

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Keywords: Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving, weaving Art, Chinese Dong

Abstract: Bamboo weaving stands as an intangible cultural heritage within the realm of traditional Chinese handicrafts. Among the various forms of this ancient art, Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving, hailing from Guangxi in China, holds a special place as it not only embodies the rich heritage of Dong folk culture but also encapsulates the aesthetic ethos of primordial creations. However, in contemporary times, the influence of cultural evolution and the ever-changing landscape of survival have engendered a certain degree of aesthetic ambiguity regarding the weaving techniques and artistic expressions employed in Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving. Drawing upon the wealth of Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving artifacts and leveraging the foundational concepts of traditional Chinese weaving art, this paper aims to delve into the intricacies of Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving art and unravel its underlying aesthetic core. By examining the aesthetic principles governing bamboo weaving creations through the lens of weaving art and culture, this paper seeks to unravel the enigmatic beauty and significance of Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving art in a more lucid and intuitive manner.

1. Introduction

Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving, a traditional agricultural production tool and essential part of daily life in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Liuzhou City, Guangxi, China, stands as a distinguished example of the Dong people's exceptional craftsmanship [1]. Rooted in functionality, Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving seamlessly integrates practicality with the cultural sensibilities of the local community. Furthermore, the profound philosophy underlying this art form, which harmonizes the material and the spiritual realms, mirrors the Sanjiang Dong people's deeply ingrained values towards the relationship between “people and people”, “people and gods” and “people and natural things”. Thus, the art of bamboo weaving in Sanjiang Dong serves as a conduit between the tangible and intangible realms, embodying a remarkable fusion of substance and essence. With a strong emphasis on local customs and aesthetics, Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving

has become a distinctive testament to the region's natural surroundings, historical heritage, and overall way of life.

2. The Concept of “Weaving Art” and the Early Forms of Bamboo Weaving

The art of weaving encompasses a multitude of techniques, each with its unique form and structure. These techniques include brocade, knot weaving, bamboo weaving, miscanthus weaving, rattan weaving and straw weaving. Collectively known as "weaving art," these methods represent the fusion of craftsmanship and artistic expression, where materials serve as the fundamental medium. The essence of weaving art lies in the interplay between two essential components: “materials” and “techniques”, which are crucial in evoking distinctive form and structure. Originating as a traditional handicraft, primitive weaving employed various plant parts, such as stems, leaves, skins, and cores, meticulously organized in singular or multiple arrangements to create practical utensils or ornamental objects. [2] Craftsmanship, as a formal expression, revolves around the mastery and utilization of specific materials, aiming to highlight their superiority in functionality and practicality within artistic artifacts. Consequently, targeted and unique weaving techniques emerge, rooted in the characteristics of the materials employed, thereby giving rise to cultural connotations that are both distinctive and meaningful. This aligns with the fundamental ideology governing early weaving art, which stressed the creation of tools for production and practical livelihoods.

2.1. The Product of the Law in Terms of Category

Bamboo weaving is a versatile craft that encompasses various forms and has been classified under categories such as “folk art (craftsmanship)”, “farmers’ art”, and “folk miscellaneous arts”. Folk art refers to the utilization of local resources and is closely intertwined with the way of life in a specific region, persisting over time [3]. Due to its adherence to the key principles of folk art, bamboo weaving is recognized as a distinct category within this genre, juxtaposed with knot weaving and straw weaving, etc., and is believed to be a folk weaving art [4]. Weaving itself is one of the oldest and most fundamental skills developed by humankind, serving both practical and artistic purposes. People ingeniously made use of readily available materials within their living areas to produce practical and durable fine tools and utensils, and further developed them into a branch of weaving crafts. At the heart of weaving art lies the act of “weaving”, which necessitates a harmonious interplay between techniques and materials. By reorganizing raw materials based on specific needs, artisans would conceive new forms that would subsequently undergo changes in functionality, attributes, uses, and appearances. Consequently, bamboo weaving and other weaving art forms represent the innovative outcomes brought forth by the evolving nature of this craft—a testament to the profound impact of experimentation and adaptation within the weaving tradition.

Comparable to the tradition of folk art, the craft of bamboo weaving aligns effortlessly with the essence and framework of both farmers' art and local artistic expressions. Nestled within the deep roots of ancient agricultural practices and artistic customs, Chinese farmers’ art epitomizes the remarkable ability to transform discarded remnants and dilapidation into splendid treasures and extraordinary marvels. Embracing indigenous resources and forsaking ostentation, it is inherently imbued with an untamed spirit, dynamic vitality, and a resolute sense of natural simplicity, fostering an authentic local ambience.

2.2. The Prototype Concept of “Weaving” in the Artifact Dictionary

In the *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (Explanation and Analysis of Chinese Characters), Xu Shen, a literal

scholar in the Eastern Han Dynasty of China, adhered to the principle of “drawing inspirations from observations of the surrounding world” in his analysis of Chinese character formation. With great diligence, he meticulously documented the early human activities and their ingenious accomplishments. In this book, a significant portion of the lexicon pertains to bamboo utensils, constituting over 20% of the total vocabularies with a character component of bamboo [5]. Wang Xuan, in his insightful interpretation of the *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, posits that bamboo utensils held equal importance with pottery and metal utensils for culinary and culinary purposes. Notably, bamboo weaving emerged as a principal representative of these bamboo utensils, characterized by a long-standing lineage defined by its resilience, flexibility, susceptibility to cracking, as well as its ease in weaving. In the *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, bamboo weaving is expounded upon as the “organization of bamboo filaments or slips”, where, “slips” are also referred to as “sheets” and “sheets” are further referred to “flakes” [6]. In *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, the three terms shared the similar meaning. Hence, it can be discerned that ancient civilizations distinguished the art of “weaving” even in its nascent stages, thereby formulating a preliminary conceptual definition that identified “weaving” as the organized arrangement of delicate bamboo fragments. In addition, the lexicon of bamboo weaving artifacts contained an abundance of related terms including “bian” (a bamboo container for fruit and dried meat), “tu” (an artifact made of bamboo skin), “min” (bamboo skin) and “yun” (green bamboo skin).

In the ancient oracle bone inscriptions, there is a rich collection of pictographs depicting bamboo weaving which recorded the form of early bamboo weaving utensils. The character “weaving” in oracle bone inscriptions is represented by primitive forms of bamboo slips and knots, indicating that the early form of weaving was defined as the “arrangement” of bamboo pieces in series. Furthermore, the oracle bone inscriptions depict the intricate details of bamboo woven artifacts with remarkable clarity. The character “dustpan” in the oracle bone inscriptions portrays the basic weaving structure such as “crossing of strips”, and even the closing, and edge banding etc.

3. The “Subconscious” Weaving Concept of Sanjiang Dong Bamboo Weaving

3.1. The Historical Concept of Attachment of Life

The Sanjiang Dong area boasts a remarkable abundance of plant resources, comprising a variety of linear vegetation such as grass, reeds, bamboo and other plants suitable for weaving. Notably, secondary deep processing enables the production of linear cotton and linen, thus enhancing the range of materials available for weaving. These linear plants serve as exceptionally high-quality resources for the art of weaving. Rooted in the animistic beliefs prevalent within the Sanjiang Dong community, a deep reverence and appreciation for all forms of life permeate their cultural practices. Consequently, many plants in this region have been endowed with profound cultural significance and are revered as objects of spiritual worship. By skillfully interweaving plants with symbolic representations into diverse forms, the Sanjiang Dong people have succeeded in creating a profound “web of life.” This artistic practice resonates harmoniously with the overarching principle of “change” prevalent in folk art. Through transformative processes that involve the transition from the original form to a newly conceived form, these woven creations exemplify the enduring principles of “life,” “death,” “rebirth,” and “bionics” as perceived and embraced by the Sanjiang Dong community. Such artistry aligns perfectly with the cultural attitudes and beliefs concerning the cyclical nature of existence held by the Sanjiang Dong people.

In the early stages of development, the Sanjiang Dong people showcased their remarkable ingenuity by devising a diverse array of weaving techniques specific to various materials. This intricate art form became categorized into two distinct forms: three-dimensional weaving and plane weaving. Predominantly recognized as Dong brocade, plane weaving constitutes a pivotal aspect of

their cultural expression. Within this realm of weaving, the Dong people thoughtfully assemble an amalgamation of cultural symbols, such as flowers, birds, fish, insects and geometric patterns. These symbols are meticulously incorporated into the garments adorned during significant folk ceremonies, sacrificial rituals, or communal celebrations, allowing for a deeply introspective and heartfelt mode of communication. On the other hand, the three-dimensional weaving encompasses the art of bamboo weaving and rattan weaving, and is influenced by the concepts of materialization of life such as ancestral beliefs and reproductive worship in the Dong bamboo culture. Inextricably linked to the essence of their existence, the technique of bamboo weaving serves a multi-dimensional purpose, catering to the practical requirements of the Dong community's daily folk activities. Whether it pertains to rites and rituals, be it occasions of solemnity such as funerals and weddings, or joyous festivities such as full-moon-birth feasts or agricultural endeavors, bamboo-woven artifacts plays an integral role. Importantly, certain manifestations of bamboo weaving also exhibits an inherent attribute associated with "rituality".

3.2. The Concept of Historical Sexual Division of Labor

In all known agricultural civilizations, the longstanding tradition of sexual division of labor and the differentiated development of men and women are evident. [7] The Sanjiang Dong people, for instance, adhere to the customary practice of men engaging in plowing activities and women specializing in weaving, all while striving for self-sufficiency. Within the Dong culture, distinct roles are assigned to men and women in both production and daily life. This division of labor is greatly influenced by early farming practices, resulting in men of the Sanjiang County primarily dedicating themselves to agricultural pursuits, while women focus predominantly on domestic handicrafts. The typical combination of agriculture and handicraft industries exemplifies the seemingly "natural" sexual division of labor. As such, it is widely acknowledged that this division represents a rational choice made by farmers in a traditional agricultural society.

The "naturalness" of the sexual division of labor is reflected in the differing physiological characteristics of men and women, which can be referred to as the "physiology" of "men plowing and women weaving." possess greater physical strength and vitality, making them well-suited for agricultural work that requires substantial manual labor. Compared with men, women are more suitable for light handicraft work such as weaving and brocade weaving. The historical function and application of bamboo weaving primarily revolved around farming and production, thus regarding men as the primary "creators" of this craft. In the process of crafting bamboo woven artifacts, men prioritize practicality, emphasizing functionality, adaptability, and durability. The advent of three-dimensional bamboo weaving has effectively fulfilled these demands. From initial stages of material and tool selection and processing to the application of various weaving techniques, a certain level of physical strength is necessary for weavers. Agriculture predominantly serves as the domain for men, while bamboo weaving becomes their principal tool of labor. The act of personally engaging in weaving allows men to fashion tools that suited their specific needs. This basic concept of male Dong people regarding bamboo weaving aligns with their traditional belief in taking personal initiative in creative endeavors. As a result, the Sanjiang Dong people's perception of bamboo "weaving" remains closely intertwined with the societal and traditional notions of sexual division of labor. While weaving, spinning and embroidery are not exclusively designated for women, bamboo weaving serves as a means to address the labor requirements of men.

4. The "Knack-related" Connotation and Aesthetic Standards of Creation in Weaving Skills

The art of Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving primarily serves practical purposes by creating tools and utensils. Over time, bamboo weaving has undergone extensive development and transformation,

gradually integrating with the everyday folk customs and aesthetic preferences of the Dong people. This fusion has given rise to the unique “bamboo art [8]” exclusive to the Dong community. Distinguishing itself from other forms of bamboo craft such as carving and engraving, bamboo weaving serves as a medium for weavers to express their inner desires and aspirations. The cultural connotation embedded within Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving emerges from the interactions between various elements, including the relationship between humans and nature, the tension between individual identity and collective values, and the dynamics of society as a whole. Moreover, through the lens of bamboo weaving, the psychological processes involved in the application of these artisanal skills are reexamined. Therefore, the connotation of weaving skills mainly reflects the weavers’ inner portrayal and aesthetic standards of the national creations, and is also the “knack-related” connotation of weaving skills.

The art of Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving encompasses a unique and intricate set of non-generalized “knack” that reflect the deep-rooted traditions and cultural values of Sanjiang Dong people. Embedded within their inherent conceptual habits regarding “material, quality, shape, potential, technology, art, use, and appreciation”, these techniques represent far more than mere practical skills. One can argue that the mastery of bamboo weaving in Sanjiang Dong culture goes beyond the realm of craftsmanship. In application to bamboo weaving, its various elements are integrated through technical techniques and forms to construct a more personalized cultural connotation of weaving, that is, the knack-related connotation of “applying art as per the property of materials”.

4.1. The Inner Nature of “Material” and “Texture”

Material and texture are important basic components of the traditional craft of Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving. The Sanjiang Dong people possess a deep-rooted reverence for nature, which is manifested in their understanding of “subjectification” and “mutualism” of natural objects. This philosophical approach further influences the choice of “material” and “texture” used in the art of bamboo weaving. The selection of materials in Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving is driven by a profound appreciation for the inherent qualities of bamboo. The concept of “subjectification” emphasizes a sincere admiration for natural objects and an unwavering respect for the laws of nature. The Sanjiang Dong people possess an intuitive understanding of the characteristics and attributes of various plants and animals, and they approach the selection of bamboo materials with great care, aligning themselves with the principles of nature. Additionally, the notion of “texture” represents an inner manifestation that stems from the concept of “mutualism”. This concept emphasizes the interdependence between humans and other substances, encompassing the aspects of fortification and sustenance for survival through coexistence with living organisms. Once the choice of “material” is made, the subsequent consideration in the context of Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving revolves around texture. This elusive quality resides within the physicality of the “entity” and is evident through various characteristics of bamboo, such as toughness, hardness, roughness and color. “Texture” serves as a crucial criterion for assessing the accuracy and fineness of weaving, while also reflecting the profound reverence and understanding that the early artisans and craftsmen held towards the natural world. It signifies the originality and ingenuity of these creators and producers in their endeavor to fashion exquisite artifacts.

4.2. The Ascending of “Skills” and “Art”

The progression from skills to art and from art to way signifies the evolution of a craftsman's creative process. This progression is specifically observed in the realm of bamboo weaving, where it transitions from serving practical purposes to encompassing decorative objectives. Furthermore, it

reveals the profound intention of the creators to infuse their work with ingenuity and achieve exceptionally refined craftsmanship. The progression of “skills” and “art” of the Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving is not confined solely to the technical expertise of weaving, but is also manifested in the transformation of bamboo weaving identity and the collective recognition of weaving skills.

In the early days, the practice of Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving primarily served practical purposes and catered to the needs of everyday life. Craftsmen at that time emphasized functionality and long-lasting quality when employing weaving techniques. With passage of time, weaving skills began to incorporate the cultural and aesthetic preferences of the Sanjiang Dong people, becoming deeply intertwined with their folk traditions. This gradually garnered recognition for the bamboo weaving skills within specific regions, as the local community developed a strong sense of attachment to their own traditional culture, resulting in a sense of "agglomeration." Through a process of innovation and inheritance, the bamboo weaving craftsmen have further refined their techniques, ultimately creating a distinctively unique style that embodies the collective aesthetic consensus of their ethnic group. Finally, ongoing integration of this aesthetic consensus with the weaving skills has given rise to the birth of extraordinary "works of art" within this community.

4.3. The Space for “Use” and “Appreciation”

The most important feature of the “three-dimensional weaving” is “space”, and the Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving is no exception. In terms of the sense of space of weaving, the Sanjiang Dong people have developed a profound understanding of various spatial dimensions that exhibit regular and organized patterns. These dimensions include the distribution space, living space, planting space, breeding space and cultural activity space of Dong villages. The bamboo weaving artifacts and utensils crafted by the Sanjiang Dong ethnic group are practical containers processed from carefully selected materials. Weaving, in this context, serves as the foundational element for creating functional "spaces". The complete composition of these spaces in bamboo weaving includes both "use" and "appreciation". “Use” refers to the rationality of space existence. In the early days, Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving was mainly used in agriculture and fishing. For example, tea baskets, fish baskets, sickle baskets, chicken and duck cages, etc. were created with specific spaces tailored to their intended objects, thus achieving the principle of “spatial adaptation”. “Appreciation” is more reflected in the mind and spirit wherein space takes on a spiritual dimension of decoration. The creation of an inner aesthetic space, characterized by the diversity and forms of bamboo weaving, showcases a transition from practicality to decoration and aesthetics. This duality forms a space within bamboo weaving that is simultaneously practical and aesthetic in nature.

5. Conclusions

In summary, the artistic aesthetics of Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving is intricately linked to the cultural principles of the Sanjiang Dong people, including their perspectives on bamboo, their appreciation for craftsmanship, and their overall way of life as reflected in their folk traditions. By employing an analytical approach that starts from a broad perspective and gradually delves into individual details, it becomes apparent that the essence of bamboo weaving lies in the act of weaving itself. The mastery of weaving techniques and the artistic expression inherent in Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving creations form the very heart of this traditional craft. Through a thoughtful exploration of their aesthetic principles and the cultural significance they embody, we are able to gain valuable insights into the functions, classifications, applications, and cultural context surrounding bamboo weaving. By seamlessly merging the concepts of weaving art and culture with the broader tapestry of Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving, including its role in national rituals and folk customs, we can appreciate the profound value and elevated status that bamboo weaving holds.

This enlightens the aesthetic appreciation of Sanjiang Dong bamboo weaving creations, and offers a fresh perspective for further exploring the creative culture of ethnic minorities and their artistic and aesthetic philosophies.

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