Symbolic Research on “Water God” Image in Paper-Charms of Yunnan

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ABSTRACT

The paper-charms of Yunnan as a kind of unique woodcut printmaking of Chinese folk cultural heritage, is a widespread phenomenon of folk culture in Yunnan minority areas, and also is the product of the folk beliefs activities for a long time. The paper-charms as a communication with god for folk beliefs, reflect the inherent spirit of people through the image of the external outline, which along with the unique, rustic, rough mad styling with local artistic features of the native character and unique aesthetic sense. The unique image style not only reflects the rich spiritual connotation of Yunnan minority Ethnic people, but also demonstrated the metaphysical meaning of religious folk art. But there are more multiple meanings of portraying water god image in the nature worship, from the religious connotation, the images dragon style reflects the special features of water dragon king divinity; from the folk belief, the images figurative dragon image reflected reverence of the dragon in Bai nationality; from the semiotic perspective, abstract dragon Patron hold more symbolic symbolism. With these multiple meanings, the shape of the paper charms reflects the rich spiritual appearance of the local people, and the common folk beliefs and speculation special significance.

KEYWORDS

The paper-charms of Yunnan Dragon, Graphical analysis, Symbolic Significance.

INTRODUCTION

Paper-Charms, also known as charms paper, paper painted pictures, as well as other names, in historical document records of “paper-charms”, the most frequently reference was the “Tianxianglou achievements-on the use of Mazi” by Yu Zhaolong in Qing dynasty: “paint portraits and Buddha images on paper, then coat with colors, for offering sacrifices to gods or ancestors, and burn, it is just said as paper charms”. It can be known that Paper charms is a kind of painted paper used for offering sacrifices to gods or ancestors, and wood engraving printing used by Yunnan minority areas in China for religious prayers and worship ritual activities, as a unique category in Chinese folk cultural heritage, paper charms is a product of long-term practice of cultural inheritance and religious belief.

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“Water God” Image in Paper-Charms is a prominent representative. On the one hand, it reflects the admiration of the Dragon Lord in the Bai nationality culture; on the other hand, it reflects the need for survival by praying for gods in nature worship. As the nature of being human, the spiritual meaning of this supernatural force and metaphysical religious implication fully embody the important and special position of a dragon in folk belief in Yunnan.

HISTORICAL TEXTUAL RESEARCH ON “WATER GOD” PAPER CHARMS

In folk belief, water god was the most influential god in folk cultural heritage, and there were multiple interpretations on water god in ancient books and records, in the 10th volume of The Lose Record in Jin dynasty: "Qu Yuan was excluded for his loyalty, and he lived in seclusion in far region in Hunan, and later, he was forced by his king, so he jumped into the cold water, hence, he was called the water fairy by people in Chu, and people set up memorial temple to worship him". Wangjia of East Jin said: In this book, Qu Yuan was called as water fairy, it was the water region where Qu Yuan was in exile. Until the late Tang Dynasty and the Five Dynasties, in the book “Jianming Book” written by Qiu Guangting: “the wooden god was named Goumang, the fire god was named Zhu Rong, the earth god was named Houtu, and the water god was named Xuanming, and the Gold god is named Rushou”. In Master Zuo's Spring and Autumn Annals-18th year of Shao, God waster was always called as Xuanming, the definition of this appellation inherited the theory of the five elements flourished in the Warring States Period, the records on “Xuanming” also expressed the multiple definitions on a plurality of gods, especially Taoism used it to express its “Taoism theory”, as a place and realm for all things to be “independent”, which was designed to express a spiritual realm, and this provided a valid basis for the study of the religious implications of Paper Charms, this was largely the source.

Therefrom, the source of “Water God” Image in Paper-Charms was from production and life needs, as well as utilitarian purpose on practical use. Water is the need of human existence, when reflected in paper charms, there existed dragons in all shapes and sizes, the dragon was the god in charge of flood and drought disasters and bringing rain, therefore, among the ethnic minorities in Yunnan, worship of God of water was built on the basis of survival, which embodied the most primitive nature.

ANALYSIS ON THE “WATER GOD” IMAGE IN PAPER CHARMS

"Dragon" image in water god paper charms is common, and in Yunnan folk beliefs, these paper charms are mainly used for burning. Regarding the dragon as the Lord is the most common existence in the Bai People's faith, and this universal existence has a special form, in analysis from the perspective of image science, on the one hand, this particularity hides the image representation of the relationship between people and religious beliefs based on changes in survival since ancient time, on the other hand, it reflects the god gradually fades its Sacredness, and more follows the

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1 East Jin dynasty, Wang Jia, 10th volume of Shi Yi Records
2 Zuoqiu Ming of the Warring States: Master Zuo's Spring and Autumn Annals-18th year of Shao
customs and psychological expressions of life in the process of visualization, this also means that many of the images depicts on dragon in the water god show the pursuit of faith and need, which also expresses the rich imagination of the Bai people, and the worship of the Dragon God. And, from the existing image, it can be seen that the paper charms of water god exists in two ways: dragon lord and Lord as a dragon, the image is basically consistent in expression, and it mainly expresses the essence of its image from the figurative and abstract forms, here, this paper analyzes the expressed visual image and meaning by water god paper charms from the semiotic point of view, thus extending the semantic role of symbols, to further expound the symbolic meaning and spiritual appeal contained in the images.

SEMANTIC FUNCTION OF SYMBOLS

The semantic meaning of symbols consists of connotation and denotation, the former belongs to the expression level, and the latter is at the connotation level. Xu Hengchun mentioned in the book of Design Semiotics that: “Saussure broke the symbolic concept into 'signifying' and 'signified', the connection between the two, that is, the arbitrariness of the connection between speech and semantics”.

As a result, symbols are created by signifying action, and this process is the association between the signifying and the signified, thus forming symbols, people endow certain interpretations to symbols to cause the symbolic form to have corresponding content to communicate the relevant information. This artistic symbol of paper charms embodies this sense, the Bai people give a certain significance to them, used to express particular ideas or thoughts, that is, the relationship between signifying and signified, while its denotation and connotation reflect more profound significance. For example, dragon god in figure 1, it refers to an abstract form of dragon, and the reverence and worship of the dragon in the worship of nature is one of the most popular folk beliefs in paper charms, this level is the physical layer as a reality symbol, that's the concept of the first level, and from a modeling point of view, the image of "dragon" depicts only the head and part of the body, while the depiction of the tail and foot is relatively simple, and the depiction on the head is more striking. On the whole, it seems the image of the dragon is deliberately different from the image of the real dragon, folk artists aimed to depict the inner dragon from the spiritual level based on their understanding, which is more mysterious and spiritual. In such a relatively complex image of dragon, some modeling techniques are worth further analysis, straight lines and curves with dense density describe the whole body of the dragon, the shape of the body is distinguished by different sizes of figures, from figure, we can see that the dragon is in motion state, the geometric triangle is intended to trim the dorsal fin. The most striking portrayal is the head, it expresses the aesthetic taste of folk art, elliptical styling, the eyes are divided by a line to form a symmetry in two circles, the wide eyes star ahead, ferocious and sacred and inviolable, two ears are abstracted, the erecting triangle image feels more like ghosts, trim the tentacles around the face are described by coarse lines, fine lines, and triangles, and the treatment on the nose and mouth is more concise, which embodies the interpenetration and symmetry of the lines, so the whole face has symbolic features in this way. From the whole, vivid

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3Xu Henchun: Design Semiotics, Beijing: Tsinghua University press, 2008.7, pp. 24-25.
images, black and white color relations, full form of composition occupy the whole space, simple lines are used to describe the dragon, with a certain randomness, below the picture there are thick and thin lines outlining the wavy lines, aiming at expressing the special functions of dragon water control, this full form of composition makes the picture elegant and whole, full and rich in content, it is really intriguing, meanwhile, it also reflects unadorned, simple, rugged beauty. Whether from modeling, aesthetics or composition, these behavior patterns reflect the understanding and expression of folk artists' self-consciousness. Through the characterization and expression of these images, reveal its meaning, namely the connotation and extension of symbol, and the implications of this allusion expresses the demand for water of the Bai people in Yunnan in the connotation, the people it a special divine function used to pray for good weather, bumper harvest, and it reveals the spirit of Yunnan people's pursuit of rich life and the nature of existence.

Figure 1. Dragon god.

Figure 2. Water God.
SYMBOLIC EXPRESSION

From the above analysis of symbolic semantics, the symbolic meaning of the image is further analyzed, as an important deity in the Bai culture, the dragon in the paper charms is various in shapes, in the process of depicting some images, the image simplified is to point-line-plane combination, only brief art symbols. These abstract artistic symbols embody the semantic function of their symbols, and then the relation between form and structure is revealed, which constructs the space of image divinity. In figures 1 and 2, the performance of graphics are based on abstract form to describe the main image of the dragon, the outline is represented by the formation of lines, the difference between these two is that the lines are thick and thin in 1, the rough line is a little stiff, the shape of the dragon tends to be more geometric, in the painting, it emphasizes the shape in a nutshell. The rough and arbitrary of this line expresses a powerful divine force, changes in thickness come from this, line of contrast enhances heavy screen style, and forms a simple shape. While in figure 2, obviously, the expression of the curve is used, in silhouette, clothing folds, facial circles and expression dynamics, an image that tends to “have characteristic symbols is showed”. The most striking feature of this image is that the pleat on the body is treated as a brief pattern, it draws an image in the same plane space, and this feature is especially reflected in the cuffs handling, the sleeve has a winding effect after plane processing, there is a three-dimensional sense of depth in the two-dimensional space, which let peoples realize that this arm is in a raised state, the other symmetry is treated as a naturally scattered form, which is in contrast, it seems that two hands are holding two abstract animals, styling is still a generalization of curves, which forms a whole with a curve of pleats. Then look at the face of the image, symbolic characteristics are particularly prominent, simple lines outline the facial features, rounded eyes, the shape of the whole face reveals that its connotation and significance lies in expressing the performance function of the holy dragon, meanwhile, it also embodies that folk artists had weakened the divinity, majesty of dragon, more life oriented, in the Lord's faith, it is a symbol of people's admiration for the dragon god. Moreover, the form and depiction of pictures tend to be more conscious, it can be seen that the folk artists give their personal emotion to the pictures in their depiction of the dragon's god, and hope God's strength could be closer to life, the objective desire of man embodies the spiritual needs and the long cherished wish of a better life. From the overall view of the image, the connotation of this symbol has more meaning for the pursuit of rich life, for survival existence, inner spiritual needs, the connotation of the image embodies the symbolic imagery of this characteristics.

From the analysis of these images, we can see that connotation of symbolic semantics of “water god” paper charms usually reflects the pursuit of a better life, and it is the emotional and spiritual sustenance of the Bai people, and, these images are analyzed from a semiotic perspective, which reveals the deep cultural connotations implied by this artistic symbol, this aesthetic artistic symbol makes the form of the image more abundant, as well as more aesthetic appeal.

\footnote{Referring to the 4\textsuperscript{th} part of Paper Charms in Yunnan by Yang Yusheng, Art Walk, an expression proposed in Art and Emotion.}
CONCLUSION

It follows that study on the paper charms on water god can enable us to understand the deified subject by folk myths and legends, people endow it with divine power and express their innermost desire. And, it reflects all the spiritual activities of man in god, and then it is depicted by a simple image, in the limited space, with condensed the rustic spiritual appeal, this secular idea is presented to the present world through vivid expression, abstract shapes, simple forms, high degree of generalization and brevity have formed special form, hence, the image of a characteristic symbol embodies its symbolic meaning. As a prominent representative in paper charms, the form of “water god” reflects the rich spirit of the local people, it also reflects that folk artists had strengthened the relation between man and such communication in the process of depicting images, it is closer to life, and reflected in real life, for the return of human nature, it is a spiritual pursuit of human existence.

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