Research on the Inheritance and Protection of Qiang Straw Plaiting Handicraft Technique

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Han Fu*, Wanyu Tian
College of Arts, Guilin university of Technology, Guilin, China
*Corresponding author, e-mail: 56910487@qq.com

Abstract

The Qiang straw plaiting technique epitomizes the folk culture and wisdom of the Qiang people and embodies the creativity of the working people. It contains ethnic culture, ethnic spirit, exhibits strong regional characteristics and historical inheritance and showcases the pursuit of beauty by people as well. However, under the influence of rapid economic development, the impact of ethic culture is constantly being reduced. Qiang straw plaiting, as an intangible cultural heritage, lacks the ability to follow the change in public perception of beauty closely and to adapt to the diverse needs in terms of inheritance and protection. Because of this, Qiang straw plaiting element has disjointed from the market and social attention still needs to be enhanced. This paper conducts investigation and analysis based on current inheritance and protection works on the Qiang straw plaiting handicraft technique and aims to enhance and widen ways of inheritance and protection of Qiang straw plaiting through methods such as building a brand image, pushing the integration of culture and tourism, increasing market publicity efforts, enhancing innovative and creative research, building the "Internet + Qiang straw plaiting" protection mechanism, etc. This paper focuses on the difficulties that the technique is currently facing and takes the actual regional situation into consideration in order to push for the innovation of the traditional handicraft technique as well as its inheritance and protection.

Keywords

Qiang straw plaiting; Inheritance and protection; Innovation

Introduction

Qiang straw plaiting originated from the Beichuan area and is the essence of human wisdom formed

from the production process and daily life of generations of working people. After thousands and hundreds of years of improvement and perfection, the technique gradually grew to become various straw plaited products able to satisfy human need and an important part of our country's traditional handicraft techniques. In the modern development process, the folk creative ideology exhibited by the technique also has significant inspirational impact on artistic designing in different fields.

With the changing times, public perception of beauty has been greatly impacted by the torrent of times. People's demand in terms of application of products becomes higher, thus the straw plaiting technique is usually chosen to be forgotten due to its inability to meet the double demands of modernization. The problems of how to achieve innovation based on rich cultural heritage and connotation, to help it overcome the difficulties faced currently and to promote effective inheritance and protection require our serious consideration. Therefore, this paper aims to discuss the ways to inherit and protect the Qiang straw plaiting technique and serve as a source of reference for the inheritance and protection of other traditional handicraft techniques.

Overview of Qiang Straw Plaiting Handicraft Technique

Qiang straw plaiting is one of the unique handicraft techniques in the Sichuan province. The traditional technique passed down relying on the advantage of the Beichuan area, its rich renewable resources, has a very long history and rich ethnic cultural characteristics and is well-known nationwide.

Qiang straw plaiting is one of the folk techniques with the most Qiang ethnic characteristics with a history of more than 5000 years. It has high appreciation value in terms of its shape and plaiting pattern. The products are rather durable with high practical value as well. The earliest historical document with relative data can be traced back to the cloths, straw-made shoes, coir coat and the tools used by Yu, ancestor of the Chinese nation, when he led the people to participate together in flood control efforts. They are made from the stems, leaves, vines, rattans of plants and bamboos in the area carefully selected by the Qiang people and then plaited by hand after the intrigue process containing steps of picking, selection, drying, boiling and exposure to sunlight.

Currently, the Qiang straw plaiting technique has already grown to be rather mature. It has not only high practical value which can act as a positive pushing force for the development of ethnic regional economy but also certain extent of ornamental value, showing rich ethnic characteristics while preserving the modern sense of fashion. As of now, the straw plaited products can be broadly categorized into 6 kinds as follows: daily necessities, furniture, toys, clothes and crafts. Daily necessities include mat, box, plate, bucket, curtain, cover, sheath, various baskets, etc.; while in terms of crafts, screen and art pieces made to look like plants, animal and people are the most common.

Difficulties Faced By the Inheritance and Protection of Qiang Straw Plaiting Handicraft Technique

Unified Way and Weak Power of Inheritance

A present, the main way of inheritance for traditional handicraft techniques is to be passed down through generations, by word of mouth and hands-on practice. The Qiang straw plaiting technique is no exception, adopting rather traditional ways like recording, interviewing, pictures and collection. However, all these ways of inheritance and protection have their shortcomings. For example, for ways of inheritance, the scale of targeted group is rather small, which is not good for training of inheritors; in terms of protection, methods using the traditional media may age and become distorted. Currently, information cannot circulate well, hence unable to extract its essence while abandoning the dregs. It is urgent to send specialists into the Beichuan area to conduct large-scale technique collection activity, integrate and compile them into a book hence widening paths of study and improve public education.

Under the background of our nation's education being in the progress of taking fostering integrity and promoting rounded development of people as the fundamental task of education, and aiming to train participants of and successors to the socialist cause who develop morally, intellectually, physically and aesthetically, the level of integration of the Qiang straw plaiting traditional culture into the local education system is not yet enough. The Qiang straw plaiting with local characteristics which the public have access to is limited, coverage of audience is small. In the local aesthetic and moral education, there is a lack of activities where traditional culture gets to enter the classroom with Qiang straw plaiting as a medium or hands-on activities where students get to get their creative juices flowing. This goes against the inheritance and development of the straw plaiting technique, hence unable to solve the deficiency of Qiang straw plaiting in terms of inheritance and unable to form an aesthetic and moral education system with regional characteristics.

Lack of Innovation Ability, Limited Cultural Foundation

The Qiang straw plaiting products made in the early stage were mainly used as tools to fulfil people's need for daily usage and production, hence more attention was paid to their practicality. However, as society and economy constantly develop, science and technology continue to progress, people began to focus more on the underlying meaning in the plaited products and the center of attention for consumers began to shift towards the cultural level. Unfortunately, most of the Qiang straw plaited products now still remain at the level of traditional design and production mode. They still rather lack cultural creativity and application of new concepts and new techniques. Whether in terms of their function or form, the products fail to fulfill the needs of the new era's development

trend and progress in human civilization.

Meanwhile, due to the constraints of the inheritors of the technique themselves, work of innovation and creation is affected. Through research, we found out that the people currently working in the Qiang straw plaiting industry can be broadly categorized into: traditional inheritors of the technique and local re-employed population with disabilities. The traditional inheritors of the technique have almost all reached their seventies. Their mind age just like their physical bodies do and it appears to be more difficult for them to sustain the intensive straw plaiting work involving innovation and creativity. As for the local re-employed population with disabilities, they face many constraints such as uneven educational level, physical conditions and their families' financial conditions, therefore most likely unable to keep working this job with long duration, unstable return and require innovation as well as creativity. Hence, they could only use the template from products made by the older population which leads to the industry slowing down in terms of its creative progress and losing its vitality.

Overall, as of now, we are in a shortage of design workers with solid aesthetic and cultural foundation who are also familiar with the Qiang straw plaiting technique. Hence, there is no re-creation based on the traditional technique, the outlook of the industry remains worrying.

Declining Market Competitiveness, Huge Loss of Inheritors of the Technique

The Ministry of Culture and Tourism have recently confirmed and published a list of names of representative inheritors of representative intangible cultural heritage projects including Qiang straw plaiting after regional declarations, initial feedback from specialists, public announcement and review by the review committee. Statistics how that their average age is 63 years old. The inheritors are all advanced in age and have limited ability to follow up with the trend which causes the current straw plaited products to have difficulty meeting the double needs of public perception of beauty and development of products.

As the times develop, mechanized and automated production has become the dominant mode of production. While production efficiency has been greatly increased, the cost for production has also been significantly decreased. However, Qiang straw plaiting products are mainly made by hand. They require long duration of plaiting and high manpower costs. Its competitiveness grew weaker as productivity strikes, so that this element no longer has room for survival in the market and hence gradually abandoned by the investors. A batch of inheritors with mature skills may lose a large amount of job opportunities because of the industry downturn and unable to keep a steady income. The heavy economic pressure may force them to switch jobs leading to huge loss in talent. Young learners no longer have someone to teach and guide them and thus the traditional technique loses

all its successors.

Low Inter-Industry Integration, Lack of Reorganization and Integration Awareness

Qiang straw plaiting handicraft technique is a cultural industry belonging to the category of intellectual industry. It directly utilizes human's intellectual resources to fulfill the needs in terms of knowledge, culture and skill for those in need. However, in today's world where information is developing at an extremely rapid speed, majority of the Qiang straw plaiting elements still exist as individual products with very low level of integration with different industries or different sectors of the same industry. The awareness of the industrial chain that unites upstream, midstream and downstream industries is weak. The production operators cannot rely on advantageous industries and extend the industrial chain with Qiang straw plaiting as the core forwards or backwards. For example, it would be extremely hard to develop intensive processing of products and to achieve integration of supply and marketing if solely relying on the Qiang straw plaiting cultural industry. This will lead to narrow space for profit, improvement and perfection of the industrial structure unable to progress, lack of ability to catalyze the regional integration of industries, inability to achieve expansion and add-value of cultural industry, low production efficiency and possibility of new industries and growth pointes generated being hindered significantly.

Ways of Inheritance and Protection of Qiang Straw Plaiting Handicraft Technique

As one of our country's traditional folk techniques, Qiang straw plaiting has rich cultural foundation as its base and very high aesthetic pleasure and economic value to add on with. Such "treasure" requires immediate protection and inheritance, be it from the perspective of emotions or value.

Enhance Market Promotion, Establish Brand Effect

Although craft factory centered around Qiang straw plaiting has already been established in as early as the last century and adopted commercial model to operate plaiting and selling of plaited products, sending them into the global market with quire optimistic economic results and somewhat built a brand image, with the change in times and technology, Qiang straw plaiting still has room for improvement in terms of its brand awareness and uniqueness as it develops until this day. It should also take advantage of the One Belt One Road development strategy and the Plan on Revitalizing China's Traditional Crafts as well as the radiation effect of the northern bay economic zone, make full use of its regional advantage, strengthen the integration of regional high-quality resources, explore and innovate on its own characteristics, pay special attention to brand building.

Market forms where crowds gather. From as big as companies to as small as individual merchants, everyone is seeking how to obtain maximized market profit while minimizing investment. This requires us to find the optical promotion path while following the current trend closely and to establish brand effect. As of now, the Internet is obviously the major trend in development of companies and economy. With its advantages of fast circulation speed, large scale and long duration of impact, the publicity department of company can cooperate with new media and we-media platforms and advertise in the form of advertorial; establish long-term cooperation relationship with third-party online shopping platforms with strong authority and high safety coefficient, put premade warming up advertisement in the advantageous section; design apartment of company to conduct collection of opinion on plaited products from targeted customer group; ensure good after-sales service and regularly organize events for users with high product stickiness, for example: scheduled benefits, personal customization, offline meeting events, push previews, etc.

Enhance Integration of Culture and Tourism, Organize Regional Resources

Our country possesses rich cultural tourism resources, Beichuan regional tourism administration can encourage and combine the unique local Qiang straw plaiting technique with modern tourism and innovate tourism products with culture as its foundation. Resources such as hotel rooms, dining, entertainment and attractions nearby should also be positively organized to build an architectural complex integrating sightseeing, display and experience and Beichuan Qiang straw plaiting culture experience zone, offering one-stop quality service and consumer advice. The five aspects of integration in the progress of future culture-tourism integration can also be achieved with the help of tourism, namely, the integration of agency, place, form of business, product and management. To fully utilize the value of cultural tourism resources and add the original ethnic characteristic to modernization, to allow tourism, entertainment and shopping to integrate into traffic and dining culture, aesthetic regional characteristic etc., so that culture can become more experienceable and valuable at tourism sites, to solve existing problems in some developed tourist area such as over-exploitation, inadequate planning etc. and solve the problem of attractions being too artificial and commercial.

Strengthen Innovation, Enhance Cultural Connotation

Through research, it was found that most of the straw plaited products in the market have rather conservative designs with much room for development in the future. It is urgent to ensure innovation and research are done well, too break the stereotype that current products may bring consumers and to expand consumer groups. Design workers should start with the emotional experience from customers' feedback based on the original cultural connotation of Qiang straw plaiting and explore, utilize the cultural elements and concept underneath the product design so as to design more diverse

and modern patterns, to enrich the theme and types of product for the traditional technique. They should also follow the international trend in color closely and catch up with current fashion in order to design colors that fit the modern perception of beauty better. The inheritors should be encouraged to explore new techniques and methods that can be integrated with the regional cultural characteristic and showcase the ethnic style while learning relative knowledge. Lowering the involvement of process by hand may not be sufficient to overcome the challenge in the possibility of developing new products in the future. The design and manufacture level must be improved as well as brand reputation, to further consolidate market share so as to stay in a advantageous position among future competitors with the same style.

Enhance Integration of Qiang Straw Plaiting Culture and Local Aesthetic and Moral Education

Qiang straw plaiting handicraft technique is the essence of wisdom of working people in the Beiqiang area through their long-term production and daily life with rich spiritual and cultural significance. Qiang straw plaiting culture and local aesthetic and moral education should be integrated, bring straw plaiting culture into the classrooms and conduct hands-on straw plaiting activities etc. so that with straw plaiting resources as the medium, teenagers can feel the charm of intangible cultural heritage, Qiang straw plaiting and be immersed in the local outstanding traditional culture, to form an aesthetics and moral education system with regional characteristics. The immersion in traditional Qiang straw plaiting culture can help teenagers cultivate their morality and mind, enhance learning and hardworking spirit, improve their perception of beauty and ability to judge, so that they can build a correct view of life and value. Meanwhile, the integration of traditional straw plaiting culture into local education system can allow more people access to the straw plaiting technique with unique regional characteristic and enlarge the group of coverage which is beneficial for the inheritance and development of straw plaiting handicraft technique.

Build the "Internet + Qiang Straw Plaiting" Protection Mechanism

The development and widespread application of digital technology has created new paths for the inheritance and protection of intangible cultural heritage. The straw plaiting technique should also follow the trend closely in terms of inheritance and protection, respond actively to government policies, establish the "Internet + Qiang straw plaiting" mechanism, make full use of the optimization and integration effect that internet has on distribution of social resources, optimize and upgrade traditional industries and create new development opportunities for the straw plaiting industry. Integrate the results of internet innovation into sectors of economy and society, help traditional industries get used to social development in new norms, push for progress in society and help promote inheritance and protection of Qiang straw plaiting. Firstly, digital technology can be utilized to

build a platform for protection, display, communication and dissemination. Digitalize Qiang straw plaiting resources and turn the traditional straw plaiting technique and products into digital and visual resources for learning, communication and innovative research. Break constraints of region, time and place and allow researchers and workers to be able to learn, communicate and research on Qiang straw plaiting knowledge in a faster and more convenient manner so that the audience group can be expanded at the same time. Secondly, we can utilize the current trend of digital simulation technology, use vritual reality technology to build the scenarios for production of Qiang straw plaited products. Those who are interested or work in the industry can learn about the plaiting technique through online platforms, widen the paths of inheritance on the basis of traditional methods of inheritance which is also beneficial for the making of more successors.

Conclusion

Qiang straw plaiting is a physical carrier of wisdom from the Qiang people. It showcases Qiang people's living habits and folk customs. However, as times change, with the shock from the intense change in public perception of beauty and product needs, inheritance and protection of Qiang straw plaiting are faced with many challenges. In order to inherit and innovate the traditional handicraft technique, we must enhance discussion on ways of inheritance and protection of Qiang straw plaiting handicraft technique, widen protection paths, enrich ways of inheritance and increase the influence of the traditional handicraft technique.

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