

• Cultural China Series

Jin Zhilin  
**Chinese  
Folk Arts**

*Translated by Jin Bei*



CHINA  
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*Jin Zhilin*

*Translated by Wang Dehua*

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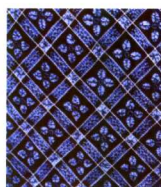
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# China's Cultural Heritage and Folk Arts

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, a loess plateau on the middle to upper stream of the Yellow River. This was the home base for my research on Chinese folk art. Rich with glorious historical culture, this place had kept its long-standing cultural tradition due to generations of self-enclosed culture and years of underdeveloped transportation. As a result, the native Chinese culture was by and large well maintained. In my 13 years working in the Yan'an Primary Art Museum and the Commission of Antiques Management, I had the chance to conduct on-site research in folk art, folk custom and culture, and an overall study and exploration of archaeological culture. The first-hand study of folk culture and customs, as well as its intersection with archaeological culture and historical/legendary documents, helped me get in-depth in the study of Chinese cultural and philosophical origins. From there, I went on to the Yangtze River valley,



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



the Liaohe basin, and the Pearl River valley, then covered the entire country from Xinjiang to Shandong to Taiwan, from Heilongjiang to Hainan Island. In the 1990s, I 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. Putting Chinese folk culture and its cultural and philosophical origin against the larger cultural background of all mankind, I shifted my study to mankind's common cultural consciousness, and the original features of individual national cultures and philosophies.

When I reached the mountain village on the loess plateau, I found Chinese folk arts in the forms of paper-cutting, embroidery and floury flower 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 fairies. 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” code from the 6000-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 of the god of life and propagation, a symbol of with supernatural power.

Likewise, the color painting “Dancing dolls,” with five babies hand-in-hand on painted pottery from the 5000-year-old Majiayao culture unearthed in Qinghai Province on the middle-upper reaches of the Yellow river, is also a popular paper-cut in today's folk art and customs. The five dolls (representing fairies from five directions – east, west, north, south and the center) are regarded as patron saints of the baby with coiled hair, who drives away evil spirits. The excavated antiques couldn't speak, but the 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 5000-6000 years ago.

After the Yellow river basin, I went on to the Yangtze river valley. When my journey reached Ping Village in the Hunan and Jiangxi countryside, mid-stream in the Yangtze River, the culture of exorcism was ubiquitous and overwhelming. There was an Exorciser (old temple for



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



exorcism) every 5 *li* (2.5 kilometers); and a General (old temple 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 opened up the mountain at the beginning of the world. Once again, I felt lost in a world of totem culture going back into the ancient times.

According to historical record, this area used to be the center of the San Miao Jiu Li tribe headed by Chi You. Members of this tribe were known to wear bronze ox horn totem masks to appear as ox heads in human bodies. This was confirmed by the excavation of ox-horn bronze masks and the mould in the area. Later, when I was in Miao Village 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 Chi You, the humanized god wearing ox-head on a human body, was their ancestor. His home was originally in the Hunan and Jiangxi area. In the wake of a defeat against the Yan Huang tribe, the Miao tribe migrated through a number of different regions to arrive in Guizhou. The fact that there was no exorciser temple in Guizhou, nor unearthed bronze ox-horn masks and porcelain bases, proves this historical legend.

Existing customs are like live fossils in the study of Chinese cultural origins, and more specifically, Chinese folk art. 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. In the event that no antiques are unearthed or no historical are available, the study becomes suspended. As one of the four 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 cultural relics, even those from ancient times, are still preserved in today's folk art, customs and culture. 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 outside world. As a result, Chinese culture and philosophy in their original tribal forms, such as represented in folk art, can still be found in today's society and cultural life. Buried antiques cannot speak, but the living antiques speak for themselves.

As the fountain spring of the ideologies of a hundred schools of thought during the period of the Spring and Autumn War period, the original Chinese philosophical system continues to be the ideological base and core content 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 the working class masses of 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 the longest history and the richest historical sources, and of all cultures, considers itself the most widely



*Hong Shan culture "Yu Zhu Long" (Jade Dragon with a Pig Head) from the primitive society.*



shared and the most geographically distinct. Its cultural implication and art form accumulate a historical culture of over 7000-8000 years dating back to primitive society. Its values extend far beyond the art itself; it embodies values deeply rooted in philosophy, aesthetics, art, archaeology, history, and the study of the social sciences, the humanities, and nations. Chinese folk art also exhibits the entire nation's philosophical viewpoint, cultural ideology, emotional and psychological makings.

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. Simplified, yin-yang revolves around the belief that the composition of yin-yang creates life, which, through propagation, never ends. This is the view of the universe in original Chinese philosophy, first developed in primitive society 6000-7000 years ago. 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 origin. Chinese folk art is an example of such cultural inheritance. This book will thus introduce and interpret folk art from that perspective.



## • • • • • Six Characteristics of Chinese Folk Arts • • • • •

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



Looking back on history 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 key in driving forward the mainstream of 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 the 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 taboos.
3. Its cultural implication and art forms are comprehensive of the world view of the community, their aesthetics, their emotional and psychological

characteristics and national spirit. It reflects the system of philosophy, art and color composition in the original Chinese culture. Some popular categories include paper-cutting; floury flower; dress and ornament; embroidery; dye and knitting; exorciser related masks and customs; painting; New Year picture; leather silhouette; puppet; toy; kite; paper folding and lighting art; folk theatrical mask; chess; puzzle; pottery; engraving; residential building; vehicle decoration; household appliance; etc.

4. It is a sector of Chinese parent art. Emerged in primitive society, Chinese folk art inherited the cultural tradition of national literature and art development throughout each and every period in a history of over several thousand years.

5. It is distinctively characterized by individual nationality and geographical region.

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

In sum, folk art is a unique sector among Chinese national art that enjoys the most popularity and with the richest resource of historical culture. It is directly embedded in people's every day life and best characterized by the geographical region it represents. It is a long-standing, signature art form of Chinese nation with over 8000 years of history and cultural progress going all the way back to primitive society. From the worship of nature, totem and ancestor; to the urban residence culture of modern capitalist commodity economy; the cultural identity of each historical period is recognizable in single piece of art work in some cases. It is truly a living fossil and a museum of national historical culture.

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

Firstly, the notion to characterize Chinese folk art as "willful creations." I disagree. Willfulness can be found in Chinese paintings, art work and art style 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.

Secondly, "change of appearance" is the basic feature. I disagree. Change of appearance is not an exclusive technique employed in Chinese folk art. It is used by career artists too. In modern art, the style of changing appearance 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 the original Chinese philosophical comprehension, art system and



its aesthetic view, apart from the art of Chinese professionals, and intrinsically different from the fashionable trend in modern western art.

Thirdly, learning from folk art, some professional artist created some art works with folk art style. They tend to characterize the work as folk art and label themselves as folk artists. It is actually a mis-conception that overlooked the fact that folk art is the art of the working class people. It is created by a group of massive laborers to serve the needs of their own social life. Even those art work did bear the artistic effect of folk art; it is still modern art by professional artists.

Fourthly, folk art differentiates from folk arts and crafts. The arts and crafts is a sector of folk art involving intensive craftsmanship, some are even consummate products. Folk art may not all have the same value or the craftsmanship as arts and crafts. They are two parts of the same category.

Lastly, folk art and folk custom art. Folk custom is the carrier of folk art.

We speak of folk art from the angle of art; whereas folk custom art is in the view of the custom.



# The Core of Chinese Folk Arts



Folk social customs are the carriers of Chinese folk art which has numerous categories and a variety of art forms. However, despite all the categories and forms on the outside, the core lies within the basic cultural consciousness of the people and the original Chinese philosophy.



## Life and Propagation – an All-time Theme

To live and to continue life through propagation are the two instinctive desires of humans. From birth, a person's first instinct is to survive, then to live a long life. However, life and death are immutable laws of nature. Therefore, they turned to seek perpetuity after life, praying for longevity for the living, and perpetuity for the dead. Since the eternity of life could only be achieved through propagation, producing children and grandchildren to pass on life from generation to generation became the ultimate goal. Thus, human perception of propagation was the same as their perception of life itself. Propagation of people and harvesting of crops were deemed as good fortune. In this way, fortune and longevity became the basic cultural consciousness of the people, which was also the main theme of folk art.

Chinese folk art and Chinese philosophy are unified in the belief that yin-yang produces all living things on earth and all living things stay alive through propagation. Originated in Chinese primitive society, this was the philosophical explanation of human's perception of life and propagation. Chinese ancestor's philosophical conclusion was to "look at oneself up close and other creatures from afar." Observing one's own life in this manner would lead to the understanding of other living things on earth. This conclusion had been the essential cultural understanding of the primitive art to the folk art of the nation.

With the coming of property ownership and intellectual development, the society began to be divided into the governing class and the governed. Class society was established. The majority of material and intellectual valuables were