

# Exploring the cultural value of folk handicrafts in the Wuling Mountains

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**Abstract:** Folk handicrafts in the Wuling Mountains are a combination of material and spiritual attributes, the physical product of the society, culture and customs of the region, and a practical folk art that could ensure the survival of villagers during the farming period in the Wuling Mountains. This paper attempts to reconnoitre and explore folk crafts from the perspective of exploring the cultural value of handicrafts. By fully exploiting the advantages of traditional ethnic handicrafts, the paper aims to find a new way out of the handicraft heritage.

**Keywords:** Wuling Mountains, folk crafts, cultural values

## 1. Introduction

Folk crafts are an important part of people's social life in the context of traditional farming culture, carrying the economic and cultural aspirations that people rely on for their livelihoods, and have remained stable and constant for thousands of years. The Wuling Mountains, centred on the Wuling Mountains and bordered by Hubei, Hunan, Chongqing and Guizhou provinces, are a multi-ethnic region inhabited by the Tujia, Miao and Dong peoples. The altitude is mostly between 700 and 2,000 metres, with high mountains and steep slopes and deep gorges. During the agrarian civilisation, villagers of various ethnic groups made full use of their own survival wisdom to develop their own special handicrafts according to their own needs and local realities, thus carrying vivid regional and ethnic characteristics and life atmosphere, and involving various aspects such as clothing, food, housing and transportation. The folk crafts of the Wuling Mountains are practical folk skills that were used to ensure the survival of villagers during the farming period in the Wuling Mountains, and are an important part of local culture and a concrete expression of the civilisation of the countryside.

## 2. Current status of folk crafts in the Wuling Mountains

The special geographical location and environment of the Wuling Mountains has created a relatively closed geographical unit and natural ecology, which not only provides the possibility for the creation and transmission of ethnic culture, but also prepares a unique growth environment for the breeding of ethnic folk culture. During the farming period, villagers had to rely on traditional handicrafts to meet their needs in life and production. Therefore, all villagers in the ethnic villages of the Wuling Mountains, both men and women, have certain handicraft skills based on their survival needs, and they give full play to their individual wisdom to create their own unique traditional handicrafts according to their geographical environment, raw materials and ethnic customs, which greatly facilitates and enriches the lives of the villagers and creates a unique culture of the ethnic villages of the Wuling Mountains, pushing the ethnic villages in the region forward in step with the times development[1].

As a practical folk art, it ensures the most basic survival needs of villagers in the Wuling Mountains. As a product of agrarian civilisation, traditional handicrafts were an important means by which people made objects and tools, transformed nature and created material life during the long period of agrarian society. [2] It is an important part of vernacular culture and a concrete expression of the degree of civilisation in the countryside. Different regions and ethnic groups in the region have developed handicraft skills with distinctive regional and ethnic characteristics, taking into account their own needs. However, under the impact of modern industrial civilisation and diversified cultures, commodities have replaced the natural economy and the traditional agricultural civilisation has fragmented, and the folk crafts of the Wuling Mountains have been exposed to an awkward situation in the process. Not only has

the traditional way of life of the villagers been changed, but the traditional skills and handicrafts adapted to traditional life have also lost their living environment. Traditional artisans have had to abandon skills that have been passed down from generation to generation in order to earn a living. In addition, due to the comfort of the external environment and high income, the new generation is unwilling to pass on their traditional skills, and the traditional crafts that have accompanied generations of villagers in the Wuling Mountains are gradually declining.

### 3. The value of folk crafts

The folk crafts of the Wuling region are the product of the specific life of the region, and the form and content of their products reflect the characteristics of the regional and national culture, representing the national folk cultural traits, thus constituting the individual characteristics of the folk crafts and gaining the value space for survival in the region. Folk crafts have an inseparable relationship with the life of the Wuling Mountains. Folk crafts such as the art of building hanging foot buildings, broccoli weaving and bamboo weaving are all products of the lives of the Tujia and Miao people, who have adapted to their environment. The mountain climate and rural farming life of the folk crafts are a mirror of human social and cultural life, and they encompass all aspects of human social life. The value of folk crafts in the Wuling region carries the collective memory of national culture, and the value is reflected in three aspects, namely the practical value, the spiritual concepts embedded in them and the institutional patterns of behaviour.

#### 3.1. Practical value

The earliest human creations were based on practical purposes. By adding aesthetic culture to the process of making and using things, folk art takes on both spiritual and material attributes. As an outstanding folk art and cultural heritage, the folk crafts of the Wuling Mountains have a special historical and cultural value, and their beauty is derived from their practical function, based on the practicality of their purpose. The principle of practicality is followed, whether it be in the form of food, clothing, production or household utensils, the principle of practicality must be met first and foremost. Most of the handicrafts are not too expensive, sometimes even simple, but this simplicity meets all the needs of everyday people. Because of their simplicity and practicality, they lend themselves to mass creation and are at the same time accepted and used by the widest possible range of people.

Taking the Tujia window pane as an example, the window pane is one of the more striking focal points in the hanging houses of the Enshi region. Thousands of years of historical changes, the development of social productivity and the continuous progress of civilization have produced corresponding changes in people's lifestyles and aesthetic concepts. As the most basic element in architecture - the window pane - plays an important role. The decorative components of the window pane became an important part of the decoration of the house. The working people of the Enshi region created the window pane decorative art according to the special geographical and natural environment of the region and their own ideology, and the little changes in the window pane decoration gave the hanging foot building a more vivid image and increased the artistic ornamental value of the building. The design and application of the window pane not only fits the characteristics of the hanging foot tower, but also gives the tower more flexibility and makes the whole tower more complete and harmonious. The window pane decorative art of the Enshi region has become a vivid carrier of Tujia culture, reflecting the rich cultural characteristics of this region.

Some of the window pane shapes are simple and generous, while others are elaborate and exquisite. Generally, they are made up of several parts, such as the deng Fang, the window Fang, the window frame, the side bars and the window heart, and are mainly made of mortise and tenon interlocking structures. The traditional hanging building in the Enshi region has a pierced structure as the most basic frame structure. The pierced square connects the rows of columns into a fan frame, which is then connected with the square and purlins, of which the various parts are connected with the mortise and tenon structure, so that the load-bearing wall is separated from it, and it only assumes the function of dividing space and defensive security. As a result, the window pane has taken over the role of part of the wall. In the special position of the hanging building, it becomes the focus of decoration and is at the centre of the vision, gradually changing from a non-aesthetic function to an aesthetic one. This is reflected in the design of the window pane, the carving technique and the content of the subject matter, and the wise carpenters' endless imagination created exquisite window panes.

The basic function of the window pane in the Enshi is security and defence, light, ventilation and

space division in one, which is the most natural expression of the window pane in the decorative structure. The main function of the window pane in everyday life is security and defence, as it is a semi-enclosed fence that not only shields people from view, but also keeps out the wind and cold in adverse conditions. The wall and window pane play a role in dividing the space, isolating the interior from the exterior and dividing the interior space, making the layout of the space staggered. Light and ventilation is one of the most basic functions of a window pane. The window panes in the Enshu region make the most of this role by using staggered latticework, which not only helps to absorb light but also facilitates the circulation of air, with sufficient hollow areas to allow the air to flow freely and improve the quality of air purification inside the room.

In addition to its most basic function, the window pane in the Enshi region also serves a status and aesthetic purpose. These motifs are based on the specific economic situation of the owner's family, and the more affluent families usually adopt elaborate motifs, which not only require more work time, but also increase the amount of manpower and financial resources, which is beyond the means of the average family. Exquisitely carved window panes would only be found in the rich and powerful families. In window pane decoration, beyond the satisfaction of the basic practical function, the pursuit of the aesthetic function of the spiritual aspect has to enter a higher level. These decorative motifs were not created for the sake of decoration, but were created by the local people in the context of the special cultural and geographical environment of the region, reflecting people's aspirations for a better life and the traditional cultural values of the region. It is not only for the sake of survival, but also for the sake of spiritual art and aesthetics, bringing spiritual enjoyment and spirituality.

There is no more prominent traditional conceptual awareness in the architectural decoration culture of the Tujia family than the 'concept of auspiciousness', which is an aspiration and pursuit gradually formed by the Tujia people on the basis of long-term social practice and a specific psychology. [3] The spiritual outlook of the Tujia people of Enshi is symbolically expressed in the window pane through the organisation of various imagery, floral patterns and auspicious characters. The various floral patterns decorating the window pane are full of worldly pleasures and reflect the pursuits and aspirations of the Tujia people, and auspicious characters such as fu, lu, shou and xi have also become an ideal pursuit. The appearance of harmonic auspicious objects such as bats, white tigers and ancient copper coins makes the window pane a carrier of an artistic language, with words as the main body, reflecting the people's wish for only a happy and good life. The window pane motifs of the Ensh region embody a variety of cultural connotations such as cultural rituals and artistic programming, and they are used in window pane decoration with conventional imagery, which not only reflects a high level of artistic creativity, but also contains the rich cultural heritage of the Tujia people of the Ensh region.

### **3.2. Spirituality**

Handicrafts themselves carry the most orthodox traditional Chinese culture, which is both material and spiritual, so naturally they have become one of the important carriers of cultural identity today. [4] Traditional crafts have both material and spiritual attributes, which are expressed in the materials, techniques, colours, graphics and the folklore of their composition, which form the basis of spiritual symbols. The objects produced by traditional crafts are integrated into the production and life of local people and become an important part and expression of labour, life and recreation, and are constructed through verbal and non-verbal symbols after a long period of historical precipitation. Carpenters, for example, use a variety of symbols and rituals to communicate their skills, ideas and thoughts in the process of construction. The folk crafts of the Wuling Mountains are highly representative and rich in connotation, as the spiritual materialisation of a people and region that has been precipitated over a long period of history.

The "five-foot" is a measuring tool often used by carpenters in the Tujia region for building houses. It was one of the most commonly used and important measuring tools before the first leather rulers, tape measures and other tools came into existence, and was needed on many occasions. It was not just a simple measuring tool in the minds of the carpenters, but also a "talisman" to ward off evil spirits.

The five foot is made up of three main parts, its basic structure and components are mainly: the body, the base and the hanging ring. By way of unit conversion one ruler is approximately 0.33 metres, and five feet is approximately 1.6 metres. The body of the five feet is a four-sided mahogany stick. The outer square of the five feet is one inch wide, and the bare wooden part is five feet long, accurate to the minute on the basis of the ruler.

The primary use of the five feet was as a measure, accurate to the minute, not only for tall trees and

beams, but also for smaller parts. The second use of the five feet was as a measure of the master's ability to pass on the job to the apprentice. When the apprentice had completed three years of study and was due to leave the school, the master would hold a ceremony. During the ceremony the apprentice would kneel in front of the master and receive the five feet, the ink bucket and the axe from him.

The beliefs of the carpenters have an important role in guiding their actions and words, and the ancestor Lu Ban has a high status in the minds of carpenters. The carpenter's lessons were followed and worshipped during the construction of the house, and the five feet were the symbol and embodiment of Lu Ban. The five feet also had an important role to play when the beams were put on the house, before the beams were put up they would stand in the middle and be covered with red cloth, and when the beams were officially put up, the five feet would also be used as a temporary crutch to support the carpenter's ability to put up the beams. The five feet are engraved with the words "The Divine Position of the Immortal Master Lu Ban", a tribute to Lu Ban. Formally this is based on the admiration, worship and respect for the carpenter's trade, which makes the five feet very sacred in the carpenter's mind, with the spiritual connotation of respect for the teacher in hand.

The five rulers are not only the result of the wisdom of the carpenters, but each one of them, each wooden object, incorporates the common aspirations of the Tujia people for a better life, a small five ruler contains a high aesthetic sense of the public, and also contains a very important part of the culture with national and folkloric characteristics. The various characters and inscriptions on the five feet are an expression of the carpenter's beliefs and wishes for a good life, expressing the pursuit and aspiration for life.

### ***3.3. The behavioural system model.***

The behavioural and institutional model of folk crafts is one that encompasses the way in which folk crafts are passed on, the system and the management. The mode of inheritance of traditional folk crafts is mostly the traditional master relationship, or the mode of transmission from son to father, mother to daughter, etc., using intuitive forms such as oral transmission or on-site practice. The development of folk crafts has long been in the mode of spontaneous management, and although it does not have a strictly compulsory system of regulation, it has formed an agreed self-management method, and under the established folklore and cultural conventions, a relatively stable code of conduct has been formed for folk craftsmen to follow.

The Tujia people, who have lived in the Wuling Mountains for generations, regard the building of a house as one of the most important events in their lives, and the folk artists have to follow the rituals inherited from generations of craftsmen in the process of building a house. The most central and important part of the building process is the building of the beams. The process of building the beams not only demonstrates the exquisite craftsmanship of the folk artists and the programmed building rituals, but also highlights the strong regional characteristics of the Tujia people and reflects the national spirit of the Tujia. This agreed code of conduct is not only a channel for the Tujia people to express their emotions, but also a carrier of the Tujia folk beliefs and a rich cultural connotation of the Tujia people. In the course of their long history and through the lessons they have learned, the Tujia people have developed a spirit of mutual harmony between man and man, man and nature, and have incorporated optimism and open-mindedness into their national beliefs.

## **4. Contemporary Transmutation of Folk Crafts in the Wuling Mountains**

### ***4.1. A change in the mindset of craftspeople***

From the folk craft making real with the change of social environment, the shift of consumer groups, local crafts in order to be more competitive in the market, for more profit space, they began to shift to conscious creation, more concerned about their own value, the main body of consciousness gradually awakened. Traditional handicrafts have gradually revealed some of their own drawbacks as the times go by. In reality, folk crafts have been marginalised for a long time. [5] With the change in the mindset of local craftsmen, they themselves are changing their creations and accepting and learning to use the Internet to strengthen the publicity of their own products and skills so that more people can understand them. They are better able to improve their status and fame, use the Internet to expand the scope of their attention and the number of orders they can obtain, diversify their means of income and gradually improve their situation of survival. Begin to actively seek out markets and adapt to them, targeting consumer preferences and shifting from a focus on traditional practical functions to aesthetic ones.

#### 4.2. Borrowing of handicraft elements

The soil for the survival of traditional handicrafts has changed, and is no longer the traditional conscious and spontaneous production, but has a more obvious mark of commercialisation. The original folklore connotations have been dissolved to varying degrees due to the social environment, cultural trends, consumer groups, market demand and other factors. Craftspeople have thus changed in the process of creation, actively exploring the possibility of creating handicraft products with regional cultural characteristics, and at the same time actively exploring the possible ways of integrating traditional culture with modern market demand. In response to the changing times, craftspeople are changing the content and style of their creations, drawing on the traditional strengths of their own handicraft skills and combining them with new market demands to improve on the original handcrafted elements in terms of form, symbols, patterns and colours in order to meet the needs of the market. At the same time, we are using internet technology to update more materials, to reproduce and improve them, and to make changes in sales and display channels.

#### 4.3. Change of form technique

The change in consumption patterns and objects of consumption has prompted the handicraft market to move from utilitarian consumption to aesthetic consumption. Consumers seek refinement and creativity and want handicrafts to be rich in character and taste, which requires traditional crafts to adapt to consumers' purchasing needs. Therefore, how to use traditional handicrafts for contemporary expression needs to be explored from multiple dimensions such as materials, forms and techniques, seeking more possibilities. The transformation of traditional techniques and the integration of new methods will lead to innovative handicraft products.

In recent years, the country has been promoting the revitalization of the countryside on all fronts, and the natural, social and cultural aspects of the countryside are undergoing major transformations, with local and foreign discourses continuing to collide, and the folk art ecology undergoing a large-scale deconstruction and reconstruction. As an important cultural carrier and industrial resource, folk handicrafts in the Wuling Mountains have an important social significance in the context of the development of cultural and creative industries and the protection of "non-heritage", as well as the return of the "artisan" spirit.

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