

Discussion on Intangible Culture Features of Mongolian Traditional Furniture

Xin-hong ZHANG^{1,a,*}

¹306 Zhao wuda Rd, Saihan District, Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, China
Inner Mongolia Agricultural University

^azxh@imau.edu.cn

Keywords: Mongolian Traditional furniture, Intangible Culture, Features.

Abstract. Most of Mongolian traditional furniture is decorated by colorful motifs on surfaces, have the ornament components, and have box-shaped forms. The types of motifs are encompassed animal figures, plant figures, geometrical shape, and other shapes. The decoration style, structures and workmanship of the Mongolian traditional furniture, are changing gradually. On the view of intangible culture heritage, intangible culture features of Mongolia traditional furniture could be distinguished as: the culture self-identity, culture sharing between different regions, and the culture transition, et al.

Introduction

The study of Mongolian traditional furniture began at the end of 20th. At that time, researchers did some field works within nomadic region of northeast Inner Mongolia. Though the region limited the sample amount, they found the main structures what distinguish from other nations' furniture. No more developing study till the beginning of 21th. With the publishing of convention for the safeguarding of the intangible culture heritage in 2003, most of the traditional cultures were valued again, and the researches of Mongolian furniture arose in successive as well. The main achievements as the following:

The Types of the Mongolian Traditional Furniture

Mongolian traditional furniture includes seats, beds, tables, and furniture used for storage. Furniture used for seat has many styles: stools, chairs, high platforms, thrones, folding stools. And beds include folding beds, demountable beds, fixed beds, Ta [1]. The tables are used for worship, dining, drinking tea, reading and writing [2]. Storage furniture is known as cabinets, trunks, boxes [3].

The Ornament of the Mongolian Traditional Furniture [4]

Most of traditional Mongolian furniture is decorated by colorful motifs on surfaces, which encompass animal figures, plant figures, geometrical shapes, and other meaningful shapes. Mongolian traditional furniture has small ornamental afflicted components. Craftsmen color-paint and engrave motifs, or sometimes inlay bone, shell or other hardwood piece on the ornaments' surface.

The Structure of the Mongolian Traditional Furniture

Mortise and tenon is generally used as Mongolian traditional furniture joint method. Since leather is accessible among the grassland, leather pieces or leather straps used on Mongolian furniture as connection or component. Fresh leather could shrink when it is left in a dryer environment. Craftsmen use the half-dry leather straps expertly to

fasten wood structures. Figure 1 shows chairs that mainly use the mortise and tenon as the structure and use waved leather straps lacing through the holes underneath the frames as the seat surface. The folding structure is very common to apply on cabinets or folding beds. Some square-shape tables can be folded as well, however, not the same folding structure used on beds and cabinets. Figure 2 shows the popular folding structure, normally the two sides of the cabinet can be folded back and flattened on the inside of the body.

The Study on Nomadic Features of the Mongolian Traditional Furniture

Nomadic life style stamped a significant feature on traditional Mongolian furniture. The resident used local materials such as using pine trees as the major material, and used leather, felt, bones as auxiliary material. Furniture was settled inside the yurt, the movable house by the nomadic Mongolians. As to herding animals need follow along river and higher grass, the yurt should be detached, folded, and be carried to another campsite. Most of the furniture used in yurt has box-shaped forms, that are easy to stack in piles and band together. The folded furniture could save most of the rooms when moving to another campsite on the vehicle-- Lele Che[5].



Fig 1. Tenon and leather strap on chair



Fig 2. Folding structure

Intangible Culture Features of Mongolian Traditional Furniture

Intangible culture heritage, According to the definition by “convention for the safeguarding of the intangible culture heritage (2003)”, is included especially in five domains: oral traditions and expressions; performing arts; social practices; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; traditional craftsmanship[6]. The traditional Mongolian furniture craftsmanship is combined traditional skill, which is included the decoration design skill, carpentry, painting skill, the tool and Mongolians aesthetics concept. From the research achieves in recent years, the culture changing and developing of the Mongolian furniture could be seen.

Culture Self Recognizing

Mongolian people look Mongolian furniture as part of their culture. Mongolian furniture research experienced a slow developing period from the outset, most of the scholars stand on the opposite side, they announced that there was no Mongolian furniture. Or in their view, Mongolian furniture was not belonging to authenticity culture. There were some reasons caused the bias, such as the worse developed road construction, the obstacle of the language. But the main point of this bias was the similar workmanship and alike appearances with that of some other nationalities.

This viewpoint could not replace the view of Mongolian people. Intangible culture should be recognized as part of their culture by the communities, groups and

individuals themselves. During the evolution of history, Mongolians inherited the culture from ancestors who lived in the Mongolian plateau, they also learned skills from other nationalities whom they related to. They identify these culture what they had possessed. They also create some decoration culture which they satisfied, such as the “five-animal”, what is a set of shapes including horse, cattle, sheep, goat, camel. These five kinds of livestock are closely bounded up with their daily life. This set of animal could be decorated individually or as a whole on the furniture. The culture self recognizing is settled within their minds, where the bystanders would not understand legibly.

Culture Diffusion between Regions

From northeast to southwest in Inner Mongolia, color habits and the motifs of Mongolian furniture are apparent different. Nevertheless Mongolian furniture culture diffusion phenomenon still could be found, especially within the neighborhood regions. Mongolian inhabit densely in Inner Mongolia area, which appears a long and narrower shape from southwest to northeast on the map. There are more than twenties Mongolian tribes lived inside the area. In Qing dynasty, the government restricted the contact between Mongolian tribes. But culture diffusion vestige remained evidences in some historical pictures and antiques. Mongolian imitated cultures from the people who has higher social status among their community. Mongolian also learned and imitated what they experienced in Lama temple. Mongolian families were willing to make and decorate their furniture following the furniture styles in Lama temple. The high social levels and Lamas were acting as the culture messengers during that time. These cases happened in the past till the end of 1980s.

Initiative Culture Transition

Intangible culture could be constantly recreated as the communities, groups and individuals adapting themselves to their environment. Mongolian furniture is experiencing the constant transition. It would be viewed apparently from the changing of preference to motifs, styles and the simplification of craftsmanship.

Motifs. Compared the historic remains of Mongolian furniture with the Mongolian furniture nowadays, the amount of motifs has a decreasing tendency. For example, Mongolian preferred colorful table and cabinet which were painted with dragons, phoenixes, tigers, lions, deer, birds in the past. Now they are more willing to select the furniture engraved with abstract lines, curves or plants on the surface, and with a transparent lacquer layer coating.

Styles. The furniture style is changing with the modern needs. A large proportion of Mongolian traditional furniture in the yurt, is the storage furniture such as cabinets, trunks and cases. Cases used to pile clothes inside. Now the Mongolian youth get used to hang their clothes in cabinets not to pile them inside cases as before. Old style cabinets have two drawers up the doors (is shown in Fig3), which convenient to pick-and -place the cutlery and small stuffs. The craftsmen adjust the old style, they set the drawers at the bottom of the cabinet (is shown in Fig4), fix a round wooden stick on the top of cabinet body. So the height is easy for people to fetch the hanging clothes.

Craftsmanship. Mortise and tenon are traditional wooden furniture joint structure. There were no single metal joints in the antique Mongolian furniture. It takes time to saw tenon and drill mortise by hand. People use machine to make tenon and mortise instead of using handcraft tools in the contemporary era. When the hinge, invented to fix the flat panel furniture originally, become the main joint used on the solid wood

furniture, Mongolian has confirmed hinge used to install the door panels to the cabinet. The craftsmen also apply prefabricated dowels to replace the tenon and mortise joints to reduce the procedure of producing.



Fig3 Old style cabinet



Fig4 New style cabinet

Researcher's Attitude to the Changes

The researchers always need to hold a principle of respect or courtesy for all cultures. The researcher should not only adhere to probe the authenticity of the Mongolian furniture, though the discovery of culture authenticity full of challenge. Or researcher should not think the economical benefit above on the crafts culture. Respect the culture what the group or individual identified, no matter the researcher do as a participant or an observer. The culture what was record is a section throughout the history. Respect the culture and let it develop sustainable is the effective way to safeguard.

Conclusions

Mongolian traditional furniture is developing. The craftsmen use machine to improve work efficiency, apply hinges to simplify the producing skills. They modify the styles and structures to meet their needs in modern society, and select or reject the motifs which the ancient Mongolians appreciated to fulfill their aesthetic conceptions at present. These culture changing are occurred actively. Researchers could not manage these transitions of Mongolian furniture, because Mongolian groups have their own culture identification, they might share experience or learn new knowledge from neighbor communities or groups, and they might also reference culture from distant regions via internet. Holding a respect attitude is needed for the researchers, no matter to study Mongolian furniture or to approach Mongolians who recognize their furniture as part of their culture heritage.

References

- [1] Xin-hong Zhang, The Traditional Mongolian Furniture—Seats and Beds, China Forest Products Industry. 7 (2015) 50-52.
- [2] Xin-hong Zhang, The Traditional Mongolian Furniture—tables, China Forest Products Industry. 9 (2015) 55-57.
- [3] Xin-hong Zhang, The Traditional Mongolian Furniture Used for Storage, China Forest Products Industry. 11 (2015) 50-52.
- [4] Xin-hong Zhang, Research on Traditional Furniture's Ornament of Inner Mongolia, Beijing Forestry University Dissertation, 2006.

[5] Xin-hong Zhang, Features of Traditional Nomadic Mongolian Furniture, China Forest Products Industry. 3 (2015) 43-49.

[6] Information on <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/convention>, 17 October 2003, 32nd session.