

# Formation Factors of Modeling Characteristics of Xunxian Clay Coo

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**Abstract**—Xunxian clay coo is famous for its simple and smart modeling, rich and mysterious patterns and colorful colors. This thesis mainly elaborates the formation factors of the unique modeling characteristics of Xunxian clay coo from geographical conditions, historical culture, folk custom characteristics, religious belief and production methods of Henan Xunxian County.

**Keywords**—Xunxian County; clay coo; modeling; culture; folk custom

## I. INTRODUCTION

Clay coo in Xunxian County, Henan, is a kind of small folk clay sculpture with a wide range of themes, vivid and exaggerated modeling and colorful patterns. The clay coo in Xunxian County usually has a small hole in the tail, which can make a sound like "coo coo", so that the local people call it clay coo. In 2006, Xunxian clay coo has been listed in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage list. It is an artistic treasure of the Chinese nation and even the whole world. The formation of its modeling characteristics is inseparable from its unique geographical location, history, culture, folklore and religion. Xunxian clay coo is a true portrayal of people's lives, reflecting the simple thoughts and desires of Xunxian people who love life, advocate nature and pray for health.

## II. THE GEOGRAPHICAL FACTORS INFLUENCING THE FORMATION OF THE MODELING CHARACTERISTICS OF CLAY COO

Xunxian County is located in the northern part of Henan. It is located in the plain area. The folk style is simple, the climate is pleasant and the land is fertile. Both humanity and geography promote the flourishing development of farming civilization. It has been said the harvest of Liyang can meet the need of the whole country since ancient times. Xunxian County is also a famous historical and cultural city in China. It has a beautiful name of "the hometown of Chinese folk culture and art". It has very distinctive local characteristics in regional culture.

### A. The Regionality of Making Material

Xunxian County is located on the old way of the Yellow River, which belongs to the fluvial plain of the Yellow River.

The Yellow River not only breeds the land and the people, but also produces a unique clay material - bond clay. Every year in the spring or after the autumn, the local farmers begin to draw water from the Yellow River. The sediments come along with water of the Yellow River. The loess which has been washed from the upper reaches of the Loess Plateau will accumulate into a thick layer of clay on the side of the large canal or the river bank. The bond clay is located between two and four meters underground. It is formed by long-term filtration and accumulation during the erosion process. The bond clay is more suitable for making clay sculpture than ordinary yellow clay. After a long period of filtration and siltation, the color of the clay is mostly red, very fine and smooth, with less sand. It has large viscosity and very strong plasticity, and has the dry and unsplit characteristic. It is a superior material for making clay sculpture.

Every year after entering winter, every household in Xunxian County will dig clay on the edge of the river. After being taken home, they dry it and crush into powder. Mix cotton wadding, shredded paper pulp and hay stalk and water with clay power. Thrash, knead by hand and beat with stick to squeeze the remaining bubble in the wet mud which will swell and make clay coo deform or craze in drying. The bond clay will be more fine and smooth with good viscosity and not sticky by using this method to mix mud. It is more convenient for shaping, and the color becomes reddish. Because of its excellent characteristics, the clay sculpture made of it does not even to be baked by fire. Drying it naturally is ok. It is not easy to crack. It can be preserved for a long time. If it is put into a kiln for burning, the surface of clay coo becomes more fine and smooth after pottery. The color of the clay will be more warm and steady. It can be preserved for a long time, and the surface is easier to color, and the refinement of the clay coo and the bright color of the pigments can be preserved to the greatest extent.

Because of its high quality making materials and processing technology, the clay coo is more exquisite and easy to preserve, and is very excellent in all aspects. It can be able to pass through the long river of history and occupy a place in the numerous small folk clay sculptures.

### B. The Regional Uniqueness of Historical Themes

In the many types of themes of Xunxian clay coo, the theme of historical figures is very local and the typical

representative is "horse rider". The main reason for its formation is that Xunxian County has experienced two major battles during the Three Kingdoms and Sui and Tang Dynasties. One of them was the Battle of Guandu in the Three Kingdoms Period. In Macun, Xunxian County, Guan Yu went to Baima Mountain at that time. He rushed into the enemy and killed Yan Liang and defeated the army of Yuan, solving the trouble at Baima at that time. The other was in the Sui and Tang Dynasties. In Liyang, Xunxian County, the insurrectionary army of Wagang destroyed the enemy troops stationed in Liyang, and opened granary and released grain to save the local people who had struggled on the edge of the death. These two battles have rescued the people of Xunxian County from the calamidade. So in Chinese folk small clay sculpture theme, only Xunxian clay coo have such heroes. This also shows the people of Xunxian County from ancient times adored heroes and never forgot appreciation.

The image of "horse rider", created by Wang Xuefeng, the representative inheritor of the national intangible cultural heritage (Xunxian clay coo), is much exaggerated. He deliberately exaggerated the head and neck of the war horse, narrowed the torso and limbs, and ignored the details of the horses and heroes. Using this method to shape the image directly highlights the sturdiness of horse and the braveness of the warrior. The simple and unadorned limbs added a bit of interest, which was the charm of Xunxian clay coo in "Fig. 1".



Fig. 1. Xunxian clay coo – horse rider.

### III. THE FOLK CUSTOM FACTORS INFLUENCING THE FORMATION OF MODELING CHARACTERISTICS OF CLAY COO

The clay coo reflects the folklore of folk art in modeling, color or pattern decoration. The birth and development of a folk art and craft depend to a large extent on the cultural traditions and folk customs of the birthplace. Therefore, it will be more reasonable and convenient to study the modeling characteristics and connotation of Xunxian clay coo in the local cultural and ecological environment.

#### A. *The Influence of Folk Activities on the Formation of the Modeling Characteristics of Clay Coos*

1) *Temple fair in Xunxian County*: There are many famous historic sites around Xunxian County. In the south of the county is Dapi Mountain, and in the East and the West is Fuqiu Mountain. Many mountains attract many religious gatherings. It has become a cultural place where

Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism gather together. Therefore, the temple fair in Xunxian County came into being. Every year from the Lantern Festival to the end of lunar January, temples between the two mountains will hold a grand temple fair, commonly known as "Ancient Fair in Lunar January". The development of the temple fair in China has a long history. The development of the folk temple fair and the vicissitude of the rise and decline are a special social phenomenon. In the life of the villagers far away from the city, the temple fair has a very important influence. The underdevelopment of the rural traffic and communication leads to the economic block and the lag of information. As a result, the temple fair becomes the center of economic trade, cultural exchange and entertainment activities of rural people. People attach importance to various activities in temple fairs and enjoy various social functions of temple fair. The basic characteristics of temple fairs are mysticism, collectivism, entertainment, the unity of inheritance and variation. So, the people of Xunxian County sell the clay coo as a handmade commodity at the temple fair to cater to the mystery of the temple fair and to cater to the demand of market. The local craftsmen make a great change in the theme and shape of the clay coo, and add a lot of mythology to the image of the ordinary birds and the beasts, or create a lot of mythical beasts who are protectors of local peasants for good life and bumper harvest. These beasts mostly use torso of common animal, or many heads, or many limbs, and the style is mysterious, in bright color and sharp contrast, conforming to the pure imagination of the common people on monster. They are mysterious and interesting, weird but not scary. Both the old and the young prefer them. They are the crystallization of the wisdom of the traditional clay coo craftsmen in "Fig. 2".

2) *Community fire in Xunxian County*: From ancient times to now, there are a large number of community fire organizations in Xunxian County, and the culture of community fire has a long history. At first, people organized the community fire to sacrifice the gods and pray for good weather for the crops and long life and harvest year. With the change of society and ideology and culture, it gradually became the folk cultural activities of the people. In all kinds of cultural activities, Xunxian dancing lion is the most popular performance. Because of its festive and lively performance form, it entertains the leisure life of the working people of Xunxian County. The image of the dancing lion is deeply rooted in the hearts of people, and the clay sculpture handicraftsman of Xunxian County has added this image to the theme of the clay coo. In the shape, it continues the consistent modeling characteristic of clay coo with exaggerated head size and small limbs. The pattern of the head mainly used head pattern of dancing lion. It is arranged in the posture of prostrating on the ground and jumping. The neck is surrounded by a circle of white hair, and the color is rich and jumpy. It is very similar to the real dancing lion in the shape and the dynamic state. It is very vivid and cute in "Fig. 3".



Fig. 2. Xunxian clay coo - mythical beast.



Fig. 3. Xunxian clay coo - dancing lion.

#### B. The Folkways of Color

1) *Black favor custom*: Xunxian clay coo is one of the representatives of Henan's black-background clay sculpture. The background of traditional Xunxian coo generally is black no matter how bright the surface color is. It is closely related to the black favor tradition of the Central Plains. In the period of Xia State, the ruling class advocated black. The Xia State was the first tribal country in ancient China. It directly followed the black favor customs of the primitive society, and made black as an official color, and established a black favor dress color system. Xunxian County was at the core of the political economy in the Xia Dynasty, so at that time, the idea of "black favor" was deeply rooted in the hearts of the people and passed from generation to generation. Even today, some rural weddings in the Central Plains still retain the "black-painted" custom, which is a blessing to the new couple and their family and life. Therefore, the local artisans naturally

chose the black background for clay coo, following the tradition and increasing the mystery.

2) *Traditional color ideas - view of five colors*: In color selection, Xunxian clay coo mostly uses red, green, white and yellow. The choice of the five colors inherited the Chinese ancient traditional color philosophy concept. As for five colors, green represents the east; red the south; black the north; the heaven is mysterious and the earth is yellow. The mysterious comes from black, so there are five basic colors. Today in the basin areas of the Yellow River, some rural areas still use five-colored paper to cut paper or use five-colored lines to embroider shoes, mainly for sacrificing ancestors and exorcism and avoiding disaster. The color of folk art works is not realistic. It is different from what eyes see. It is abstract and perceptual. It needs some decorative, symbolic and symbolic features to meet the warm and simple expectation of the people of Xunxian County. So, the colors of clay coo are rich and strong with sharp cold and warm contrast. It used the adjacent color contrast between red and yellow and the complementary colors contrast of red and green, showing the brightness and satisfactory characteristic of clay coo and implying prosperous and hopeful life. Xunxian clay coo add decoration to the houses in the countryside while maintaining the local customs of the Central Plains. Xunxian County has a profound cultural history, which endows nature, society and life with different colors. The local people tend to be simply summed up as "auspicious", "harvest", "health", etc. in "Fig. 4".



Fig. 4. Xunxian clay coo.

#### IV. CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS FACTORS INFLUENCING THE MODELING CHARACTERISTICS OF CLAY COO

##### A. The Totem of Birds

In the last five thousand years of Chinese culture, totem culture is one of the oldest and most popular cultural phenomena. The totem culture is the cultural phenomenon of our ancestors who took the totem as a symbol and belief out of the worship and admiration of a certain creature or image. And among Xunxian clay coo there is typical bird worship. The



local legend of Xunxian County believes that the seeds of wheat and rice were originally spread by birds, and that birds have an initial significance to farming civilization, which derives the worship of birds and the belief of birds.

It is believed that birds send wheat and rice seeds to humans, and food is the foundation of human existence and reproduction, so people take birds as "seed god". In folk proverb, "bird" is a common name of male genitalia. Because most common birds in the countryside spawn a lot, and the survival rate of young birds is high. Therefore, it left people an impression of fecundity and health. Xunxian clay coo takes bird as a symbol. With a variety of themes and patterns, we can find the existence of bird elements, and the appearances of all sizes are mellow and full. They seem to be strong, implying the blessing for a healthy and prolific mother. Since ancient times, women who went to the temple to seek children in Xunxian County would buy a lot of clay coo birds when they went back. On their way home, a group of boys will follow and sing: "give me a coo chicken, bless you giving sons and grandchildren". Women will not hesitate to throw the clay coo to the roadside to let the children pick up and make a good luck. It is the perfect fusion of reproductive worship and bird worship, and also promotes the pluralistic development and inheritance of clay coo in "Fig. 5".



Fig. 5. Xunxian clay coo - clay birds.

#### B. Flowers and Grass Patterns - Praying for Blessing

The surface patterns of Xunxian clay coo mostly are flowers and grass patterns. These flowers and grass patterns are extracted from the daily life of the people of Xunxian County, containing the warm feelings of the handicraftsmen to life, and expressing people praying for auspicious peace and safeness, longing for good weather for crops and long life. Every pattern has its meaning and each meaning is auspicious. Each flower and grass pattern has its special meaning. Praying for more children, blessings and longer life are common themes of flower and grass patterns. For example, peony is noble and graceful, so peony pattern has the meaning of richness and auspiciousness. Chrysanthemum, also known as "longevity chrysanthemum", represents longevity. Lotus flower pattern has the meaning of having many sons and a large family because the seed of lotus has the partial tone "li án zǐ". Giving patterns moral appeal and auspicious meaning are

conformed to the public's understanding and recognition on patterns. In the continuous development and improvement of the later generations, Xunxian clay coo has formed a set of routines in the choice of shape and pattern. It is as if everyone has recognized a set of pattern applications. Gradually these patterns tend to be stylized and symbolized, and evolved into a pattern color system at present, and also become an art style of Xunxian clay coo in "Fig. 6".



Fig. 6. Xunxian Clay Coo.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Because of its unique geographical conditions and historical culture, under the large environment protection of farming civilization, Xunxian County has produced Xunxian clay coo with a wide range of themes, vivid images, distinctive features and profound meaning. Xunxian clay coo, as a unique form of folk clay sculpture, embodies the aesthetic taste, emotional culture and the beautiful and simple expectation of life of local people from ancient times, with a strong folk characteristics and profound cultural connotation. The research on the forming factors of Xunxian clay coo's model characteristics has typical and referential value for the research and development of small scale folk clay sculpture in China.

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