

Female Power on Fingertips: Gender Symbols and Aesthetic Expressions in the Art of Shanxi Flower Steamed Bread Modeling

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Abstract: As a national intangible cultural heritage, Shanxi flower steamed bread originates from daily life and is widely used in festivals, life rituals, and other important occasions. It is not only edible but also highly ornamental. From a female perspective, this paper demonstrates the external forms and internal meanings of Shanxi flower steamed bread from multiple aspects, analyzing the gender symbols and aesthetic presentations within its works by starting with specific examples. Meanwhile, it explores the gender symbolic meanings embedded in the modeling art of flower steamed bread from different angles, showcasing the unique aesthetics and emotional sustenance that women place in it, which endows the steamed bread with more vitality and vividness. Additionally, this study hopes to add new inspiration to the expressive forms of Shanxi flower steamed bread modeling art. Finally, it highlights the power of female groups in intangible cultural heritage inheritance and provides more new directions for gender aesthetics-related research.

Keywords: Shanxi Flower Steamed Bread; Modeling Art; Gender Symbols; Aesthetic Expressions; Female Power

1. Introduction

The Yellow River basin is an area with a high concentration of folk flower steamed bread traditions. This paper takes the flower steamed bread of Shanxi as its research object, while acknowledging that the steamed bread crafts in neighboring regions of Shanxi each possess distinct characteristics and variations [1]. As a national intangible cultural heritage and one of the most distinctive folk arts in Shanxi, Shanxi flower steamed bread is not only used in important occasions such as festivals, sacrifices, and life rituals but also serves as a significant symbolic carrier embodying

profound historical and cultural connotations as well as artistic values. In the inheritance and production of Shanxi flower steamed bread, women play a dominant role. Skillful women use their dexterous hands, hearts that love life and beauty, and industrious labor to perfectly fulfill every requirement for making flower steamed bread, ensuring that every detail is executed with precision. Shanxi flower steamed bread has thus become an important channel to reflect female power and aesthetics. Exploring the symbolic meaning of gender and the presentation of beauty in the modeling art of Shanxi flower steamed bread helps us better understand the unique charm of this intangible cultural heritage and enables us to cherish our own traditional culture more deeply.

2. The Characteristics of the Modeling Art of Shanxi Flower Steamed Bread

2.1 Rich Styling Themes

The modeling of Shanxi flower steamed bread is extremely rich, encompassing everything from natural flowers, plants, fish, and insects to heroic deities in mythological stories, as well as various auspicious blessings in daily life. Meanwhile, flowers such as peonies and plums created by female handicraft creators are vivid and lifelike; bird-shaped designs like phoenixes and dragons are lively and aesthetically appealing. At the same time, patterns and characters with auspicious meanings such as "fortune," "emolument," "longevity," and "happiness" reveal the creators' meticulous observation of life and their numerous beautiful aspirations for it. These models not only satisfy the needs of various human activities but also serve as one of the ways for women to express their emotions and wishes.

2.2 Unique Production Techniques

The production techniques of Shanxi flower steamed bread mainly include a series of

actions such as kneading, rolling, pressing, cutting, pinching, and pasting [2]. Through the skilled operations of female craftspeople, the dough can be transformed into various shapes in a multitude of forms. For example: Pinching patterns with combs; Cutting the texture of phoenix feathers with scissors; Kneading dough to create petal textures. Rolling the dough into streamlined blocks, and making the patterns formed by the dough more regular

through pressing and pasting techniques (Figure 1: shows the production process of Shanxi flower steamed bread). Additionally, female craftsmen integrate their personal subjective consciousness into this art, endowing the works with innovative charm through their craftsmanship. This is the reason why the techniques of flower steamed bread are innovative.



Figure 1. Shows the Production Process of Shanxi Flower Steamed Bread

2.3 Distinctive Regional Characteristics

The flower steamed bread models vary greatly across different regions of Shanxi, each with its unique characteristics symbolizing the local culture and customs. In southern Shanxi, the designs are grand and imposing, mostly featuring large dragon-phoenix and peony motifs, used for sacrificial ceremonies or wedding banquets. In northern Shanxi, the styles are simple and elegant, mainly adopting small animal and plant shapes, often used in daily festivals. This regional diversity is a result of female artisans' innovation and development in modeling while inheriting traditions and adapting to local conditions. It is also a distinctive feature of the modeling art of Shanxi flower steamed bread.

3. Gender Symbols in the Modeling Art of Shanxi Flower Steamed Bread

3.1 Metaphors and Symbols of Female Images

Many symbols implying femininity appear in the forms of Shanxi flower steamed bread. For example, lotus-shaped steamed bread represents the purity and beauty of women and often appears in folk activities related to women. In addition to some steamed bread shaped after mythological female figures such as the Child-Giving Goddess and nvwa, most designs express people's hopes for women to

bear children and protect large families. These various shapes not only shape the aesthetic image of women but also, within the social and cultural context of their time, use the concrete medium of steamed bread to convey the significance of women's roles and identities.

In the modeling of Shanxi flower steamed bread, floral motifs are extremely common, with peonies, lotuses, and plums being the most beloved by women. Due to their delicate and graceful appearance, peonies are often used in festive steamed bread for weddings and birthdays. The lotus, celebrated for its purity as it rises unsoiled from mud, symbolizes women's innocence and holiness. Meanwhile, the plum blossom's resilience against harsh winters mirrors the strength of women facing adversity. By mimicking feminine virtues through these cherished flowers, floral elements have become a staple in the art of flower steamed bread.

Female images are not merely single-dimensional character representations but also embody female creators' identification with and interpretation of their own roles and values. Mythological stories related to women also frequently appear in the modeling of flower steamed bread. For example, the tale of "Seven Fairies Descending to Earth" is often depicted through a group of fairy figures on the steamed bread. These fairies are shaped wearing long flowing dresses, holding flowers or colored ribbons, and posed in elegant

postures, showcasing the gentle beauty of women. Such mythological character designs not only serve as decorative elements in folk activities but also embody people's yearning for beautiful love and a happy life. At the same time, the representation of these stories through flower steamed bread during traditional folk festivals reflects Chinese people's idealized views of women. These artistic renderings transform oral traditions into tangible symbols, merging aesthetic craftsmanship with cultural values. The graceful movements of the fairies—each delicate fold of their dresses and flutter of their ribbons meticulously shaped from dough—become a celebration of femininity. In this way, the steamed bread acts as both a visual narrative of myth and a cultural artifact, preserving collective memories while reinforcing societal ideals of female elegance, virtue, and the pursuit of harmony.

3.2 The Embodiment of Maternal Power

Various shapes in flower steamed bread, such as "fish," "pomegranates," and "watermelons," all embody the beautiful implication of "multiple children, multiple blessings," which are closely tied to female identities. The images crafted by female makers not only reflect their longing for life's continuation but also their wishes for family prosperity. When creating steamed bread for children, motifs like tiger-shaped buns, "Five Poisons" steamed bread (Figure 2: Five Poisons Flower Steamed Bread), and zodiac-themed collars (made of steamed dough coiled around the neck, embedded with red dates, and shaped like animals, with paired tiger designs at the opening) symbolize elders' deep attachment and good wishes [3]. These collars are believed to "lock in" a child's health and bless their growth, embodying love and protection through every meticulous detail.



Figure 2. Five Poisons Flower Steamed Bread

3.3 The Objectification of Women's Aesthetic Concepts

Gender symbols represented by daily utensils are ingeniously applied to the modeling of Shanxi flower steamed bread, such as commonly seen scissors, sticks, and other tools. The vivid and exquisite shapes of Shanxi flower steamed bread, with their bright and cheerful colors, reflect the delicate psychology and aesthetic tastes of female creators. In the process of making flower steamed bread, they invest meticulous care into each piece—carving petal by petal and crafting feather by feather (Figure 3: Feather making). In terms of color selection, festive red, warm yellow, and hopeful green are most frequently used, creating an antique yet joyous atmosphere that is both delicate and harmonious. These colors symbolize women's yearnings for a good life, beautiful love, and peaceful happiness.



Figure 3. Feather Making

The female clothing and decorative elements in flower steamed bread modeling carry distinct gender characteristics, often expressed through exquisite female attire, intricate patterns, and delicate color tones. Examples include traditional garments, shoes, and bows. Accessories commonly worn by women, such as earrings and necklaces, are also incorporated, making the female images in the steamed bread more lifelike. These elements further emphasize the feminine traits of the modeling and highlight women's interpretation of and pursuit of beauty. Through meticulous craftsmanship, the modeling showcases the elegance of traditional female clothing—such as the flowing lines of dresses or the intricate embroidery on shoes—using dough to recreate fine textures and patterns. Soft color palettes, like gentle pinks or muted blues, enhance the delicate aesthetic. Even small accessories, such as the dangling beads of earrings or the

intricate designs of necklaces, are carefully shaped to add realism. Collectively, these details transform the steamed bread into a vivid representation of female grace, reflecting both cultural traditions and women's unique artistic sensibilities in folk art.

4. Aesthetic Expressions in the Modeling Art of Shanxi Flower Steamed Bread

4.1 Modeling Beauty

In the details of flower steamed bread, we can see the use of straight lines, curves, and the combination of points, lines, and planes [4]. From the modeling of Shanxi flower steamed bread, it can be seen that it pursues a solemn sense of symmetry and balance. Taking the overall circular shape of the flower steamed bread and the symmetrically distributed decorations as an example, the steamed bread gives a stable and harmonious visual effect. The design of proportional relationships such as size, height, and thickness also takes into account the actual dimensions of the steamed bread, aiming to meet both practical needs and aesthetic appeal. This is a set of dragon-and-phoenix steamed bread used in wedding ceremonies. With appropriate sizing and mutually responsive postures, they exhibit a dynamic symmetrical beauty with a sense of strength, demonstrating female creators' excellent grasp of formal beauty (Figure 4: Dragon and Phoenix Auspicious Flower Steamed Bread).



Figure 4. Dragon and Phoenix Auspicious Flower Steamed Bread

4.2 Auspicious Implications Beauty

The modeling of flower steamed bread often uses concrete forms to convey abstract meanings, embodying numerous aesthetic imageries. A blooming peony-shaped steamed

bread not only resembles the flower itself but also symbolizes wealth and auspiciousness. A pair of intertwined mandarin duck-shaped steamed breads implies marital love and everlasting harmony (Figure 5: Mandarin Duck Flower Steamed Bread). By relying on symbolism and implication, these designs allow people's thoughts and emotions to be integrated into the works through the shapes. When viewing the flower steamed bread, one can perceive the profound cultural connotations and emotional sustenance within the art, achieving a sense of joy and fulfillment.

When celebrating a woman's birthday, flower steamed bread is often combined with motifs symbolizing female longevity and beauty, such as auspicious flowers or animals, to express wishes for her health, longevity, and happiness. In wedding ceremonies, steamed bread shaped with double "happiness" characters is paired with dragon-and-phoenix motifs. The dragon symbolizes masculinity, while the phoenix represents femininity, embodying traditional societal hopes for a harmonious and enduring marriage. Together, these designs convey blessings for marital bliss and eternal love, integrating gender symbolism with cultural ideals of union and prosperity.



Figure 5. Mandarin Duck Flower Steamed Bread

4.3 Cultural Beauty

The modeling art of flower steamed bread embodies a profound regional cultural beauty with distinct Shanxi characteristics and folk traditions. It integrates local historical legends, folk tales, religious beliefs, and other elements, where each shape carries a corresponding cultural story. For example: Using the image of Guan Gong (a historical figure revered for loyalty and righteousness) in steamed bread symbolizes respect for his virtues. Zodiac-themed steamed bread reflects China's zodiac culture. Mythological themes like the

Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea are also woven into the art. By incorporating such cultural elements, the modeling art of Shanxi flower steamed bread has become a medium for spreading regional culture, showcasing its unique cultural charm. Each design serves as a narrative of local heritage, blending artistic creativity with deep-rooted traditions.

Meanwhile, at different times, flower steamed bread accompanies us in daily life in various forms. For example: Tiger-shaped steamed bread symbolizes health and safety for children. Lotus-shaped steamed bread embodies the moral character of purity and integrity, akin to "rising unsullied from muddy waters." Double Ninth Festival's tiered cakes represent blessings from younger generations to elders [5]. Elements in flower steamed bread also embody cultural meanings. For example: The bat motif is considered a homophone for "fortune" in Chinese, symbolizing blessings and good fortune. The crane represents longevity and auspiciousness, conveying wishes for a long and healthy life. These symbolic elements transform the steamed bread into a carrier of cultural values, blending linguistic puns and auspicious symbolism to express people's yearnings for happiness, prosperity, and longevity [6]. At every significant festival, flower steamed bread makes an appearance. Though varying by region, each form showcases local culture and customs, fully reflecting unique regional characteristics. These edible artworks not only mark temporal rhythms but also serve as living symbols of diverse traditions, weaving together a tapestry of cultural identity across China.

5. The Role of Female Strength in the Inheritance and Development of Shanxi Flower Steamed Bread Modeling Art

In Shanxi Province, those who learn the craftsmanship of making flower steamed bread generally do so within family-centered settings, where female elders pass down techniques to younger generations. For this reason, the art of flower steamed bread is also known as "maternal art." [7] Through the summation and improvement of skills from one generation to the next, the craftsmanship has become increasingly refined. Moreover, as people of all ages and genders engage in making flower steamed bread, the craft has been

well-preserved and developed. Female inheritors, in particular, dare to explore and research boldly on the basis of inheriting traditional techniques, courageously innovating their works and continuously infusing them with new concepts and connotations.

Women utilize various folk activities to present or gift flower steamed bread, thereby expressing the implied meanings and traditional culture embedded in the art of its modeling. When visiting relatives and friends, they give flower steamed bread, specify its purpose on the bread, and explain its production method. During folk festivals and events, they also organize steamed bread-making competitions and exhibitions of steamed bread works. All these efforts aim to enable more people to understand and appreciate the art of flower steamed bread modeling. Through generations of oral and practical teaching—where knowledge is passed down by word of mouth and demonstrated through personal example—the modeling art of Shanxi flower steamed bread has gradually been preserved, widely accepted by the public, and become a unique intangible cultural heritage symbol of Shanxi's local characteristics.

As times evolve, female creators are no longer satisfied with traditional flower steamed bread designs. Many now draw inspiration from diverse perspectives and aspects, adopting new shapes and techniques to participate in innovative designs. For example: Some integrate cartoon and trendy patterns into steamed bread modeling, infusing modern aesthetics into traditional crafts. Others combine steamed bread shapes with modern packaging design, reshaping public perception of the art in the market. Notably, however, all innovations must fundamentally preserve the authentic traditions of the craft to adapt to contemporary life and needs. This balance between heritage and innovation is particularly crucial for today's creative practices, ensuring the art remains both rooted in history and relevant to modern audiences.

6. Conclusion

The modeling art of Shanxi flower steamed bread is a quintessential expression of folk art, a handicraft, and an artistic form created by women's collectives. It embodies symbolic

meanings of female identity and gender, reflecting the collective image and social status of women. Its rich and diverse aesthetics represent women's unique aesthetic consciousness and artistic tastes. In the generational inheritance of this art, women serve multiple roles: Reproducers of Female Life: They mirror real-life female experiences through their creations. Interpreters of Beauty: They define and express aesthetic values through their designs. Custodians of Craftsmanship: They preserve traditional techniques while passing down knowledge. Drivers of Innovation: They infuse daily life with creative expressions. Thus, it is crucial to prioritize the protection and inheritance of Shanxi flower steamed bread modeling art. By leveraging women's strengths in its development, we can uncover its deeper charm and facilitate its adaptation to contemporary times. This will ensure that this intangible cultural heritage—condensing women's beauty and charisma—continues to bloom indefinitely.

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