

The Construction of Fashionable Life Aesthetics in Gansu Dough Figurines

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Abstract: Gansu dough figurines, a folk art with distinctive local characteristics, embody profound historical and cultural connotations. A key research focus lies in exploring how they integrate into fashionable life and construct unique aesthetic patterns during their development and evolution. This paper attempts to analyze the creative characteristics and spiritual implications of Gansu dough figurines. Based on the influence of current fashion on life, it explores the context of innovative design by continuously excavating the aesthetic tension of Gansu dough figurines, aiming to realize the organic integration of industry and art. Furthermore, starting from the characteristics of Gansu dough figurines, it gives full play to their cultural and tourism functions for publicity and promotion, so as to construct the life fashion aesthetics of Gansu dough figurines in the new era.

Keywords: Gansu Dough Figurines; Fashion Life Aesthetics; Inheritance of Intangible Cultural Heritage; Innovative Development

1. Introduction

Dough figurines, also known as "flower buns", are pasta crafts made with flour as the main raw material. They are shaped into various forms through techniques like kneading, pinching, rubbing, cutting, and carving, then steamed. They are both a type of food and a work of art, being excellent folk handicrafts that integrate folk culture, artistic aesthetics, and craftsmanship. Gansu, located in the inland northwest of China, is influenced by its unique geographical environment. Thanks to its diverse natural landforms, rich ethnic cultures, and long history, the province not only boasts a wide variety of dough figurine styles but also preserves other traditional folk handicraft forms of Gansu. In contemporary society, where people are paying increasing attention to the quality and taste of life, integrating [dough figurines]

with fashion life aesthetics can better realize the protection and development of traditional folk art.

2. The Artistic Features and Cultural Connotations of Gansu Dough Figurines

2.1 Artistic Features

2.1.1 Diverse and varied in shape

The "fan bun" belongs to Minqin flower buns [1]. Apart from Gansu dough figurines, there are also various forms such as figures (e.g., characters from myths, legends or historical stories), animals, plants, utensils, and some abstract patterns. The figures include gods, ghosts, immortals, and mortals, some of which are vividly lifelike and amazing. German philosopher Ernst Cassirer mentioned "fish drilling through lotus" and held the view on it [2]. In flower cakes (huamo), various elements symbolize different meanings. For example, plant-based motifs (wheat ears, peaches, lotus flowers) usually symbolize harvest and good luck, and are often used for decoration during traditional Chinese festivals; dragons, phoenixes, unicorns, lions, etc., typically represent auspiciousness, embodying people's hopes for health, safety, and a large family with many descendants. Such flower cakes, with their lifelike shapes and bright colors, can be said to be carriers of traditional culture, containing rich folk cultural connotations [3]. After the dough is properly fermented, with skillful kneading, pinching, cutting, slicing, and pressing, and using tools such as rolling pins, scissors, chopsticks, combs, and bamboo sticks for shaping, vivid flower cake carps come into being [4]. In addition, animals come in a great variety of forms. The most common ones are auspicious animals like dragons and phoenixes, rabbits symbolizing having children, farm cattle representing diligence, and peach trees expressing prosperity and symbolizing life. Besides, there are many plant-shaped dough figurines, mostly flowers such as peonies, lotus

flowers, and plum blossoms; in addition, there are various fruit shapes, such as peaches, pomegranates, and Buddha's hands... These dough figurines either are extremely realistic, directly imitating real objects, or are exaggerated and deformed with unconstrained imagination, full of life flavor and rich in artistic imagination. Take the "fish drilling through

lotus" shape in the dough figurines of Qingyang area as an example. The fish and the lotus are cleverly integrated into one, which is originally an extremely beautiful combination — the agility of the fish and the gracefulness of the lotus. Such a pairing not only has a beautiful aesthetic meaning but also profound folk custom significance. (See Figure 1)



Figure 1. Minqin Flower Buns (Image from Baidu)

2.1.2 Bright and vivid colors

The colors of Gansu dough figurines exude a bold and vigorous spirit. Most of the colors used are bright ones such as red, yellow, blue, green, and purple. These colors come from pigments made from natural colorants like red yeast rice, turmeric, spinach juice, and purple potato puree, which are very safe. They not only allow people to enjoy the dough figurines without any worries but also create a colorful and pleasing visual effect. The clever use of colors by dough figurine craftsmen can make the shapes of the dough figurines more vivid and interesting. For example, craftsmen in Minqin, Gansu, mainly use red and yellow when making dough figurines for festive occasions. Red symbolizes auspiciousness and joy, while yellow represents wealth and glory. The combination of the two can convey a warm and lively atmosphere.

2.1.3 Exquisite craftsmanship

The craftsmanship of Gansu dough figurines is both intricate and elaborate, requiring craftsmen

to possess superb skills and years of experience. The general procedures for making fine dough figurines are as follows: preparing ingredients—kneading dough — proving dough — kneading again — shaping — decorating — steaming. Among these, the key and essential steps are: Shaping: Craftsmen turn the dough into three-dimensional forms by virtue of their dexterous fingers and essential tools (scissors, combs, tweezers, toothpicks) through such techniques as pinching, rolling, cutting, pressing, and carving. Decorating: This is the essence of dough figurine making. In this step, craftsmen can perfect each part of the dough figurine by means of outlining, line drawing, color painting, tinting, and inlaying. For instance, in Xifeng dough modeling, craftsmen use a writing brush dipped in pigments to carefully paint patterns on the faces and beards of the dough figurines, and add color blocks and lines to the costumes, so as to achieve a more lifelike effect. (See Figure 2)



Figure 2. A Diagram of the Dough Figurine Making Process(Image from Baidu)"

2.2 Cultural Connotations

2.2.1 An important carrier of folk culture

Minqin, Gansu Province, is located in the eastern part of the Hexi Corridor, with the Tengger and Badain Jaran deserts lying to its east, west, and north. It has abundant sunlight and heat, and a large temperature difference between day and night. ^[5] Gansu dough

figurines are closely related to local folk life, integrating into people's daily life, with various shapes appearing on different festivals. For example, "date mountains" made during the Spring Festival symbolize favorable weather and a bumper harvest in the coming year; "dough lanterns" made on the Lantern Festival are meant to ward off evil, eliminate disasters, and light up the future life path. In addition,

dough figurines are also indispensable in major life rituals such as weddings, funerals, and birthday celebrations. Among them, the "dragon and phoenix bringing prosperity" dough figurines for weddings, the "longevity peach" dough figurines for birthday celebrations, and the "gujie" (a special dough figurine) for children's first birthday are all very common in local people's daily life. [6] Dough figurines, while being a kind of food, also embody folk customs and traditions, inheriting elements of local customs and cultural heritage.

2.2.2 The inherited imprint of historical culture
Gansu dough figurines have a long history. Emerging and evolving alongside social development and the progress of the times, they have been passed down from generation to generation, absorbing elements from various eras and thus serving as a reflection of thousands of years of historical culture. This is evidenced by dough figurine molds unearthed among ancient relics and relevant historical records. The shapes and craftsmanship of Gansu dough figurines produced in those times were linked to the sacrificial culture and farming culture of the period. For instance, some dough figurines retain the characteristics of totem worship, which reflect people's reverence for nature and admiration for heaven, earth, and gods in ancient times. Moreover, the craftsmanship of some dough figurines, developed through learning and innovation by craftsmen of successive generations, has been continuously improved and advanced on the basis of inheritance from one generation to another.

2.2.3 A unique symbol of regional culture
Gansu has a vast territory, and dough figurines in different regions vary in shape, style, and craftsmanship. Through continuous evolution and development, they have formed unique local characteristic dough figurine symbols with distinct styles. For example: the dough figurines in Longdong area are relatively delicate and small in shape, with soft and exquisite colors, full of strong farming atmosphere, reflecting the honest, simple, enthusiastic and kind character of the local people; while the Hexi area, influenced by the Silk Road, has dough figurines with more majestic shapes and brighter colors, showing the characteristics of openness, inclusiveness, enthusiasm and boldness. Dough figurines with diverse forms and distinctive styles have enriched the connotation of Gansu

dough figurines and become unique local regional symbols.

3. The Challenges Faced by Gansu Dough Figurines in the Contemporary Era

3.1 The Traditional Craftsmanship is Complex, Making it Difficult to Inherit

The production process of Gansu dough figurines is quite complex. It requires multiple steps such as peeling and grinding into flour, kneading dough, and proofing to create dough figurine works that are not only beautifully shaped but also flexible and elastic. Each step is a test of the craftsman's skills, especially the fermentation step, where the proofing time and temperature must be precisely controlled—any slight mistake can affect the overall effect of the work. The shaping step also demands basic skills and a certain degree of imagination; only those who are dexterous, creative, and good at observing the characteristics of things can perfectly present works of various shapes and unique features. Nowadays, with high life pressure and a fast-paced lifestyle, most young people are unwilling to invest too much energy in such a time-consuming and labor-intensive task, thus being willing to let this craft fade away. At the same time, modern people's aesthetic views are gradually changing. The unique style of Gansu dough figurines will gradually disappear, and some precious and wonderful dough figurine shapes and production techniques will decline or be lost as a result.

3.2 The Product Forms are Relatively Single, Resulting in a Lack of Market Competitiveness

At present, Gansu dough figurine products mainly consist of traditional folk festival-themed ones, which are homogeneous and lack creativity. However, the current market demands are diversified, personalized, and strongly contemporary. Traditional dough figurine products can hardly meet the consumption upgrading trend of today's dough figurine market. Compared with other modern food products and handicrafts, Gansu dough figurines have significant gaps in packaging design, product functions, and other aspects. In addition, dough figurines are perishable, have a short shelf life, and are not easy to transport over long distances or store, which also brings certain difficulties to their market expansion.

3.3 The Dissemination Channels are Limited, and the Popularity is not High

Gansu dough figurines belong to a folk craft category with strong regional characteristics. Due to the lack of obvious universal and global features, they are only confined to Gansu and its adjacent areas, lacking popularity nationwide and even worldwide. The traditional way of dissemination mainly relies on word-of-mouth in folk activities, attracting passers-by through posters or on-site displays. The rapid development of new media has provided a large platform for cultural communication. However, at the current stage, Gansu dough figurines have not fully utilized new media to expand their dissemination channels. There is a lack of corresponding systematic communication methods and correct dissemination approaches in terms of internet communication. Many people are not familiar with Gansu dough figurines, and some have never even seen them in their lives, which has a great adverse impact on the inheritance and development of Gansu dough figurines.

4. The Path to Constructing the Aesthetics of Fashionable Life in Gansu Dough Figurines

4.1 Innovative Design, Endowing Dough Figurines with New Fashionable Connotations

4.1.1 Integrate modern design concept

Invite professional designers and dough figurine craftsmen to jointly participate in the design of dough figurines. On the premise of retaining the original connotation of dough figurines, integrate modern design concepts, and use design concepts such as modern minimalism and cubism to simplify, deform, and reorganize traditional dough figurine shapes, making them more in line with the aesthetic needs of contemporary people. Adopt the method of simplifying complexity to transform the intricate forms of traditional dough figurines into simple yet beautiful geometric forms with a modern touch, and apply different color proportions to different types of dough figurines for color matching, thereby creating works with a modern vibe. In terms of color application, while retaining the inherent bright and vivid color characteristics of dough figurines, incorporate popular bright colors and gray scales to make them more close to life,

highlighting the sense of the times and change of the works. Attach importance to material innovation of dough figurines, use some new edible materials or environmentally friendly materials to enhance their texture and visual effect.

4.1.2 Expand the application fields of dough figurines

Break the traditional notion that dough figurines are only for food and sacrificial purposes, and explore and develop their new use as decorative materials: apply dough figurines to home decoration, making dough figurine wall hangings, ornaments, and lamps; incorporate them into modern stationery, such as bookmarks, keychains, phone cases, and dolls. On one hand, this allows dough figurines to fully enter people's daily lives; on the other hand, it can reflect China's unique traditional culture, truly achieving novelty and distinctiveness. In addition to integrating into daily home life, dough figurines can also be combined with other modern elements, such as incorporating them into current clothing and accessories, thus forming new lifestyles.

4.1.3 Carry out cross-border cooperation

Strengthen cross-border cooperation between Gansu dough figurines and different fields. Leverage advantageous resources such as talents, funds, and technologies from related fields to enhance cooperation with fashion brands, and launch fashion items such as clothing, accessories, and bags with dough figurine elements as the theme. Cooperate with catering enterprises to integrate dough figurine elements into modern catering, meet market demand through forms like dough figurine-themed restaurants and dessert shops, enrich people's lives, and attract more young people's attention. Strengthen cooperation with industries such as film and television, animation, and games. For example, animation characters with the characteristics of Gansu dough figurines can be incorporated into animation works; their unique shapes, combined with the background, can better highlight regional characteristics and add humanistic feelings.

4.2 Industrial Integration, Promoting the Industrialized Development of Dough Figurines

4.2.1 In terms of its inheritance value, we should inherit and carry forward the excellent traditional Chinese culture in combination with

the new era conditions.^[7] Governments and relevant departments can also, based on actual circumstances, actively encourage and support the development of Gansu dough figurine industry in building bases and engaging in processing, extending the industry from dough figurine production and processing to the development of a full industrial chain covering R&D, sales, and exhibition. Within the industrial bases, set up dough figurine production workshops, introduce advanced production equipment and technologies to achieve high yield and efficiency; establish dough figurine R&D centers, organize professionals to conduct research on the production techniques, product development, and packaging design of Gansu dough figurines; build dough figurine exhibition halls and sales centers to centrally display and sell dough figurines and other Gansu characteristic products, creating a favorable shopping environment for the people and driving local economic development.

4.2.2 Develop dough figurine cultural tourism

Integrate Gansu dough figurines with local cultural and tourism resources, develop Gansu dough figurine cultural tourism products and routes. Use tourist attractions (folk culture villages), scenic squares, and blocks as display venues for dough figurine cultural tourism products, and set up dough figurine making experience areas to allow tourists to personally participate in making dough figurines. At the same time, hold activities such as dough figurine cultural festivals and dough figurine art exhibitions to attract more tourists to visit, enhancing the cultural connotation and appeal of local tourism. Launch dough figurine-themed tourist souvenirs: frozen dough figurines, postcards, refrigerator magnets, small craft items, etc., to enrich the types and varieties of local tourist souvenirs and increase income for local people. For example, a dough figurine making experience center can be set up near Zhangye Danxia National Geological Park, so that after enjoying the magnificent Danxia scenery, visitors can make a dough figurine work by themselves to take home as a travel souvenir.

4.2.3 Strengthen brand building

Implement the brand strategy and build the brand of Gansu dough figurines. Tell the stories behind dough figurines well and inject cultural connotations into the dough figurine brand;

unify the brand logos and packaging of mass-produced dough figurine products to enhance the brand image of dough figurines; increase efforts in brand promotion, participate in various cultural exhibitions, brand launches, and carry out online publicity and reports through mainstream media and new media, so as to expand the brand influence and reputation; encourage and support dough figurine enterprises and craftsmen to establish brand awareness, focus on improving product quality and service level, and create high-quality dough figurine brands with exquisite products and services to satisfy customers. For example, "Chengzhou Dough Modeling" has gradually emerged in the market after years of development, with its brand popularity and reputation continuously increasing, and it has gradually become a bright cultural business card of the local area.

4.3 Dissemination and Promotion to Enhance the Popularity and Influence of Dough Figurines

4.3.1 Utilize new media platforms for dissemination

Digital dough figurine is a novel art form compared with the original ecological dough figurine. It has a certain inheritance relationship with folk dough figurines, integrating original ecological culture with modern culture and combining technology with art. It is handcrafted with exquisite materials, unique shapes and rich meanings.^[8] In the promotion on major media, we can make extensive use of new media such as WeChat, Weibo, Douyin and Kuaishou to publicize our Gansu dough figurines. We can set up official accounts with relevant themes and regularly push information on dough figurine making processes, finished products and their meanings for people to view and interact with. We can also create more and better short videos and video screenshots to showcase the unique charm and cultural value of dough figurines to the public. The traditional craftsmanship of dough figurines can be made into excellent short videos by online influencers and web celebrities and promoted on the Douyin platform for wide dissemination. They can attract the attention of a large number of netizens, stimulate the public's desire for knowledge, and enable people to learn more about it. For example, some dough figurine craftsmen make short videos of dough figurines on Douyin, attracting a lot of attention

from netizens. Many netizens got to know Gansu dough figurines after watching these videos, and some even became very interested in them.

4.3.2 Hold dough figurine-themed activities

The production techniques of huamo have also undergone continuous improvement and innovation. Nowadays, huamo features more vivid colors, more exquisite appearances, and is increasingly attractive. [9] The holding of various dough figurine-themed activities includes dough figurine making competitions, dough figurine art lectures, and dough figurine cultural experience activities. Holding dough figurine making competitions builds a platform for dough figurine craftsmen to display their skills and works, boosts their enthusiasm for creation, and at the same time, enables more people to understand the art of dough figurines. By holding dough figurine art lectures, experts and scholars are invited to talk about the history, culture, artistic characteristics and production techniques of dough figurines, which can attract more people to pay attention to dough figurine art. Meanwhile, holding dough figurine cultural experience activities allows citizens to participate in making and tasting dough figurines by themselves, so that they can feel the charm of dough figurines in personal experience. For example, Gansu holds some dough figurine making competitions every year. It can be said that those who have participated in the competitions are eager to sign up for the next ones, and many citizens come to visit, resulting in an excellent publicity effect.

4.3.3 Strengthen cooperation with educational institutions

Increase efforts in cooperation between Gansu dough figurines and educational institutions, introduce dough figurine culture into campuses. Set up dough figurine making interest classes and club activities in primary and middle schools, and invite dough figurine craftsmen to enter campuses to teach students dough figurine making skills, so as to cultivate students' interest in traditional culture. Establish relevant courses and research projects in colleges and universities to train professional research and creation talents in dough figurines. Through the promotion and popularization by educational institutions, Gansu dough figurine culture can be inherited and continuously developed among young people, laying a solid foundation for the future of dough figurines. For example, some

schools have contacted local dough figurine craftsmen, invited them to give lessons, and organized some dough figurine making activities. Children can not only improve their hands-on ability through personal operation, but also realize a sense of cultural pride and happiness in their hometown of Gansu.

5. Conclusion

Gansu dough figurine is a unique form of folk art, which is in an endangered state in today's society. However, through continuous innovative design, it will be endowed with new fashion attributes. After integration with industries, it will develop into industrialized commodities. In addition, the use of diversified channels for extensive publicity to enhance its popularity and influence can, to a certain extent, form the aesthetic value of Gansu dough figurine in fashion life, carry it forward, ensure its better inheritance and development, and make it take on a new look in the new era. It can also enable more people to know and love this traditional Chinese folk art category, enrich people's cultural and spiritual life, and contribute to the development and progress of culture as well as the mutual learning and integration of regional cultures. With the continuous development of the times, people pay more and more attention to traditional culture. It is believed that in the future, Gansu dough figurine will gain more wonderful connotations in the process of constructing fashion life aesthetics and present a better and more splendid look in the current society.

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