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Research on the Aesthetic Value of Traditional Chinese Timber Construction from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance

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Abstract: This paper is based on the practical needs of the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), focusing on the traditional Chinese timber construction skills to systematically explore their diverse aesthetic values. The research not only deeply analyzes the historical origins, technological processes, and cultural connotations of these skills but also emphasizes their unique values in three core dimensions: formal beauty, technical beauty, and cultural beauty. In response to the current challenges of personnel disconnection and "de-localization" in inheritance, this study, in combination with modern ICH protection practices, discusses how to achieve the contemporary transformation and innovative development of their aesthetic values while maintaining the authenticity of the skills through educational inheritance, technological integration, creative transformation, and "re-localization" strategies. This provides support for the sustainable inheritance of traditional culture and offers innovative insights for modern architecture and artistic creation.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage; Traditional Chinese Timber Construction Skills; Aesthetic Value; ICH Aesthetics

1. Introduction

From the perspective of traditional aesthetics, most intangible cultural heritages (ICH) possess aesthetic value, containing aesthetic emotions and imagination, and can be regarded as objects of aesthetic research. Traditional Chinese timber construction skills, as an important carrier of the Chinese nation's millennia of construction wisdom and cultural memory, bear profound historical and cultural connotations and are a precious form of intangible cultural heritage. It is not only a sophisticated technology but also a unique art form and cultural expression system, containing rich aesthetic value. Aesthetic value is one of the important starting points and core values of cultural heritage protection.

However, under the impact of the modern industrial wave and drastic changes in lifestyle, this skill faces severe challenges such as a break in inheritors, shrinking practice fields, and loss of local knowledge. Therefore, starting from the perspective of the living inheritance of ICH, systematically studying the deep aesthetic value contained in traditional Chinese timber construction is not only related to the survival of this precious cultural heritage but can also provide traditional wisdom for dealing with modern dilemmas, such as cultural homogenization and emotional alienation, and offer innovative insights for modern architecture, design, and artistic creation [1,2].

2. The Historical Origins, Cultural Background, and Local Roots of Traditional Chinese Timber Construction Skills

Traditional Chinese timber construction skills have a long history, with origins traceable to the Neolithic Age. Archaeological evidence, such as the wooden remains found at the Hemudu Site, has confirmed the early rudimentary form of these skills. After thousands of years of evolution, this skill has formed a rigorous technical system and aesthetic standards in ancient books such as the "Kao Gong Ji" and the "Ying Zao Fa Shi," which systematically record architectural scales, structural principles, and decorative norms. This system is deeply influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and diverse folk cultures, specifically manifested in the following three aspects:

2.1 Confucian Ritual Order

Confucian thought profoundly affects the spatial arrangement and hierarchical division of architecture. For example, the symmetrical axis and clear distinction between primary and secondary elements in palace architecture, such as the central axis layout of the Forbidden City, reflects the emperor's authority and creates a solemn and elegant architectural style, emphasizing the unity of order and harmony.

2.2 Taoist Natural View

With the core concept of "following the natural way," it is reflected in the harmonious interaction between architecture and the environment. For example, the borrowing of scenery in gardens, through ingenious design, integrates mountains and waters into the courtyard. There is also respect for and innovative use of the nature of natural materials such as wood, pursuing the principle of "material beauty," preserving the natural beauty of the material. For example, only tung oil is applied instead of thickly painted with colored lacquer to highlight the wood's texture and durability.

2.3 Folk Beliefs and Local Knowledge

This adds rich symbolic connotations and practical wisdom to timber construction, such as auspicious patterns and carvings of themes like fortune, rank, and longevity in decorative patterns. It is particularly emphasized that the skill itself contains a large amount of tacit knowledge, involving the understanding of wood properties, such as identifying the mechanical properties of different tree species, empirical judgment of mortise and tenon structures, such as choosing dovetail or through tenon according to the force, and unique processes adapted to regional climates, such as the southern moisture-proof and anti-corrosion treatment using tung oil immersion and the northern cold-proof and windproof measures of thickening walls. This kind of knowledge, highly dependent on master-apprentice inheritance and local practice, constitutes the core element of its vitality, ensuring the continuous evolution of the skill through generations.

3. The Core Aesthetic Value of Traditional Chinese Timber Construction from the Perspective of ICH Inheritance

From the perspective of ICH aesthetics, highlighting non-transcendence, shared experience, and bodily practice, and integrating formal analysis, its aesthetic value can be summarized in the following three closely related dimensions:

3.1 Formal Beauty: Visual Presentation of Harmony and Order

Firstly, the beauty of structural logic. The wooden framework system centered on mortise and tenon joints demonstrates the unity of strength and beauty. Components are tightly interlocked to form a stable whole. For example, the "puzuo layer" of dougong (bracket sets), the internal mechanical logic is externalized into a clear and rational structural form, with both strong earthquake resistance and visual tension, reflecting the highest realm of "unity of skill and art." This structural expression of harmony and order is similar to the "serene harmony" pursued by ancient Greek art but is rooted in Eastern philosophy.

Secondly, the beauty of proportion and scale. Strictly following the modulus system and mature compositional rules, such as the "caifen" system and the "three-part" rule in the Song Dynasty's "Ying Zao Fa Shi," the proportions of each part have been refined through countless trials, achieving dual harmony in both vision and function. The scale design fully considers human perception and environmental coordination, creating a pleasant spatial experience.

Thirdly, the harmony of decorative ingenuity and composition. Carving, painting, inlaying, and other decorative techniques are exquisite, with themes covering figures, flowers and birds, antiques, geometric patterns, and poetry. They are not only visual embellishments but also carriers of cultural symbols, such as the bat representing "fortune" and the fish representing "surplus." The composition emphasizes proportion, symmetry, balance, and moderation [3]. For example, the "serene harmony" of Wuyuan wood carving, where patterns complement the architectural components and spatial relationships, highlighting the main image and forming a simple, rustic, and vibrant decorative pattern, conveying a simple and naturally naive beauty.

3.2 Technical Beauty: Bodily Practice and Wisdom Crystallization

Firstly, exquisite craftsmanship and bodily practice. From material selection, preparation to component processing and overall assembly, every link depends on the craftsmen's superb skills, rich experience, and in-depth interaction with materials and tools. This is not only a display of technology but also an immersive bodily practice. Craftsmen maintain direct contact with materials and a sense of reality in self-forgetful labor, and the skill itself contains the beauty of natural authenticity.

Secondly, the wisdom of tools and practical decorative beauty. The use of traditional tools such as saws, axes, chisels, and planes condenses the wisdom of generations of craftsmen. Tools are not only an extension of the hand but also the materialization of technological ideas. Craftsmen flexibly use tools according to the properties of wood, the functions of components, and decorative needs, such as the delicate lattice carving of doors and windows, which not only meets the practical needs of pasting paper but also serves the decorative purpose of light transmission, achieving unity of function and form, and reflecting a high degree of practical decorative beauty [4].

Thirdly, innovation while maintaining the essence in living inheritance. The vitality of the skill comes from its living nature. While craftsmen adhere to the core skills, such as the mortise and tenon rules and proportion systems, they continuously adjust and innovate in response to the changing times and materials. This innovation is an extension of the skill's internal logic, aiming to improve quality and serve life, rather than deliberately seeking novelty for its own sake, reflecting the adherence to the nation's shared aesthetic experience [5].

3.3 Cultural Beauty: Profound Connotations and Local Identity

Firstly, the diversity of regional culture and sense of place. Timber construction is a vivid embodiment of locality. Different regional natural conditions, climate, resources, and cultural customs have shaped distinct styles: Jiangnan timber construction, represented by garden architecture, is characterized by its delicate and clever design, focusing on ventilation and moisture prevention; Northern timber construction, represented by siheyuan (courtyard houses), is characterized by its thick and simple style, emphasizing wind and cold prevention; Hui, Jin, and Lingnan styles each have their own characteristics. These differences are the concretization of local knowledge, forming unique regional cultural symbols and a sense of place.

Secondly, the symbolic connotations of folk culture. Architectural decoration is a concentrated expression of folk beliefs and life aspirations. The “dragon and phoenix bring good fortune” and “qilin sends a son” in wedding architecture, and the solemn and solemn patterns in sacrificial architecture, all carry deep collective emotions and spiritual sustenance, such as praying for blessings, disaster prevention, and ethical education. These symbolic systems are an important part of the nation's shared aesthetic experience and have a strong cultural connotation beauty.

Thirdly, the bearing of historical context and collective memory. As “frozen history,” traditional timber construction and its skills are the material carriers of historical culture and collective memory. They have witnessed social changes, technological evolution, and aesthetic trends and are an important window for understanding ancient society. Inheriting timber construction skills is to continue the nation's cultural genes, enhance cultural identity and confidence, and has profound historical and aesthetic significance in itself [6].

4. Current Status and Challenges of the Inheritance and Protection of Traditional Timber Construction Skills

At present, the continuation of this craft is facing severe challenges, with the core issue being the disruption of its living inheritance ecosystem. First, there is a crisis of the bearers of the craft. The bearers who have mastered the core skills are aging. Statistics show that 70% of the bearers are over 60 years old. The younger generation is reluctant to learn due to the long learning cycle, limited economic benefits, and insufficient social recognition, leading to the imminent breakage of the inheritance chain. Second, the practice domain is shrinking. Under the dominance of the modern building system, the market for traditional timber structures has significantly contracted, and the craft has lost its main application scenarios and practice platforms. There is a risk of "de-localization." Third, local knowledge is being lost. With the departure of

veteran craftsmen and the process of modernization, implicit and local knowledge closely related to specific geographical environments, materials, and customs is being lost at an accelerated rate, weakening the authenticity of the craft. Fourth, there is a cognitive bias in its aesthetic value. Society's understanding of its value often remains at the level of "antiques" or "craftsmanship," with insufficient recognition of its deeper cultural connotations, harmonious aesthetic views, and embodied practice value. There is even an aesthetic alienation in modern transformation, with its use merely for curiosity or symbolic appropriation. Fifth, there is a tension between "de-localization" and "re-localization." When intangible cultural heritage (ICH) carrying "local" elements enters public space and is reinterpreted and given new meanings by contemporary aesthetic culture, it tends to become a selective aesthetic expression of a small group during the process of development and transformation. There is a risk of detachment from the original context, dissolution of local sense, and "de-localization." How to maintain or reconstruct its local significance in the process of revitalization and achieve "re-localization" is the core challenge [7].

With the formulation of relevant policies and regulations such as the "Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage" and the "Measures for the Recognition and Management of National Intangible Cultural Heritage Representative Bearers," the legal framework for the recognition of ICH catalogues, bearer subsidies, and productive protection has been perfected. The "14th Five-Year Plan for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage" also emphasizes targeted protection measures such as "ICH in schools." However, there is still a need to address the systemic, continuous, and in-depth cognitive issues in the protection and inheritance of ICH [8].

5. Contemporary Transformation and Innovation Strategies of Aesthetic Value from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Inheritance

To realize the contemporary vitality of the aesthetic value of traditional wood construction, it is necessary to adopt a variety of innovative strategies under the guidance of the concept of ICH inheritance to promote its "relocalization".

5.1 Educational Inheritance and Reinterpretation of Value

Systematic courses should be offered in relevant majors such as architecture, design, and fine arts in colleges and universities to cultivate compound talents with both a solid foundation in traditional skills and modern design innovation capabilities. In-depth activities of "ICH entering campuses/communities" should be carried out, using forms such as workshops and experiential courses to allow the public, especially young people, to participate and practice personally, to feel the charm of the skills and the experience of the body, to understand its cultural connotations, and to reshape social cognition and value identification.

5.2 Innovation through the Integration of Traditional Skills with Modern Technology and Design

Firstly, structural innovation. Explore the combination of traditional mortise and tenon wisdom with modern materials such as steel and composite materials, and large-span structural systems to create new forms that combine traditional charm with modern functions and aesthetics. Secondly, process optimization. While respecting and inheriting the core traditional skills, actively introduce and apply modern tools, advanced digital technology, and intelligent means to comprehensively improve and enhance the design and processing of products. This will significantly improve the precision and efficiency of the production process and further expand the expressiveness and artistic value of the products. Thirdly, design transformation. Integrate the aesthetic elements of traditional wood construction, such as structural logic, proportion, decorative patterns, material texture, sense of harmony, and natural view, into modern furniture, interior design, public art, and cultural and creative products. This will bring it back to daily life, meet modern aesthetic and practical needs, and achieve the "everyday life" return of aesthetic value.

5.3 Digitalization and Mediatization of Survival

"ICH + short videos" and "ICH + digital" are new opportunities for ICH to "break out" and

integrate into the modern cultural structure. These emerging forms not only meet the acceptance of the masses but also promote the youthfulness of ICH expression. In the process of constructing the mediatization and digitalization of ICH, it is necessary to fully utilize the emotional form of short videos and the immersive mode of digital display. Multiple narrative means should be used to bring local memories from the past to the present and from reality to the virtual world. By vividly recreating and interpreting local memories, depth is given to the transformation of ICH. For example, the "Lu Zhengyi's Carving Time" model can be referred to, but it is important to focus on the transmission of the skills themselves and cultural depth, and to avoid excessive "spectacularization". Construct an ICH digital resource library to preserve local knowledge and tacit experience. Through digital storytelling, local memories are reproduced, emotions are connected, the boundaries of dissemination are expanded, and young audiences are attracted.

5.4 Integration of Culture and Tourism and "Relocalization" Practice

Firstly, in the protection of historical and cultural blocks, traditional villages, and cultural and tourism projects, the traditional wood construction skills should be revitalized for repair or new construction, making them an important symbol of local culture. Secondly, create immersive cultural experience spaces, such as craftsmen's studios, wood-themed homestays, and research bases. Visitors can experience the skill process and body practice through watching and hands-on attempts, understand the local knowledge and cultural connotations behind it, and build a new local identity in specific scenes, such as the Nanjing Lishui Luoshan Big Dragon case. Thirdly, based on the trend of cultural tourism, integration, and performance, build local identity. The integration and development of ICH and cultural tourism can either weaken or strengthen "locality". The key is whether it is possible to innovate forms and content on the basis of truly respecting the local context and spirit of ICH, and thus construct a local identity.

5.5 Strengthening the Transformation Oriented by "ICH Aesthetics"

Firstly, emphasize non-transcendence and focus on its value in beautifying daily life and emotional connection, rather than pursuing pure "artistic autonomy". As a skill, traditional architectural wood construction mainly shows a functional tool for understanding the world and highlighting the truth. It lacks autonomy and is subordinate to other social practices of human beings. Secondly, adhere to shared experience and cherish the common aesthetic experience and cultural symbols it carries. Transformation is not subversion, but creative continuation. Thirdly, pay attention to physical practice, protect and develop craftsmen's handwork experience, support experiential inheritance, and emphasize the immersive aesthetic experience in the process of "doing" [9,10].

6. Conclusion

Traditional Chinese architectural wood construction skills, as intangible cultural heritage deeply rooted in local culture, have value far beyond simple spatial construction. From the perspective of ICH inheritance, its core vitality is reflected in multi-dimensional aesthetic values, covering formal aesthetics, process aesthetics, and cultural connotations of aesthetics. Together, they constitute the rich connotation of the Chinese nation's construction aesthetic system. However, in the current inheritance process, the skills face multiple challenges such as the disconnection of inheritance subjects, the shrinkage of practice fields, the loss of related knowledge, and "de-localization". The key to protection and inheritance lies in deeply understanding and cherishing its essence as a living culture and aesthetic value. By inheriting through education and reinterpreting values, cultivating relevant talents, and reshaping social cognition; promoting the integration of traditional skills with modern technology and design to achieve creative transformation; using digital and mediatization means to preserve knowledge and expand channels of dissemination; and reconstructing local identity in the integration of cultural tourism, the aesthetic value returns and nourishes contemporary life. Only in this way can traditional Chinese architectural wood construction skills rejuvenate in the new era, provide inspiration for modern architecture and design, and provide strong support for building a Chinese-style human settlement environment, resisting cultural homogenization, and enhancing national cultural confidence.

Protecting and innovating this heritage is the key to continuing the root of Chinese civilization and shaping a better future living space.

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