

Symbolism in Chinese Children's Hats and Baby Carriers: Folklore, Bonding, and Mother's Affectionate Embrace

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Presentation Outline:

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THE CHINESE USE SYMBOLS TO CONVEY THEIR DESIRE FOR A GOOD LIFE.

I. The Sociology of Folk Art

- Folk art is the art of people. It is a collective social and psychological expression of ordinary people's daily lifestyle and life attitudes.
- Folk art is an important vehicle for socialization and transmitting of moral teachings.
- Folk art is anonymity.
- Story-telling is a venue for passing culture heritage to children.
- Folk art is produced for practical purposes and it is closely related to the locality.

II. Characteristics of Chinese Embroidery (Folk Art) for Children's Ware

1. Folk Art and Chinese Culture

- The core of Chinese folk art is its symbolism and cultural connections.
- Folk art is a reflection of the larger culture characteristics (i.e., the symbolic nature of Chinese writings and its ideology)
- In China, many of the symbols used in folk art are derived from traditional moral teachings and legend stories that have been passed on from generation to generation.
- **Four basic symbols for a happy life are luck (*fu*), wealth or officialdom (*lu*) longevity (*shou*), and happiness (*xi*).**
- People always believed that the death of children was due to the effect of evil. Therefore, children ware is always decorated with auspicious designs (symbols) to portray the presence of supernatural power to ward off the evils and the attainment for the four elements for a happy life.
- **Five cardinal virtues for the Chinese are good morals, propriety (good behavior), justice, benevolence (humanity) and trust.**

- Types of Chinese children's hats include rice bowl hat, wind hat, animal hat, open crown hat, scholar cap, and crown hat.

2. Embroidery

- Embroidery was a symbol of femininity and feminine accomplishment in traditional Chinese society. Every stitch and thread of a mother's embroidery work on children's hats, bibs, shoes, clothes, and baby carriers is the deepest expression of a mother's affectionate embrace to her child.
- Since the invention of silk 4000 years ago, embroidery has become a common folk art in China.
- Basic cloths for embroidery include linen, cotton hemp, ramie, wool, flax, batik, satin, and silk.
- Needles are about 3-centimetre and they are made of ivory, bone, copper, bronze, or steel.
- Stitches include chain stitch, satin stitch (brick stitch which give interesting textured effects), couching (a way to anchor gold and silver thread), *dazi* (Pekinese stitch, knot stitch, or "forbidden" stitch), **cord** stitch, **horse tail couching** technique, **cross** stitch, **split thread** stitch, etc. A stitch has many variations and went by a variety of names.
- Embroidery and appliqué are the most used techniques for the decoration of children's clothing.

III. The Miao and Dong Chinese Ethnic Minorities in Southwest China

- There are 8 million Miao and 2.51 Dong in China. They mostly live in Guizhou, Yunan, Hunan, Schuan, Gangdon, Hubei, and Gungxi.
- The Homongs (in southeast China) are called the "cotton clothes" people.
- When girls are eight or nine, they begin to learn the traditional embroidery and weaving techniques for making baby carriers.
- Clothes making process include picking cotton, extracting cotton from the cotton flower, looming yarn, starching yarn, raising silkworms, extracting silk threads from the cocoon, looming silk dyeing and embroidery. Girls may also learn batik technique.
- Traditional Miao and Dong art works include different stitch tenuous in embroidery, weaving, paper cutting, and making silver ornaments.
- Miaos are grouped by the dominant color of their clothing.
- The Dong people worship the sun.
- Miao mothers in Taijiang County, Guizhou Province and Gingpo County, Yunnan use their aprons to make baby carriers.

IV. Symbolism and Folklore in Chinese Children's Hats and Baby Carriers

- Symbols are the foundation on which the artworks are built. Therefore, to appreciate the artwork, one must, first, understand the definitions and the meanings attach to symbols used in the folk art.
- Baby carriers (and hats) reflect the art and soul of the Miao and the Dong people in southwestern China.
- Mothers and their babies are bonded by the baby carriers.
- Different shapes and patterns of Chinese children's hats have different meanings. Traditionally, children wore different types of hats from infancy up to early teens.
- Young children wore hats for protection against evil spirits and then, as the child grew older, wearing hat was a wish for good luck when taking examinations.
- The rite of passage for adulthood included a ceremony for wearing the adult cap (*kuan*).
- Hats were symbols of mothers' wishes and moral teaching for children.
- The study of Chinese children's hats reveals the fabric of peasants' life in rural China.

- There are four ways to employ symbolism in folk art:
 1. To invoke good fortune
 2. To outwit the evil forces ever present
 3. To imply social achievement
 4. To wish for happiness and longevity

- **Symbolic Meanings of the Auspicious Motifs**

Bat: The homonym *fu* stands for both “bat” and “happiness.”
 Bird: shaman (Maio’s legend), messenger, laurel achievement, and rich life
 Buddha’s hand: wealth and divine protecting
 Butterfly: joy, marital happiness, and origin of the Miao race
 Cat: can spot evil lurking, protectors of silk worm, and longevity (octogenarian)
 Cockerel: reliable, achievement and fame, and the emblem of an official
 Crane: longevity and civil officers of the first rank
 Deer: wealth and achievement
 Dragon: emblem of imperial authority, male vigor and fertility, rain, the supreme force and power
 Endless motif and mystic knot: eternity and longevity
 Eight Trigrams (Pa Gua): the basis of an ancient system of divination and philosophy, a mystical symbol showing eight groups of triple broken and unbroken lines representing the eight points of compass, and often arranged in a circle with the *yin-yang* symbol in the center
 Fish (and gold fish): A homonym for fish, *yu*, means superfluity or abundance, successful passing of an examination (“Carp jumps over the dragon gate”), freedom and conjugal blessing
 Gourd: longevity and many offspring
 Human figures: Neolithic image of human figures to present tribal union
 Laughing Buddha (*Mi-Leh Fo*): wealth and good fortune
 Lion: protects children from harm, often depicted in green, and intelligence
 Lotus: purity, fruitfulness, perfection and Buddha
 Melon: to have many offspring
 Monkey (Lang Mei): ancestor of Miao people in a fairy tale
 Peach: longevity and immortality
 Peony: wealth and nobility
 Phoenix: Goodness and benevolence, empress, bride and purity
 Pine: long life, vigor, strength, and vitality
 Pomegranate: abundance and a desire for many children and grandchildren
 Qilin: A mystical composite beast with a dragon’s head, a scaly body, and bushy lion’s tail, a pair of horns and horse’s hooves; high rank, wisdom and a fairy sending baby to parents
 Revolving pattern (Huei Motif): endless connections
 Rong Ball: hero’s courage
 Ruyi: “as you wish” or “in accordance with your heart’s desire”
 Shou: longevity
 Shuangxi: double happiness
 Spiral Pattern: to be united forever
 Sun: heaven and emperor; enlightenment’ called “ancestral mother” by the Dong people
 Tassels: longevity
 The three rounds: the three accomplishments (in civil examinations)
 Thunder line: prehistoric emblem; often combined with the *wan* motif
 Tiger: protects children from evil
 Wan: often confused with swastika; longevity
 Yin Yang (*Taiji or Taichi*): the interaction of opposites in nature; the light portion, *yang*, signifies the male and the dark side, *yin*, symbolizes the female

- **Popular Legends and Folktales in Chinese Folk Art**

Shelter in the Mulberry Garden
Liu Hai Fishes for the Three-legged Toad
Picking up the Jade Bracelet
Journey to the West
Ma Gu Presents Gift for Longevity
All Men Are Brothers
The Fairy Spouse
Rendezvous at Mulberry Garden

- **Grouping of Symbols**

Three friends in winter: the plum, pine, and bamboo
 Three lucky fruits: peach, pomegranate, and Buddha's hand
 Three noble flowers: plum blossom for winter, magnolia or orchid for spring, peony or lotus for summer, and chrysanthemum for autumn
 The four attributes of the scholar: books, scroll paintings, lute, and chessboard
 The four treasures in the scholar's study: brush, ink slab, ink stone, and paper
 Five poisons (Five evil creatures): snake, three-legged toad, scorpion, spider, and centipede
 The longevity symbols: bamboo, butterfly clouds, mountains, peach, pine and plum blossom, sacred fungus, *shou*, *shouxing*, and *wan*
 Twelve animals of the zodiac: rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, cockerel, dog, and pig (2007 is the year of pig.)
 The three happiness in life: *fu*, *lu*, and *shou*
 The heavenly twins: *hehe* (These two little boys are symbols of peace and harmony.)
 The eight Daoist immortals: Each immortal represents a different condition in life (poverty, wealth, aristocracy, plebianism, youth, age, masculinity, and femininity); the eight Daoist emblems (fan, sword, gourd, castanet, castanet, flute, flower basket, bamboo tube and rods, and lotus)
 The eight Buddhist emblems: wheel of the law, conch shell, umbrella, canopy, jar, pair of fish, endless knot

IV. Selected References

- Christi Lan Lin and Phylis Lan Lin, *Chinese Children's Hats: Symbolism and Folklore*. Indianapolis: University of Indianapolis Press, 1996.
- Christi Lan Lin, *Bonding via Baby Carriers: The Art & Soul of the Miao and Dong People*. Taipei: Les Enphants Co., 2001. (In English, Chinese, and Japanese)
- Christi Lan Lin, *Symbolism of Chinese Children's Bib: A Mother's Affectionate Embrace* (English and Japanese translations by Yu-Chiao Liu Lan and Brenda Lin). Taipei: Les Enphants Co., 2006. (International distribution by University of Indianapolis Press)
- For a more detailed discussion on the dragon and the Chinese heritage, see: Christi Lan Lin and Phylis Lan Lin, "Dragon Culture in China," a presentation made at the annual conference of the Chinese Professional and Academic Association annual meeting, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2000.

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