

Liu Huijun¹, Mai Yulin², Lin Xilei³

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¹⁻³ China Hanshan Normal University (Guangdong Province) 521041, China

ON THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF JIESHENG CLAY SCULPTURE IN SHANWEI CITY

Based on the investigation of the intangible cultural heritage of Shanwei City and the current state of clay sculpture in Jiesheng Town, Shanwei City, as well as through interviews with Zhou Guitong, the fifth-generation inheritor of Jiesheng Clay sculpture, the distinctive features of Jiesheng Clay sculpture have been explored. This article primarily elucidates the cultural significance of Jiesheng Clay sculpture from three aspects: material, craftsmanship, and imagery. The inheritors of Jiesheng Clay sculpture continue to advance the development strategy of branding the craft, thereby benefiting the local cultural economy.

Keywords: Jiesheng; Clay Sculpture; Culture; Inheritance.

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Лю Хэйцзюнь¹, Май Юйлинь², Линь Силэй³¹⁻³ Ханьшаньский педагогический университет (провинция Гуандун) 521041, Китай

О КУЛЬТУРНОМ ХАРАКТЕРЕ ГЛИНЯНОЙ СКУЛЬПТУРЫ В г.п. ЦЗЕШЭН ПРИ г. ШАНЬВЭЙ

На основе исследования нематериального культурного наследия города Шаньвэй и текущей ситуации с глиняными скульптурами в городском посёлке Цзешэн, при городе Шаньвэй, а также через интервью с Чжоу Гуйтуном, наследником глиняных скульптур Цзешэн в пятом поколении, были изучены характеристики глиняных скульптур Цзешэн в городе Шаньвэй. В этой статье в основном объясняется культурная природа глиняной скульптуры Цзешэн с трех аспектов: материалы, производственные навыки и образ. Наследники глиняной скульптуры г.п. Цзешэн при г. Шаньвэй продолжают изучать идею развития брендинга глиняных скульптур, принося пользу местной культурной экономике.

Ключевые слова: Цзешэн; глина; культура; наследство.

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Авторы:

¹ **Лю Хэйцзюнь** – кандидат наук Института изящных искусств, Ханьшаньский педагогический университет, направление исследований: теория искусства и дизайн.
1069923996@qq.com

Authors:

Liu Huijun – Ph. D., Institute of Fine Arts, Hanshan Normal University, research direction: art theory and design.



² **Май Юлинь** – Ханьшаньский педагогический университет, 521041, направление исследований: экологический художественный дизайн.
2891149336@qq.com

Mai Yulin – Hanshan Normal University, 521041, research direction: environmental art design.



³ **Линь Силэй** – институт литературы и журналистики, Ханьшаньский педагогический университет, 521041; направление исследований: язык и искусство.
2045260974@qq.com

Lin Xilei – School of Literature and Journalism, China Hanshan Normal University, 521041, research direction: language and art.



Located in a coastal area deeply influenced by maritime culture, Jiesheng Town in Shanwei City, a historic cultural town with over 600 years of history, has preserved many precious folk arts. Mr. Zhou Zhongfu and Mr. Zhou Guitong are outstanding representatives of clay sculpture in Jiesheng Town. In 2012, the clay sculpture of Jiesheng Town in Shanwei City was listed in the fourth batch of provincial intangible cultural heritage in Guangdong Province, becoming a typical representative of traditional handicrafts, further affirming its cultural value and artistic charm. The clay sculpture of Jiesheng Town is closely intertwined with local folklore, beliefs, aesthetics, and social life, serving as an important carrier for inheriting and showcasing regional culture [1]. The cultural value of Jiesheng clay sculpture

is multifaceted and layered. It is not only a crystallization of the local natural environment and culture history but also a reflection of the wisdom and craftsmanship of folk artists.

1. MATERIAL OF JIESHENG CLAY SCULPTURE

The soil in Jiesheng Town is non-sticky, possibly containing certain minerals or saline-alkali properties, with good quality and unique types. Using the local “Wujin” soil, the craftsmanship is often publicly displayed with low technical barriers but high demands on the artist’s skill and experience. The primary material used in Jiesheng clay sculpture is a unique local clay, known for its fine texture, strong adhesion, and high plasticity. This clay is closely related to the local geographical environment, having undergone long-term weathering and sedimentation to form a high-quality resource suitable for clay sculpture. After obtaining the clay, the artists are going to screen, sun-dry, and pound it for the impurity removal, humidity adjustment, and uniform clay through beating. These seemingly simple steps reflect the artists’ deep understanding of material properties and respect for the natural environment. Additionally, during the sculpting process, the artists incorporate auxiliary materials such as straw and cotton fibers to enhance the sculpture’s toughness and strength, preventing cracking or deformation during drying and firing. This careful selection of materials demonstrates the artists’ profound knowledge and skillful use of local natural resources. In traditional views, clay sculpture requires meticulous material handling with each step carrying the craftsmanship and cultural spirit passed down by ancestors. For auxiliary materials like straw and cotton, the artists will cut or knead them into suitable lengths and shapes before mixing them with clay. This mixing process requires precise proportions and skilled techniques, symbolizing the fusion and coexistence of different elements and reflecting the cultural concept of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, much like the blending of diverse local cultures in folk art.

The exterior paint of Jiesheng clay sculpture is an important component, serving both as an aesthetic enhancement and a means to extend the sculpture’s lifespan, lasting it durable for centuries. Traditionally, mineral-based paints were used, but since the reform and opening-up, factory-produced chemical paints have become more common. Through the use of color materials, Jiesheng clay sculpture conveys the people’s aspirations for a better life and their reverence for traditional cultural values. Since the sculptural materials themselves are highly expressive, the artists use the plasticity of clay to create various figures, animals, and folk scenes. For example, when depicting traditional farming culture, they sculpt hard-working farmers and farming tools like oxen and plows, vividly reflecting local production methods and agricultural traditions. Additionally, the figures from myths and folk tales, such as the Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea and Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King, are represented through clay sculpture. These works are not only artistic creations but also direct expressions of folk cultural beliefs and spiritual pursuits, allowing traditional culture to be inherited and promoted through material forms. Traditional Chinese culture is a complex system formed by the convergence of various cultural forms, embodying a “pluralistic unity” composed of numerous elements [2] 285. As a local social ideology, Jiesheng clay sculpture is rooted in the customs and sentiments of the local society. Materials sourced from nature are integral to clay sculpture art, while the materials, techniques, and aesthetics inevitably evolve with societal development. The comprehensive application of different historical and cultural elements in clay sculpture materials expresses the metaphorical connotations of the works, making them microcosmic carriers of regional cultural integration.

In the inheritance process of Jiesheng clay sculpture, the cultural significance of materials remains a core aspect. Through oral and hands-on teaching, veteran artists pass down material selection standards, processing techniques, and the cultural meanings embedded within them to the younger generation. Young artists not only master the craftsmanship but also deeply understand the cultural connotations behind the materials, ensuring the continuation of cultural genes in Jiesheng clay sculpture. For example, in some family-run clay sculpture workshops, new generations of artists still follow the material formulas and techniques passed down by their predecessors, maintaining the authenticity and continuity of the material culture in clay sculpture. With the progress of time and society, Jiesheng clay sculpture continues its innovation. Therefore, the materials have seen new developments. On one hand, modern materials such as eco-friendly paints and new clay additives have been introduced, expanding the possibilities for clay sculpture creation without compromising the traditional cultural essence of the materials. For instance, the use of new paints has made the colors of clay sculptures more vibrant and durable, broadening the expressive range of the works. On the other hand, the application scenarios of clay sculptures have expanded from traditional folk rituals and decorations to modern tourism souvenirs and cultural creative products. In these new contexts, the material culture of Jiesheng clay sculpture is presented to the public in new forms, such as stationery and home decor designed with clay sculpture elements, allowing more people to appreciate and experience its unique cultural charm.

2. CRAFTSMANSHIP OF JIESHENG CLAY SCULPTURE

The cultural symbolism of material processing in the works, along with its close connection to regional culture and its manifestation in inheritance and development, fully demonstrates the rich cultural connotations embedded in the materials of Jiesheng clay sculpture. Although Jiesheng clay sculpture is known for its exquisite craftsmanship without technical restriction, it demands high levels of experience and sculpting ability from the artisans, which can be summarized as “three-parts sculpting, seven-parts coloring.” The folk artists integrate contemporary cultural elements, evolving from simple figurine molding to creating statues of characters from operas and myths, reflecting their innovative spirit and artistic pursuit. To prevent cracking during the drying process, the artisans will add plant ash and fine sand to the clay to enhance structural stability. The production process of Jiesheng clay sculpture involves steps such as soil selection, mold-making, shaping, drying, and painting, with each step showcasing the artisans' dedication and meticulous craftsmanship [3].

During the sculpting process, the quality of the clay directly affects the final outcome. The saline-alkaline nature of Jiesheng soil makes it less sticky, so the local “Wujin” soil, known for its good plasticity and breathability, is predominantly used. The production process is as follows: after sun-drying, crushing, sieving with iron wire mesh, and soaking in water to remove impurities and improve the uniformity and plasticity of clay, the folk artists obtain the materials for making clay sculptures with fine sand and cotton added in proportion to enhance its extensibility. During shaping, the artisans use their techniques like hooking, picking, smearing, and kneading to form the basic structure, followed by detailing each part. The entire process relies on manual skills, with self-made tools used for hard-to-reach areas.

Table 1

<i>Name of clay sculpture images</i>	<i>Site of clay collection</i>	<i>Method of clay processing</i>	<i>Cultural metaphor of clay processing method</i>	<i>Function of clay processing method</i>
Sacrificial deity clay sculptures	Red Clay from Feng Mountain, Shanwei City	Clay stored in sealed environment for three years	Clay accumulates essence of heaven and earth	To eliminate organisms in clay
Toy clay sculptures	Riverbank soil from Jiesheng Town	Immediate processing and utilization	Accessible to all preferences	Mass production of clay sculpture toys
Architectural component clay sculptures	Mixed sand from coastal areas	Traditional rammed construction	Nature-tempered sand brings good fortune	To enhance durability of vernacular architecture

The cultural significance of clay sculpture materials and techniques stems from deep-seated traditional beliefs, as shown in *Table 1*. The belief in clay idols provides spiritual comfort and support, helping people maintain an optimistic, upright, resilient, and steadfast mindset in the face of difficulties and challenges. In the religious belief system of Shanwei City, the faith in Mazu (the Goddess of the Sea) is deeply rooted in people's hearts. During major festival temple fairs, the clay statue of Mazu becomes the focal point of worship, and the statue of Guan Yu in the Guan Di Temple is highly revered [4]. During the sacrificial rituals, the clay statue of Guan Yu embodies loyalty, wealth, and safety in people's minds. Therefore, from a deeper perspective, these Jiesheng clay sculptures reflect the spiritual pursuits of the local people.

3. THE IMAGERY OF JIESHENG CLAY SCULPTURES

Jiesheng Town in Shanwei has developed a unique clay sculpture art over the years. This art form has evolved alongside local religious beliefs, folk activities, and daily life. The imagery of these clay sculptures is not only an artistic expression but also a vivid representation of the region's historical culture, social life, and aesthetic values, holding significant cultural and research value. The clay sculpture imagery of Jiesheng Town continuously integrates Central Plains Culture with local maritime culture, resulting in a more diverse range of cultural themes. These images include heroic figures from historical stories, mythical characters from legends, such as Guan Gong, as well as household items like tea bowls and cups. The stylistic evolution has shifted from simple and rustic to intricate and delicate, while retaining an exaggerated flair, vividly showcasing the unique cultural connotations and aesthetic pursuits of the Shanwei region. These sculptures have become a living vehicle for the transmission of regional culture. In people's cognitive world, the phenomenon of beauty gradually forms a consensus of imagery, which, in the context of clay sculptures,

manifests as expressive and abstract forms. Through this expressive abstraction, vague concepts are transformed into definitive spiritual norms. "Imagery is a 'mental image' formed through the classification of the shapes and features of objects, a mental image imbued with emotional and intentional direction [5] (53–54)." Thus, the charm of clay sculpture art lies in the process of reinventing imagery. New forms of clay sculptures depend on the environment in which folk artists operate, and artistic innovation may lean toward tradition or embrace various stylistic transformations. Artistic innovation is always a realm of possibilities.

Furthermore, the colors used in Jiesheng Town clay sculptures serve as an important artistic language, making the sculptures vibrant and rich in hue. The pigments are commonly used including red, yellow, blue, green, white, black and so on. These colors are not chosen merely for aesthetic appeal but also for their specific cultural meanings. Red is often used to depict clothing, flowers, and important decorative elements, symbolizing aspirations for a better life and blessings. Yellow is frequently used for statues of deities or figures of high status, reflecting reverence for divinity and authority. Blue may be used to depict skies, oceans, or mystical backgrounds, creating an ethereal and fantastical atmosphere. Green often appears in scenes of plants and rural landscapes, representing the vitality of nature. White symbolizes purity and innocence, while black conveys depth and solemnity. The interplay of these colors enriches the harmony of the artwork and embodies the philosophical concept of balancing yin and yang, as well as the unity of opposites.

The process of creating clay sculptures is not only a demonstration of folk techniques but also a transmission of culture and emotion. Each folk artist infuses their experiences, insights, and innovations into their work, giving each sculpture a unique soul. Influenced by religion, coastal regions have seen the emergence of clay sculptures depicting deities and figures from Taoism, Buddhism and literal novels. The imagery often leans toward mythological and traditional stories, with figures like Mazu being particularly prevalent [6]. These clay sculptures are solemn and dignified, embodying the religious prayers and reverence of the people. At the same time, due to the prevalence of Temple Fair Culture, small clay figurines, known as "Tugongzai", are widely popular. These figurines, with their simple and endearing forms, often depict folk legends and everyday scenes, such as the "fisherwoman", reflecting strong folk customs and the essence of daily life. They have become a part of people's entertainment and carry auspicious meanings.

In the history of clay sculpture, the heir Zhou Zhongfu stands out as a representative figure. With over four decades of experience, he has boldly innovated while preserving traditional techniques. His Mazu statues retain the goddess' traditional benevolent and dignified image but innovative details in clothing textures and dynamic postures, enhancing their artistic appeal. These works are collected and displayed in many important temples in Shanwei. Additionally, Zhou Guitong has actively engaged in clay sculpture education, offering courses in local schools and nurturing generations of young clay sculpture enthusiasts, injecting fresh vitality into the continuation of Jiesheng clay art. Mr. Zhou Guitong believes that Jiesheng clay sculptures belong not only to the inheritors but also to the people. The transmission and development of Jiesheng clay sculpture techniques largely rely on family and master-apprentice traditions.

The diverse themes of Jiesheng clay sculptures disseminate folk culture, making traditional opera, legends, and mythological stories accessible to all through vivid and expressive forms. These sculptures reflect people's lifestyles and aesthetic values. In our view, the vitality of clay sculptures shifts with the properties of the materials. The meaning of clay

sculpture imagery continuously extends and transforms into the material's symbolism, as well as the traditional beauty and morality it conveys. "New meanings emerge through artistic and religious activities, and only through specific artistic or religious creations can such meanings arise [7] (188)." The art of Jiesheng clay sculpture gains broader recognition through the effective economic activities of folk artists. The audiences can appreciate the significance of clay sculptures at any time or place.

In the Hailufeng region, traditional temple fairs serve as gathering points for folk beliefs and cultural practices. The traditional beliefs, morals, and concepts embodied in clay sculptures are widely disseminated through these fairs. Notable temple fairs include those at Xuanwu Mountain, Fengshan Mazu Temple, and Lianhuashan Jiming Temple, which have a profound local influence. In addition to their religious and cultural roles, Jiesheng clay sculptures also serve practical purposes, such as children's toys. The "Tugongzai" figurines, with their lively forms and rich symbolism, convey folk wisdom and emotions. In some Shanwei households, Jiesheng clay sculptures are purchased as decorative items. These sculptures come in various forms, such as the character "Fu" (fortune), the twelve zodiac animals, lions, lotus lanterns, ancestral statues for family shrines, and statues of the Earth God and Goddess in local temples. These realistic and solemn statues reflect descendants' respect and remembrance of their ancestors. During the sacrifice rituals, offerings are placed before the statues, and incense is burned to pray for blessings. From a cultural perspective, these Jiesheng clay sculptures carry rich folk culture and traditional values. Using famous landmarks, traditional folk deities, and Buddhist figures as themes, and employing folk artistic techniques, they embody the wish to "abandon evil and promote good," directly manifesting in physical forms and becoming shared symbols of faith in people's hearts.

CONCLUSION

The unique geographical location and historical development of Jiesheng Town have given rise to a rich and diverse regional culture. Local maritime culture, agricultural practices, and religious beliefs have all left profound imprints on the materials, techniques, and imagery of clay sculptures. Jiesheng clay sculptures continuously absorb the essence of other art forms, gradually enriching and refining their techniques and expressions. However, the traditional materials, craftsmanship, and cultural connotations have always been preserved and passed down, serving as an important cultural bridge connecting the past and the present. Through interviews, it was learned that inheritors of Jiesheng clay sculpture have made significant efforts in preserving and developing this art form. Through research projects, the inheritors like Zhou Guitong have been promoting the creative transformation and innovative development of local traditional culture. The methods are as follows:

1. Digital Design and Online Marketing: The use of e-commerce platforms has effectively expanded sales channels and increased market reach for intangible cultural heritage products like Jiesheng clay sculptures.
2. Synergistic Development of Urban Culture and Creative Industries: The integration of cultural and creative industries with urban development drives economic growth and builds new city brands.
3. Creation of a New Cultural Tourism Image for Shanwei: Artists are crafting a new cultural tourism identity for Shanwei, establishing a competitive "culture+" brand.

4. Rural Revitalization and Cultural Confidence: In the implementation of rural revitalization strategies, the coordinated development of rural revitalization, cultural confidence, and city branding is emphasized.

In the realm of modern art, Jiesheng clay sculptures are no longer confined to traditional folk art but are recognized as a unique artistic expression in Shanwei City and its surrounding towns. The preservation and development of Jiesheng clay sculptures contribute to strengthening local cultural identity and promoting the growth of the local cultural economy.

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