

## The Study of Aesthetic Features Interpretation and Cultural Identity of Baiku Yao Dress Patterns

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### Abstract

The objective of this research is to design the Baiku Yao Dress Culture Learning Center in Huaili Village and to select 6 interviewees using a heterogeneous sampling method. The majority of them have been dressed in Baikuyao national costumes for more than three months and can provide the interviewer with the necessary information. Semi-structured interviews, literature analysis, and participant observation were all used in this study. Thematic analysis was used to examine the data. The national memory of Baiku Yao created the aesthetic characteristics of this ethnic group during the formation of Baiku Yao dress art; the national memory of Baiku Yao is embodied in the aesthetic characteristics of costumes aesthetic feeling, which explains the cultural identity of Baiku Yao dress. The findings reveal the following four scenarios: First, a look at the historical development of Baiku Yao dress patterns. The aesthetic composition and cultural significance of Baiku Yao dress patterns are discussed in the second part. Third, the identification of Baiku Yao dress patterns and cultural changes. Fourth, the "Huaili Village Cultural Learning Center" capitalizes on the ability of Huaili Village residents to inherit active

communication community culture through education, training, and exhibitions, and gives learners full play.

**Keywords:** aesthetic, dress culture, identity, inherit

## **Introduction**

The Yao Nationality is widely distributed in South China with numerous ethnic groups such as Guoshan Yao, Pingdi Yao and Pai Yao. Anthropology focuses on such issues as means of livelihood, exchange, function, structure and the changes of times and attaches importance to cultural phenomenon and structure description and interpretation. The academic community tend to focus more on traditional subjects and follow the methods of literature review and interpretation when conducting research into the Yao Nationality in South China, attempting to explain the origin of Yao ethnic groups, their cultural structure and meaning and construct their knowledge genealogy of ethnic history. However, in such process, art is just source material under traditional issue study framework; the aesthetic values and emotions as well as imagination of art itself are frequently neglected (He, 2009). British Scholar E.H. Gombrich pointed out in *The Story of Art*, the art history of a certain nationality is the history of continuous changing in ethnic traditional culture. Any art work from the artistic world is both a retrospective to the past and a guide to the future (Gombrich, 2006, p. 8). Therefore, intangible cultural heritage is a powerful cultural capital or resource (Blake, 2008, p.45-50). It is of great significance to observe and interpret the cultural changes and its significance to the modern times from the perspective of art. As intangible cultural heritage, traditional crafts have at least two values: technical and aesthetic (Ma & Liu, 2020, p.19-29).

Baiku Yao in Huaili Village is one of the important branches of Yao Nationality in Nanling Corridor, China. Residents of Baiku Yao in Huaili Village, Nandan County lived on the mountains, which fostered their making and arrangement of costumes and dress based on the special living environment. Males usually put on black coats and white trousers while females always put on black blouses and blue skirts. Compared with other ethnic groups of Yao, apart from the cloth-making skills like embroidery, inlaying, dyeing and dyeing with special sticky pastes, Baiku Yao dresses are endowed with various figures on the basis such as spiders and chicks, which are the exclusive cultural symbols and aesthetic means of Baiku Yao to spice their lives. It is of prominent cultural aesthetic status and value in China's minority costume.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To study the origin of Baiku Yao dress patterns.
2. To study the aesthetic symbols and cultural meanings of Baiku Yao dress patterns.
3. To study Baiku Yao dress culture changes and identity.
4. To design Baiku Yao Dress Cultural Learning Center, in order to promote cultural communication and integration and to push the building of cultural soft power and sustainable development.

### **Research Methodology**

In this study, it is qualitative research, six respondents were divided into three groups. The first group was the policy makers. They are the curator of the Baiku Yao Ecological Museum and the chief of Rihu Yao Township. The second group

consisted of the inheritors, who led some women to engage in the production of Baiku Yao costumes in Huaili Village. The third group consists of related practitioners who run the business of Baiku Yao costumes in Lihu Yao Township, and they were selected through purposive sampling. Most of them have been engaged in Baiku Yao costumes for more than three months and have played an important role in the preservation and transmission of Baiku Yao costumes.

### **Population and sample**

The article observes and interprets the views of the research participants through field research (Muggleton,2000). Personnel and sample groups involved in this paper fall into three groups: two cultural inheritors, two related personnel of government organizations and two relevant practitioners and the designated sample size were six people. All personnel involved have been engaged in Baiku Yao dress culture study for more than three months and were able to provide desirable information.

### **The creation of research instruments**

The prime data collection instrument was semi-structured interview. As dialogues in interviews were free and various, there might be radical changes among participants. The basic structure and question list were as follows: interview with inheritors focuses on the origin, aesthetic value and cultural meaning of Baiku Yao dress patterns; interview with government officials will inquire after budget and management plans; and interviews with practitioners talks about the current status and prospect.

### **Data collection**

The researcher had interviews with six participants (ranging from 30 to 70 years old), including one national-level inheritor and one provincial -level inheritor

of Baiku Yao dress culture; the Curator and Deputy Curator of Baiku Yao Ecological Museum; two proprietors of Baiku Yao dresses.

The researcher had explained research purpose, application procedure and cooperation means to all participants and promised that all interviews were reserved only for academic purpose.

During the interview, the researcher would prepare interview guidelines, camera, notebook, recorder and video equipment for data collection. Picture-taking, sound recording and video were allowed by the participants.

The interviews were conducted in the form of semi-structured ones with questions and answers to guide the participants to express their personal opinions. Locations for interviews were: the production protection demonstrative base of Baiku Yao dresses and Baiku Yao Ecological Museum.

All data collected, the researcher would sort out all recording documents and notes, categorize all information and data based on contents and check whether the acquired information and data were sufficient with the preparation for information and data complement.

### **Data analysis**

Qualitative analysis was adopted to summarize and figure out all data collected by investigation, observation and interview. Taking figures, patterns and colors of Baiku Yao dresses as foothold, generalized description and analysis were conducted to seek for the cultural connotation and analyze the processing methods and reasons of Baiku Yao dress patterns. Combining Baiku Yao ethnic belief and personality, the relation between the aesthetic features of the pattern and ethnic culture was elaborated. On the basis, the demonstrative management project, Huaili Village Baiku Yao Dress Cultural Learning Center will be designed and constructed.

## Research Results

### 1. General contexts and the origin of Baiku Yao Dress Pattern in Huaili Village

Bodily decoration is the important content and means of cultural expression, because of which anthropology study always starts with dress culture to observe and elaborate the structure and connotation of ethnic group culture. The dress of a certain ethnic group basically serves people's basis needs and the development of its dress will be endowed with aesthetic meaning, and the state of collective jubilation (Durkheim, 2011, pp. 492-494), then become the form of social culture embodiment and expression.

### 2. Aesthetic Symbols and cultural meanings of Baiku Yao Dress Pattern

The aesthetic system of Baiku Yao dress of Huaili Village (Figure 1) consists of folk tales and myths, epics, dress taboos and local aesthetic preferences and it is expressed in production of dress patterns and everyday dressing. The unique aesthetic system of Baiku Yao is the symbol and sign of ethnic group culture and also the significant media for mutual communication and meaning exchange among the local people.

#### Figure 1

*Female and Males Dresses of Baiku Yao*



**Source:** Self-photography (2022)

## 2.1 Agricultural Production and Geometric Patterns

Geometric ones is used in dress patterns of Baiku Yao. From early slash-and-burn cultivation to current small-scale agricultural production, the farming activity of Baiku Yao is influenced by natural environment and tools. Therefore, their aesthetic thoughts are correlated to agricultural production.

In production and daily life, local people of Baiku Yao gradually develop their dress culture by observing the surrounding and substance.

1. Union-Jack pattern and its aesthetic meaning. This Pattern (Figure 2) belongs to the abstract recognition of local people of Baiku Yao. For example, the common-seen union-jack pattern, originated from early production labour of Baiku Yao and was often seen in patterns of casual dress. It is primarily drawn with special sticky pastes and embellished with embroidery coupled with single color and various patterns, which symbolizes long-standing, circle of life and lasting prosperity.

**Figure 2**

*Union-Jack Pattern*



**Source:** Self-photography (2022)

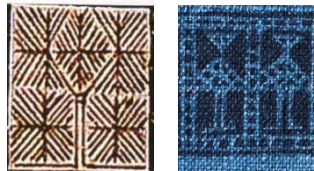
In terms of color, filed investigation found out that there is a notion that local people of Baiku Yao grasped primitive techniques in silkworm breeding and silk reeling and the silkworm they raised is golden silkworm which produced the golden silk. Currently there is no written record about such raising technology but materials

from field investigation have reflected the production level of Baiku Yao to some degree when they migrated to Huaili Village. The direct effect is the spread and application of color and in Baiku Yao dresses, the color orange is widely used both in male and female clothes.

2. Square patterns and the aesthetic meanings. Squared patterns came into being during the early migration of Baiku Yao. The principal part is a square pattern made up of tens of square sunflower embroidery and partially decorated with embroidery and wax printing patterns of thumb-size, which are extremely abstract wax-printing patterns and called “chicken little”, “person”, “flower” and “scissors”, etc. (See Figure 3-6) (Luan, 2014).

#### Figure 3 - 4

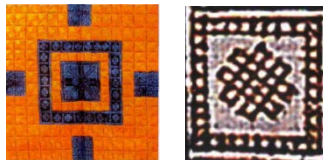
*(Left) Chicken Little Pattern / (Right) Person Pattern*



**Source:** Self-photography (2022)

#### Figure 5 - 6

*(Left) Flower Pattern / (Right) Scissors Pattern*



**Source:** Self-photography (2022)



In Baiku Yao dresses, the pattern of bird and flower, the pattern of fish-bone, chicken and flower are of unique aesthetic meaning and value compared with other branches of Yao. For example, the bird and flower pattern in intersecting parallels structure (Figure 7) is mainly made up of abstract flying birds. According to field investigation materials, this pattern is to express local people's native feelings towards the life and labour surroundings of Huaili Village and it is the artistic representation of Baiku Yao's nature and animal worship.

### Figure 7

#### *Bird and Flower Pattern*



**Source:** Self-photography (2022)

What separates Baiku Yao from other branches is that little chicken pattern is often seen on its dresses and it is usually in square form. Field investigation found out that many local people think that it originated from labouring legends of Baiku Yao. After migrating to Huaili Village, local people of Baiku Yao were of shreds and patches in the hostile natural environment. On seeing the golden pheasants with beautiful feathers, local people began to make dresses through imitation. The method of zoosemy is adopted for abstract expression with the little chicken image, hoping for more warm and beautiful dresses, which gradually fostered the current chicken little pattern. With production activities, the gradually-formed animal worship and relevant aesthetic ideas are still continued.

## 2.2 Ancestor Memory and Life Rituals

Ancestor memory and life rituals: dress culture is closely related to the memory and identity of life rituals. Two square continuous pattern on male waistband (Figure 8) is woven with bright-colored silk threads and symbolizes several generations of ancestors. It is found through field investigation that the pattern is widely seen on casual dresses and is the memorial practice of Baiku Yao folks towards their ancestors. What's more, there are family god pattern and dragon-path pattern. The image of family god is usually a person-on-horse pattern. Usually woven in embroidery, it is of plain shape and geometric features and moreover combined with dragon-path pattern (Jia & Jia, 2014, pp. 74-79). The long and narrow figure of dragon-path pattern is completed with dyeing with special paste and is used on "silk cloth" to commemorate ancestors. By wearing dresses with similar patterns, folks of Baiku Yao manifest the power of ancestors and vision of the contemporary generation and correlate the ancestors with their ethnic group.

### *Figure 8*

*Male Waistband of Baiku Yao*



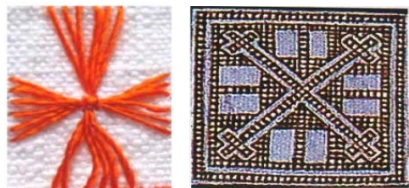
**Source:** Self-photography (2022)

Love and fertility: person-figure (Figure3-4 Right) and flowering branch patterns (Figure 9-10 Left). The appearance of such patterns are shaped with blocks and two figures of "person" are woven on the black cloth. People of Baiku Yao believe that person-figure pattern usually denotes the idea of love and fertility. Flowering branch patterns on male trousers and female pleated skirt and female-

dressed person figure echo each other. In daily life and festival celebrations, the local natives regard them as a call of emotions.

**Figure 9 - 10**

*(Left) Flowering Branch Pattern / (Right) Bamboo Tube Flower Pattern*



**Source:** Self-photography (2022)

Bamboo tube flower pattern presents the change and rhyme of “short” threads among “long” threads by combining long threads with short ones. Coupled with the square pattern in the middle, cross pattern and then the square frame, the whole pattern is formulated. The whole “×” pattern demonstrates certain visual emphasis. (Figure 9-10 Right). Similar to the person-figure pattern, this one also symbolizes human’s love and fertility.

Falling leaves return to the roots (death): Beipai (an important clothing element) is the last dressing decoration worn by the local people of Baiku Yao in their lives. Beipai patterns of dresses are all made with sticky pastes without any embroidery (Figure 11-12). It represents the separation of life and death and it is more exquisite and solemn than the rituals for the alive. In Yao villages, there is designated order to put on grave-clothes. The alive will put on clothes from head to foot but for the deceased, it should be started from the foot to the head.

**Figure 11 - 12**

*(Left) Beipai Patterns (Male's Funeral) / (Right) Beipai Patterns (Female's Funeral)*



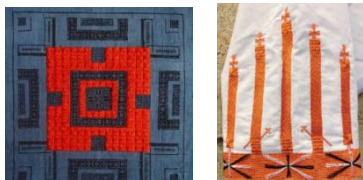
**Source:** Self-photography (2022)

### 2.3 War Memory of the Ethnic Group

War is an essential component of the ethnic group memory of Baiku Yao. Their memory of war is also presented in dresses. The pattern of royal seal of Yao (Figure13-14 Left) and the usage of red color are relevant to sacrifice rituals and wars. Different from the royal seal of other Yao branches, the one of Baiku Yao lays emphasis on construction group memory from the perspectives of color and abstract modeling. Five blocks are in parallel distribution and contrasted with white trousers. The red one in the middle is the longest while shorter on both ends. Field investigation found out that most local people of Baiku Yao are aware of the origin of the royal seal and it is related to the wars of the local ethnic groups. Baiku Yao natives pointed out that five vertical red blocks stands for five fingers (Figure13-14 Right). The prints of five fingers on dresses demonstrates the image of a bloody hand and five vertical blocks are the cultural representation of human and war. In dresses with Royal Seal Pattern, local people of Baiku Yao attend the ethnic group sacrifice rituals and finish the construction of group memory through epic and ballad chanting.

**Figure 13 - 14**

*(Left) Royal Seal of Yao Pattern / (Right) Five-finger Blood Print Pattern*



**Source:** Self-photography (2022)

**3. Baiku Yao Dress culture changes and identity**

Since 1949, with the social change and life needs in new period, local people of Baiku Yao have gradually formed two dressing habits: one is the modern dress for the collective with times change; the other is the tradition dress of the ethnic group itself. Since the reform and opening up in 1978, with the improvement of people's life and the influence of new matters and cultural touch and accommodation, people of Baiku Yao develop the open notion and new trends in aesthetic ways. Western clothes come into Chinese mainland, people's dressing style also diversify and the "modern" dressing style is accepted by people gradually. As a result, dress-making technology of Baiku Yao also embraces new trends: first, traditional patterns, modeling and color are maintained; second, on the basis, there are certain changes on dress collocation, for example there are new match styles of coats and pleated skirt to better adapt to modern life. The dressing custom with both traditional and modern styles also has certain influence on the protection, inheritance and innovation of ethnic dresses: first, aesthetic ideas of cultural inheritors will develop and accommodate with changes; second, the absorption and accommodation of modern

dress design style will transform the foreign into the familiar; third, there will be new thoughts and samples for innovation and development.

Arjun Appadurai stated that the ethnic groups, media, technology, finance and ideology are interacting and affecting with each other all over the world (Appadurai, 1996). The expression ways and contents of traditional culture are always changing.

One influential event for “Yao Nationality Dress” is to be listed in. The first batch of national intangible cultural heritage list in 2006. It significantly boosted the inheritor’s confidence. According to the interview with the inheritor Jinxiu He (Figure 15), before the acceptance by the list, they seldom paid attention to, let alone realized the importance of dress culture. When the general survey of intangible cultural heritage began in 2005, she realized that sticky-paste painting, patterns and corresponding cultural sign are attached importance to. Jinxiu He noted, “They believe that dress culture and relevant patterns are the essential representation of the folk culture of Baiku Yao”.

(Inheritor, in-depth interview)

### Figure 15

*Interview with Jinxiu He*



**Source:** Self-photography (2023)

Meanwhile, under the background of poverty alleviation projects and tourism development in Lihu of Nandan County and the drive of government, media and

fund, the innovation of Baiku Yao dresses lay emphasis on highlighting native ethnic cultural symbols, which shows certain difference from traditional dress in aesthetic and processing technology. In terms of processing technology and aesthetic idea, the traditional dress is more complicated, time-consuming, rhythmic and skilful practice (Price, 2015, pp. 81-95), bearing preference to individual aesthetic notion about the choice of patterns, figures and colors, which enables dress to be the demonstration platform of personal aesthetics and skills, accompanied by improvisation and growing (Ingold, 2013).

After 2014, Baiku Yao Ecological Museum was founded. Two producing departments of A Mei Handicraft Workshop were established to produce Baiku Yao dresses and cultural and creative products with weaving and embroidery techniques and conduct innovation processing on patterns for different parts of the dress. In 2016, the production protection demonstrative base of Yao Nationality dress was set up. New patterns and pattern design samples are widely applied since then. Compared with the traditional dress, innovative ones are made both by machines and hands and are more likely to be affected by market in aesthetic aspect. They also prefer to traditional ethnic patterns with universal meaning, which are influenced by mass media's imagination towards Baiku Yao culture. The production technology is simpler and it is more time-saving. To this point, inheritors of Baiku Yao dress culture will not reject the involvement of market and internal techniques. He Chun, deputy curator of Baiku Yao Ecological Museum noted, "The dress and patterns from the older generations must be inherited and we're willing to make it with the market and technology" (Figure 16).

(Museum administrator, in-depth interview)

**Figure 16***Interview with Chun He*

**Source:** Self-photography (2023)

Consequently, the writer thinks it is necessary to re-dig and re-arrange the dress culture of Baiku Yao. By understanding more knowledge of the pattern design techniques and processing technology of Baiku Yao dresses, the writer tries to collect and analyze the data of Baiku Yao dress patterns in the aspects of color, structure, models, styles and types and further makes analysis of the features and aesthetic notions of Baiku Yao dress, the changes and development of old and new patterns and builds a management center of Baiku Yao dress culture.

**4. Design Huaili Village Cultural Learning Center**

Based on what mentioned above, the writer asserts that the inheritance and innovation of Baiku Yao dresses from the traditional style to the modern one can be realized in the mode of cultural learning center.

As mentioned previously, choice of pattern focuses on such elements as life rituals, family ties, agricultural activities and war events and components of pattern, color and raw material are applied to sign design, pamphlet design and creative produce design, etc.

Apart from previous means, both online and off-line channels are set up. The former one is to design an APP of Baiku Yao dress culture in order to achieve the digital processing of the dress culture. With the learning center, people are



encouraged to learn and use the app for the purpose of interpersonal communication within the ethnic group, which enables the complete display of inheritors' genealogy of knowledge. Digital devices will strengthen the inheritors' connection with Baiku Yao dress culture system as well as the relationship with apprentices, thus fulfilling the inheritance system construction. It is essential practice for Baiku Yao dress culture identity. With digital construction and spread, the information mastered by culture inheritors can also be accepted by audiences. Fans of Baiku Yao dresses from different regions can also exchange information immediately with limits of time and space.

## **Discussion**

Baiku Yao dress development and application is the process of touching, integration and construction between historical memory and realistic aesthetic experience. Via the practice of dress culture and dress patterns, native people of Baiku Yao explains the issue of identity, knowing who they are and where they are from. It is feasible to develop the Baiku Yao dress cultural learning center. It is a smart home where local residents, tourists and students are encouraged to participate in management and experience and to learn about the culture.

From the previous discussions, it can be seen that Baiku Yao dress is influenced by traditional cultural structures and modern lifestyles. The choices of dress patterns by the local people of Baiku Yao encompass various aspects of their daily lives. Therefore, the research on Baiku Yao dress culture and its pattern characteristics can elucidate the relationship between dress and ethnic history, as well as understand the significance and role of Baiku Yao as a unique branch of the Yao ethnic group. Furthermore, the dynamic changes in their cultural structure and

aesthetic approach are issues worth further discussion, which are closely related to the future management of Baiku Yao cultural arts.

1. In the process of Baiku Yao dress art development, the aesthetic elements are infused with Baiku Yao ethnic memories. In daily life, the aesthetic characteristics of the Baiku Yao community are reflected in various aspects such as their history, productive labor, ancestral memories, and life ceremonies. Through the practice of dress culture and patterns, the local people of Baiku Yao articulate their sense of identity regarding who they are and where they come from. Based on previous research, the organic combination of internal and external factors has strengthened the traditional cultural elements in dress while incorporating modern elements, providing the potential to activate the local dress inheritance.

Personal and collective understanding and evaluation of their own dress culture among the Baiku Yao community need to be connected and carried out through dress culture-related (intangible cultural heritage-related) organizations and initiatives. This has been demonstrated in practice since Following our field research in Huaili Village, it is suggested to establish a Cultural Learning Center for Baiku Yao dress culture, encourage local residents, tourists, and students to participate in its management and experience. This would help harness the initiative of the community, group, and individuals (UNESCO, 2018). The interaction between the traditional dressmaking process and the human being is utilized, and making is connecting (Gauntlett, 2011). Thus, the role of personal aesthetics and personal memory in this context should be discussed, and from a subjective point of view, they influence "embodied practices" such as the constitution of social memory (Connerton, 2000).

2. In the context of globalization, rapid technological and economic development, local and indigenous cultural systems are undergoing revival, rejuvenation, and restructuring. Local governments and communities often utilize conscious creation to achieve the inheritance of cultural traditions. Since 2014, offline practices of Baiku Yao dress culture have been able to hold activities in fixed venues, which serve as direct channels for the dissemination of Baiku Yao dress culture. The purpose of these activities is to strengthen cultural confidence and identity, and encourage more people to participate in the preservation and inheritance of Baiku Yao dress culture, improving the quality of life and communication (Jefferies, 2011, pp. 222-242). In this process, the interaction between individuals, communities, and learning centers and the significance of inheriting and innovating Baiku Yao dress culture customs, as well as the dynamic changes in Baiku Yao aesthetic elements and connotations, are worth further attention. This will impact the practices of Baiku Yao dress culture centers and the sustainable development of Baiku Yao culture.

### **Recommendations**

The research findings can be used as practical guidelines for establishing a Cultural Learning Center for the Baiku Yao ethnic group in China and a database of dress patterns and designs. Local residents, communities, tourism developers, and academic researchers can utilize these research outcomes to create the corresponding cultural learning centers, collect and organize fundamental data related to Baiku Yao dress culture such as crafts, patterns, and designs, and design relevant courses on Baiku Yao dress culture to promote the innovative inheritance of Baiku Yao traditional culture.

However, it is important to note that the above-mentioned research only covers a part of the historical development of the Baiku Yao ethnic group and forms the foundation of their identity and cultural recognition. With globalization, cultural exchanges, and rapid economic development, the local community faces new opportunities and challenges. Therefore, cultural practitioners and local residents can employ these research findings to assess and envision the sustainable development of Baiku Yao traditional culture, as well as to serve as references for formulating cultural development policies and projects.

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