

Exploring the protection and inheritance of the non-traditional heritage of tooth carving in Guangzhou

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Abstract: *Guangzhou tooth carving has a long history with high historical and artistic ornamental value, which was listed as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2006. However, with the progress of society and the development of concepts, the public's attitude towards dental carving has gradually changed, and its inheritance process has also been subject to ups and downs due to multiple reasons. How to ensure the development of the heritage of dental carving in Guangzhou under the current conditions and many restrictions is an urgent demand to be answered.*

Keywords: *Guangzhou Dental Carving; Non-Foreign Heritage; Protection*

1. Introduction

Guangzhou tooth carving also pays attention to the bleaching and color decoration of the tooth material, and the works are mostly distinguished by the glittering quality of the tooth, fine carving, and the overall layout is lively, like a flower, leaving no blank. The representative types of works are openwork carving of dental balls, flower boats, micro-carving of paintings and calligraphy, etc.

From the historical inheritance, the prototype of ivory carving in China was first seen in the Neolithic Age, and ivory products in varying quantities were unearthed at the Hemudu culture site more than 7,000 years ago as well as at the Dawenkou culture site more than 4,000 years ago. This shows that the ancient ancestors had the custom of carving and processing ivory into various practical items at an early stage. Later, with the development of the tooth carving process and the change of demand, ivory carving products showed complex and refined characteristics. At the same time, their practicality is gradually weakening, and the use value of ivory carving is gradually surpassed by the ornamental value.

Dental carving in Guangzhou has a long history, having developed as early as the Qin and Han dynasties, with craftsmanship and production reaching a historical peak during the Ming and Qing dynasties. During the Ming dynasty, the development of maritime trade created a thriving handicraft industry in Guangzhou, with the Pearl River connected to the sea all the way to the Daxin Road area of Guangzhou. Overseas ships carrying high-quality ivory and other materials could moor directly in the city, and a variety of handicraft workshops converged in the streets near the Pearl River. During the Qing Dynasty, Guangzhou's foreign trade further developed. In 1757, Guangzhou was designated as the only foreign trade port of the Qing Dynasty, and a large amount of ivory from overseas was imported into Guangzhou, providing a unique condition for the development and prosperity of the dental carving industry in Guangzhou.

Tooth carving was also highly respected by the imperial court in the Qing Dynasty. In the Qing Dynasty, the palace had a workshop for imperial wares, the "Office of the Zao Office", which concentrated skilled craftsmen from all over the country to produce fine dental carvings. According to the "Qing file of the work of the Office of the Palace of Health", Guangdong craftsmen were also known as Guang Craftsmen or Nan Craftsmen, they were often recruited to serve in the inner court because of their excellent skills. For more than a hundred years, from the Yongzheng period (1723-1735) to the Xianfeng period (1851-1861), Guangdong provided dozens of top dental carvers to the Office, creating many works of high artistic standards. Among the works in the Palace's collection today are a carved ivory pen-holder with a fisherman's joy figure, an ivory carved gourd with the word "Daji" in openwork. The gourds in the Palace's collection are all made by Guangdong dental carvers.

Before the war, Guangzhou's Daxin Street (now Daxin Road) and the area around Xiaoxin Street,

Sanfuqian and Yuzi Lane formed the famous Ivory Street, with 2,780 employees and 126 stores. The first ivory handicraft trade organization, the Ivory Society, was established. After the war broke out, the Japanese occupied Guangzhou, and the tooth carvers went around after the outbreak of the war, the Japanese occupied Guangzhou and the tooth carvers fled, as a result, the tooth carving industry fell into ruins.

After the founding of New China, China's dental carving industry received key support, and dental carving products also became an important source of China's export earnings. At this time, the level of dental carving techniques and content themes were further enhanced and expanded, many famous products full of new era characteristics appeared.

As a production process with deep cultural connotation and aesthetic value, Guangzhou tooth carving has a rich conservation and heritage value, but suffered the impact of industrial production and related policies in the subsequent decades of development. In modern times, ivory carving has been included in the official protection statutes as intangible cultural heritage. In January 2006, Chongwen District in Beijing and Guangzhou City in Guangdong Province declared ivory carving to be included in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage protection list, Daxin Ivory Craft Factory in Guangzhou City was selected as the protection unit, and craftsman Zhang Minhui was recognized as a national representative inheritor. However, in the process of implementing the actual measures, the inheritance of the skills has been repeatedly affected by multiple factors such as policy changes and a reduction in the number of practitioners. From all aspects, it is still of far-reaching significance to find room for measures and policy adjustments to match contemporary social attitudes and development needs for the tooth carving craft.

2. Heritage Status

Guangzhou dental carving has been passed down and developed throughout history, but it has been put to an unprecedented test in recent decades.

In 1989, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) banned all commercial trade in ivory. China, as a member of CITES, stopped importing ivory from 1990. The ivory carving industry in Guangzhou suffered a serious crisis of raw materials, most ivory craft factories and dental carving enterprises were forced to stop production and divert, thus lots of dental carving artists have changed professions, which was a large loss of professional talents.

In order to save the craft of tooth carving, China stipulated that units registered with the relevant state departments before January 1990, such as the Guangzhou Daxin Ivory Craft Factory, could continue to process ivory from stock. Some tooth carving enterprises and craft inheritors also made efforts to explore new paths for the Guangzhou tooth carving industry to break through the dilemma and sustain its survival and development under new historical conditions by finding alternative materials or other means. Nonetheless, the limitations of raw materials still caused Guangzhou elephant carving to decline.

In January 2006, Guangzhou tooth carving was included in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage list, gaining more attention and support. In 2008, China was allowed to import ivory from specific African countries under strict conditions, obtaining a large amount of African ivory in one go through public auctions, alleviating the domestic shortage of ivory. The policy support and the replenishment of raw materials have made Guangzhou's tooth carving industry show signs of recovery, and the sustainable development of the tooth carving craft has been guaranteed.

However, the 2008 import attempt also thrust China into the limelight. In the years following the completion of the one-time auction, the international community repeatedly blamed the legal trade for fueling illegal demand, driving the black market in ivory, and making poaching a more serious problem. China's perception as a major illegal ivory trader was highly scrutinized by the world, and external public opinion urgently demanded a response from China.

On December 30, 2016, the General Office of the State Council issued the Notice on the Orderly Cessation of Commercial Processing and Sale of Ivory and Products Activities, which determined that commercial processing and sale of ivory and products would cease in phases by December 31, 2017. The domestic ivory market was completely shut down at the end of 2017, and the dental carving industry in Guangzhou entered a cold winter. The supply of ivory was once again cut off, the limited stock of ivory could not meet the needs, and the scale of tooth carving production contracted further. Tooth carving products can no longer be put into the market for profit, producers choose to switch

production in order to maintain survival, many practitioners are laid off and change jobs, making the obscure future of the dental carving industry is difficult to attract newcomers to enter. According to the research results, the number of technicians and apprentices in the dental carving industry in Guangzhou has declined considerably after the total ban on business. The artists who still adhere to this craft also show a serious problem of aging. The plight of dental carving in Guangzhou raises the question of whether we should still preserve this intangible cultural heritage at a time when it seems to have failed to meet social trends. Of course, our answer is yes.

First of all, Guangzhou tooth carving itself has high historical, cultural and spiritual values. Non-foreign heritage is a kind of living history, which can reflect the worldview and survival of a nation in different historical periods. Guangzhou dental carvings witness a long history of the nation, and it provides an important reference for cognition of the history of Guangzhou in an intuitive and vivid living form. At the same time, Guangzhou dental carvings contain the essence of Guangzhou's local culture. It is the crystallization of the wisdom of the local people, expressing distinctive local characteristics and conveying the aesthetic interests of the Guangzhou people. As a national intangible cultural heritage, it is also an important carrier of excellent Chinese traditional culture and has a high international reputation, which can become a bright cultural card in foreign exchanges, promote the spread of Chinese civilization, show the uniqueness of national culture, promoting the world's cultural diversity.

Secondly, the contradictory nature of the heritage development of Guangzhou tooth carving prominently reflects the collision between traditional culture and modern ideas, and the decline of tooth carving seems to be the inevitable result of the development of modern ecological civilization concept. However, is tooth carving only as the representative of the backward culture eliminated by the times, must not be able to coexist with modern civilization? This is not the case.

It should be clear that ivory carving is not the same as elephant hunting. In the case of rational use of resources, the ivory left behind after the natural shedding and death of elephants is sufficient to meet the needs of ivory carving heritage. In their view, ivory carving is not a disregard for the life of elephants, on the contrary, it is a continuation of the life of dead elephants. In this sense, the tooth carving deeply contains the simple life consciousness and harmony concept in traditional culture, showing the kernel that is compatible with the modern ecological civilization concept. For many countries, in the wild elephant distribution area, the protection of the herd depends on stable financial support, so that the demand for tusk material for the inheritance of ivory carving in China caters to the local willingness to export ivory, and the rational use of ivory resources can promote the economic development of the ivory producing areas, and the high profits from the export of ivory can be used for the protection of the herd, forming a virtuous circle. The heritage of ivory carving does not necessarily conflict with modern civilization, under certain conditions, it can even play a positive role in promoting the harmonious development of man and nature.

There is room to explore policies that would close the domestic ivory market altogether. The ban was introduced because the legal ivory trade has stimulated the black market and intensified the poaching phenomenon. A total ban on legal trade is actually only a measure to address the symptoms but not the root cause of the problem, and does not deal a fatal blow to poaching, the fundamental solution to the problem calls for more mature and powerful monitoring and management. In addition, the ivory issue has always been an international problem. Combating the illegal trade market and protecting wild elephant populations requires the concerted efforts of countries around the world. Studies have shown that the lack of international collaboration is an important reason for the rampant illegal trade. While China has strictly banned trade in ivory and its products, most countries in Africa have not banned domestic trade in ivory, and in a gaping area of research, Europe and the United States are also important ivory consumers. Restrictions set by individual countries alone cannot make a good solution to the problem, and better handling of the ivory issue requires countries around the world to strengthen international cooperation and integrated management to promote rational distribution of ivory resources globally and jointly promote sustainable development.

For the heritage of Guangzhou tooth carving, the problem never lies in making trade-offs between non-genetic heritage and nature conservation, but in how to use wisdom to find a healthy balance among them. Although there is still room to adjust the policy of completely closing the domestic ivory market, for a period of time, Guangzhou tooth carving still faces a tightly closed domestic market. Therefore, it is especially important to find a conservation and inheritance strategy for Guangzhou ivory carving that is compatible with social development under realistic conditions.

3. Heritage Strategy

Faced with the dilemma of inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, it is necessary to actively explore feasible measures within the existing conditions in collaboration with the private and official sectors. In fact, there are many operational measures for the heritage and development of tooth carving in Guangzhou.

3.1 Find alternative materials

The total closure of the domestic ivory market means that the main raw material for ivory carving in Guangzhou is out of supply, and although some dental carving factories and workshops may still have ivory in stock for dental carving, this is not a long-term solution after all. The ivory is important to the heritage of Guangzhou dental carving, but the skills attached to the ivory are the soul and foundation of dental carving.

As early as 1988, some practitioners of tooth carving realized the material dilemma and took the initiative to seek the direction of transformation. At that time, Jin Zhaoguang, who was the head of the technical section of the Daxin Ivory Craft Factory, began to explore innovative bone carving techniques. And in the 1990s, tooth carver Zhang Minhui was committed to carving innovation with cow bone as the material. Cow bone is an abundant and inexpensive material, and it has a similar structure to ivory. However, compared to ivory, cow bone is hollow and small in size, and the bone is more brittle and prone to mold. After solving the problems of mildew and bleaching, Zhang Minhui then adapted the skills of dental carving to the characteristics of cow bone, so that the artistic effect could be better presented. When the raw material was changed from ivory to cow bone, the price of dental carving artworks in Guangzhou dropped, which contributed to the promotion of the art of dental carving.

Weng Yaoxiang, who is also a Guangzhou dental carver, chose to use mammoth ivory, which has been excavated in large quantities from the permafrost in recent years, as the material for his dental carvings. Today's mammoth ivory is mined in large and stable quantities, and its material and size are similar to modern ivory. It can be said that this is a proven solution to the problem of ivory being out of supply.

In addition, the use of modern advanced technology can also cope with the raw material dilemma of Guangzhou tooth carving, such as in the field of scientific research to open up the resources of industry, academia and research, for Guangzhou tooth carving to seek help from scientific research institutions in the field of materials science, biology and other fields. Moreover, through special treatment, the gap between organic alternative materials and ivory materials can be narrowed, and synthetic materials of the same hardness and density as ivory can be developed.

It can be said that whether it is the search for alternative materials in today's society, or the use of ancient heritage, or the use of modern technology to produce synthetic materials, all can be used as a possible direction to solve the problem of raw materials for dental carving in Guangzhou.

3.2 Passing on the transmission channel

In the past, the skills of dental carving in Guangzhou were passed down according to school or family lineage. Nowadays, the number of practitioners in the dental carving industry is significantly less than before. If we want to ensure the inheritance and vitality of dental carving skills, it is necessary to break down the barriers between different schools and skill categories and cooperate to ensure the inheritance and development of dental carving in Guangzhou.

In addition, the transmission of tooth carving skills also needs to develop new ways while ensuring the effectiveness of the established transmission channels, and the fresh blood of Guangzhou tooth carving can be absorbed from the huge number of student groups. Therefore, scientific and effective methods of inheriting intangible cultural heritage can be adopted through social and school education, etc. For example, courses on intangible cultural heritage as well as courses on the appreciation of the art of tooth carving can be offered within higher education and colleges, so that more young people can experience the artistry and unique charm of Guangzhou tooth carving and awaken their enthusiasm for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. In addition, it is quite necessary to set up an on-campus teaching base plus off-campus cooperation base model. Theoretical study of tooth carving skills and corresponding practical teaching can be conducted on campus, and cooperation with social tooth

carving factory studios can provide students with a real working environment to guarantee the effective transmission of tooth carving skills.

3.3 Official and private cooperation

Official top-down policy and guidance is one of the most effective ways to ensure the development of the heritage of dental carving in Guangzhou.

The first is to provide financial support and subsidies for the inheritors of dental carving in Guangzhou. The loss of dental carving practitioners is related to a shrinking market and an uncertain future for the industry. The cultivation of highly skilled dental carvers does not happen overnight, and the high demand for artisans in the dental carving process means that it is not something that is necessarily highly rewarding. Therefore, the state needs to use multimedia to increase the publicity of Guangzhou's dental carving skills, improve international influence, and provide positive feedback to the inheritors in many ways. At the same time, it is also necessary to provide policy support and subsidies to non-hereditary carvers and practitioners, so that they can devote themselves to the development of dental carving in Guangzhou in a relatively independent environment and promote breakthroughs and innovations in their skills.

In addition, an official database of intangible cultural heritage can be set up to record and preserve intangible cultural heritage, including Guangzhou tooth carving, through modern communication media. The inclusion of Guangzhou tooth carvings into the collections of museums, art galleries and archives is also a proven form of protection. By using the huge official resources to realize online and offline connection, it can make the process of tooth carving and the production results closely integrated, bringing the audience a direct and effective experience of intangible cultural heritage.

Although both the official and private sectors play a unique role in the process of preserving dental carvings in Guangzhou, it is undeniable that both sides have their own shortcomings in the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, joint consultation and cooperation between the two can complement each other's strengths and better achieve the purpose. For example, the old dental carving factory in Guangzhou, the Daxin Ivory Factory, whose closure was eventually announced at the end of 2017 due to policy restrictions, brain drain, and a shrinking market. However, Daxin Ivory Factory has a long history and a strong cultural heritage. And its exquisite tooth carving craftsmanship symbolizes the highest level of tooth carving in Guangzhou. Mo Junhao, deputy director of Daxin Ivory Factory, was not willing to let the tooth carving skills of Daxin Ivory Factory die out, and the government also had the need to protect Guangzhou tooth carving as a national intangible cultural heritage, so Mo Junhao said in an interview in 2018 that they planned to build an intangible cultural heritage creative park based on the existing Daxin Ivory Factory campus, and transform the factory as a whole from a production enterprise to a non-profit cultural enterprise. This public welfare transformation means that the survival difficulties of Guangzhou tooth carving will be alleviated, and actually responds to the society's demand for the protection of intangible heritage, so that Guangzhou tooth carving finds a new development possibility outside the market.

4. Conclusion

As ordinary non-heritage workers, we cannot shake the international policy, but can only find the way to develop the dental carving in Guangzhou under the limited conditions.

But in any case, we must admit that without the most original material - ivory as the carrier of the skill, the tooth carving will inevitably be deformed in the process of transmission, and the effect of the skill transmission will be weakened. So, we might wonder, is it possible to provide some more breathing space for the ancient non-traditional heritage at a time when tradition and modernity are in conflict?

In the view of some scholars, the only solution to the problem of raw materials for ivory carving is to dispel misconceptions about ivory products and to establish a system for the distribution of legal ivory products. Previously, the legal ivory materials imported into the country were not obtained by hunting and killing elephants, but by natural death, with each tusk carrying a death certificate and number. But this policy was eventually scrapped due to the rampant black-market trade in ivory in the country. In fact, there was nothing wrong with the orientation of the policy itself. Reusing the tusks of dead elephants as a resource has positive implications both for the domestic tusk carving craft and for local foreign exchange generation in Africa. Perhaps the solution to the conflict is not an absolute ban,

but a stronger and more efficient control measure.

All in all, while intangible cultural heritage are developing, they still need to be presented in their original form. Even though there is such a serious conflict between tradition and modernity, we should provide a certain space for the survival of intangible cultural heritage, giving them more time and opportunities to find a balance between adaption to modern society and maintaining their core.

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